

1 || Poland's Postwar Moral Panic

STANISŁAW KOZICKI (1876–1958), a prominent politician of the nationalist-right camp, reflected in 1932 on the numerous challenges that contemporary Poland faced and offered the following summation: “In addition to everything that is going on there [in western Europe after the Great War], we are undergoing a transition from slavery to freedom and are exerting a great effort to organize our own state. Can one really be surprised that the transitional period is lasting longer and is more complicated?”¹ Though it was unpleasant and troubling, it was natural enough, Kozicki reasoned, for the Second Republic to confront monumental problems on all fronts and at all levels. Commentators like Kozicki moved effortlessly from blaming the lingering effects of the partitions for the problems evident in the Second Republic, to blaming the Great War and the subsequent border wars, the political structures of the new state, the ethnic minorities, the international situation and geopolitics. But commentators also impugned something far less tangible and potentially far more explosive: the moral health of the nation. A vocabulary of infestation and filth, of healing, good ethics, and moral rigor, was heard frequently in the press of the early independence period as many looked to the moral realm as possessing great explanatory power. In an atmosphere of economic uncertainty, social tension, and political animosity, cultural and moral visions of newly independent Poland were bound to clash. Bit by bit, the contours of a discursive moral panic developed alongside the political crises, the social unrest and the economic ruin. Within intellectual circles of the Second Republic, debates raged about the quality of the nation's moral fabric.

Just as they did in western Europe, debates about Poland's moral health developed with a ferocious intensity right from the start of the postwar period. Evident in the Second Republic before the May coup of 1926, these

debates were instrumental in laying the groundwork for an intensification of interest in moral themes after May 1926. If the May coup could capitalize on a feeling of disaffection and malaise, as I argue it did, then this was possible only because the foundations for a nationwide forum on moral health had been laid earlier. Piłsudski's coup and the proclamation of a *sanacja* would provide a resonant focus for discussions about morality—political, social, and sexual—that had been circulating in the Second Republic ever since independence. The *sanacja* could and did function rhetorically as a moment of rebirth precisely because many people had become accustomed to thinking about the need for a dramatic cultural and social transformation and had become comfortable with a language of crisis, moral degeneration, spiritual renewal, and moral rejuvenation. The *sanacja* grew out of and reflected a deep-seated moral crisis, while it also acted as a catalyst for an invigorated focus on moral questions.

Moral Crisis in Postwar Europe

In the aftermath of the Great War, and with the profound and all-encompassing transformations that the war occasioned in Europe, anxiety about culture and the vitality of nations was raised to unprecedented heights. Historians have described the postwar era as one replete with moral anxiety, as a time of cultural and moral crisis. These terms designate periods in which analysis of the forms of social and national organization, purpose, and potential develop a widespread appeal. Moral crises are sparked when the structures of a given community change dramatically and, consequently, when visions of the world and conceptions of right and wrong clash, as can happen during and in the aftermath of war. As people search for explanations and subject their environments, both local and national, to intense scrutiny, they typically identify scapegoats to blame for ushering in changes they perceive as threatening.²

The term *moral panic* was coined by British sociologist Jock Young, who used it to describe quite a different context: the public reaction to forms of supposedly threatening youth behavior, especially drug use, in Britain in the 1960s. But the term has since been used to describe any period that provokes concerted and widespread scrutiny of the meaning and structures of social organization, of moral beliefs, and of the ties that bind people to-

gether. When the members of a given society disagree fundamentally about how to create categories, norms, and models to evaluate action and perception, and when they disagree over what values the society should promote, the result is a moral crisis, or a pervasive feeling that something is not quite as it should be.³

Feminist scholars have further suggested that in times of acute political or moral chaos, social disorder, and perceived danger, ideas about gender difference acquire an especially powerful resonance and are easily linked to more general national preoccupations. Though certain levels of anxiety over gender roles are arguably always present to some degree, changes in the intensity of this anxiety and variations in its expression during particular historical moments can be quite revealing. During chaotic times, the disorder of social life is represented by and reflected in the perceived perversion of what is assumed to be a natural order between the sexes: men are portrayed as ineffectual and unable to fulfill their obligations, while women are depicted as replacing men in their public roles, as strong and assertive as well as careless in their attitudes toward family and nation. What are understood to be immutable gender norms and relationships are depicted as having been overturned and violated.⁴ The overall impression is of a broken-down social order that only dramatic intervention can fix.

Historians of the postwar western European context have argued that the Great War, in part because it was an experience so exceptional and devastating, produced a profound and long-lasting moral and cultural crisis.⁵ Many analyses have focused specifically on the gendered aspects of this crisis. In postwar France, for example, anxiety about women's new status, choices, and opportunities was discursively linked to nervousness about sluggish population growth and to the effects that this was expected to have on military potential, national prosperity, and security. A violation of "proper" gender norms and the emergence of a "civilization without sexes" (to quote the title of a monograph on the subject) portended the ruin of France itself.⁶ Similarly, postwar Britain nurtured its own anxieties about how the war had opened new possibilities for women and had altered gender relations, and how, in turn, both private and public morality were affected adversely, to the detriment of the nation as a whole.⁷ In Germany contemporary sources reveal a heightened anxiety about women's perceived embrace of sexual liberation and a commitment to all manner of "modern" ideas, from the latest fashions

to paid employment.⁸ Critics, especially during the National Socialist period, argued that the “New Woman” of the Weimar era had brazenly abandoned her womanly duties and forsaken family and nation, putting Germany itself in peril.⁹

Historians of western Europe, and of North America,¹⁰ have produced many interesting analyses of the deliberations about moral and national health that erupted after the war and have paid special attention to the ways in which an emphasis on gender identity and gender relations became a part of these debates. A discursive focus on women and their newfound rights, their supposedly modern styles of dress and comportment and their daring new behavioral choices, emerges in such times of turmoil.

Historians of eastern Europe, in contrast, have been slow to offer specific analyses of the postwar moral trauma that might have accompanied the numerous political and economic crises after the war. They have tended to prioritize instead the strictly political aspects of nation and state building that the war occasioned. There are many reasons for this. In the Polish case, the independent Second Republic, which represented the realization of long-held Polish patriotic dreams, was hardly a favorite topic of the post–World War II Communist regime. Moreover, historians of Poland or other Soviet Bloc countries could not often indulge in the luxury of studying topics that did not suit the ideological imperatives of the moment and that did not promote a desired narrative about one’s national history.¹¹

And yet the Polish context provides an especially fruitful terrain for the study of a postwar moral crisis; the language and preoccupations of the period show this very clearly.¹² The Second Republic had to contend with more than just the effects of the Great War, as other countries did; it also had to come to terms with the end of a partition period that had lasted well over a century. This was the transition “from slavery to freedom” to which nationalist-right politician Stanisław Kozicki referred. It was hardly surprising, given this double burden, that so much discursive attention was devoted to Poland’s moral health in the post-1918 years. The fact that political life was not functioning smoothly, that economic problems were fierce, and that social and ethnic tensions were dangerously high, suggested, many contemporaries argued, that Poland’s “moral health” was also in need of serious attention and reform. “Something,” people said, was not right. It is to the specific Polish context that we now turn.

Moral Citizenship in the Second Republic

That the partitions had imprinted many undesirable features on the Second Republic was beyond dispute: the long partition era had deprived Poles of the experience of state administration and political organization and of opportunities for social cooperation and growth. Thereafter it became standard fare for commentators to invoke the partitions when trying to explain the political, social, and economic problems that plagued the Second Republic. At the same time, some commentators in the Second Republic noted that certain aspects of partition-era patriotism had been passionate and ideal, and that the Second Republic needed to emulate the best features of this national devotion if it were to survive the challenges of the modern period. A fantastic legend about consummate partition-era commitment to the nation developed in independent Poland (although only a very small elite actually expressed this unwavering national devotion during the partition period) and became a measure by which to gauge contemporary patriotism. Citizenship in the Second Republic was recast as much more than a constitutionally regulated designation; it acquired the status of a moral category,¹³ a duty to the nation and to Polish history that, if ignored, would result in a tragedy on the scale of the late-eighteenth-century partitions.

In the postwar era of national soul-searching about what it meant to be a Pole living in a resurrected Poland, certain expressions of partition-era Polish womanhood became for some an especially revealing marker of national commitment and, it follows, of the health of the nation generally. With the partitions, the men of the nobility and the political institutions they had dominated in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lost their special and publicly recognized status. And while men went off to fight for Polish independence, women dominated the private sphere and turned it into a site of sedition and hope; the home became a repository of Polishness, a vital center of political and national mobilization in a patriotic spirit. Commentators from across the political spectrum in the Second Republic heralded women of the partition era for fulfilling their “natural” roles as bearers of national culture as well as for having played an indispensable role in the national struggle, for protecting national virtues, for passing along language and tradition, and thus, at the most basic level, for ensuring the very existence of the Polish nation.¹⁴

Women of the Second Republic could not but fail to measure up to the models of femininity and citizenship that had arisen out of the partition period. Some commentators in the Second Republic were quick to observe that independence-era women had too quickly become satisfied with mere formal territorial independence and with their newly won political rights, including suffrage rights; women of the Second Republic were accused of having become so enamored with the concept of rights that they forgot what responsibilities to the nation they, as women and as mothers, “naturally” possessed. Many critics emphasized that independence-era women had been lured away from husbands and children by the temptations of modern life. The effects of women’s supposed disregard for national imperatives were evident in the depth of the problems the Second Republic confronted; as a result of women’s choices, the family suffered, and the nation suffered, too.

As early as the border wars of 1919 to 1921, but after the formal declaration of Polish independence in 1918, women were already singled out for threatening to eschew their responsibilities to the nation. Contemporary women needed to be reminded of the sacrifices their foremothers had made and which they, as good and moral citizens of an independent Poland, should also make. An army poster from the border wars urged, “Be like Polish women from the past, who, without a tear, sent their most beloved to their deaths. . . . Away with rags and fashions, trite phrases and fox-trots, and that whole hideousness of a low and impoverished life. Your dance hall is an army hospital, your fashions, a headband with a cross.”¹⁵ If women needed to be reminded even during the wars over Poland’s borders that they were morally obliged to fulfill the dictates of citizenship, then it could come as a surprise to no one, the reasoning went, that during a time of formal peace after 1921, when the threats to Poland were less tangible, women continued to act with callous indifference toward the nation. Far from being unimportant, women’s behavior went to the very core of definitions of citizenship and symbolized what some believed was the lamentable state of national commitment in the independence era.¹⁶

References to the dangerous “savage mores” of the postpartition period, to the dire effects private immorality exerted on the nation as a whole, and to the need for women to take seriously their citizenship duties resonated with a dire urgency as the political and economic problems mounted in the Second Republic. The discursive attention given to gender and morality—a focus that conveyed, in turn, an anxiety about the nation generally—was especially

marked in the press of the period, which, owing to its numbers and influence, came to occupy a central role in the political and cultural life of the nation.¹⁷ Almost all political groupings in the Second Republic had their own periodicals, such that reading a particular publication revealed a great deal about one's political affiliations and ideological underpinnings.¹⁸ Divisions were based on seemingly simple left and right categories; left and right were, however, incredibly complicated and imprecise designators. These, as we shall see, became even more tangled in the post-May period, when divisions between left and right gave way at least in part to pro- and antisanacja and were replaced by moral precepts and values.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the press of the Second Republic became an especially useful instrument of politics with a vital role in shaping public opinion, popularizing ideas, and expressing profound frustrations with contemporary life.²⁰

One typical supplication to the republic's women appeared in a conservative and highly moralistic magazine entitled *World and Truth* (*Świat i prawda*) in 1925: "The whole nation watches you. . . . The Fatherland calls out to you with every pain and every sadness."²¹ Another appeal from the same publication stated that women, quite simply, were "on the front lines" of the nation's future, and would have to answer for their actions "before God and history." The author stated: "One could reproach today's mothers for many, very many, things," and he pointed to women's short hairstyles, knee-length skirts, low-cut dresses, and to the fact that the modern woman's household was more likely to have rum for the guest's tea than something for the children's bread. Nothing less than Poland's future was at stake.²² Yet another author, referring to the way in which the yearly "springtime of peoples" effected changes in women's fashions, concluded, "Women's summer dresses really most clearly reveal the state of the spirit and of culture."²³

Models of femininity and expressions of gender identities reached to the very heart of morality, and morality, in turn, reflected both on the quality of citizenship in Poland and on the very essence and vitality of the nation. As another writer in *World and Truth* stated, the penalty for turning a blind eye to the "moral gangrene" would be "a complete turn to savagery of our mores, and with this . . . the worst political consequences"; the allusion here to the partitions served as a painful reminder and warning.²⁴ Another author in the right-nationalist *Current* (*Prąd*) argued that while the Polish political nation had been reborn in 1918, the moral nation had not, and women in particular were

betraying Polish history and tradition during the postpartition era. “A *non-Polish* type [of woman] is a wife whose only ambition is fashion and flirtation, . . . a ‘mother’ who supports neo-Malthusianism, which leads to the dying of the race and the nation.” The nation always ended up paying for women’s experimentation: “The nation needs for a woman to be a mother not only in the flesh, but also of the spirit.” Only a woman whose sense of her duty is based on “faith and morality” would guarantee the strength and longevity of the nation.²⁵

Here, in the midst of staggering inflation, social unrest, and political instability, women’s “fashions and flirtation” made it to the forefront of at least some commentators’ editorials on the state of the nation. These debates reached an especially interesting note in the months immediately preceding the coup—months of extremely tense political wrangling—on the pages of a journal called *National Thought* (*Mysł narodowa*).

Writing the Moral Crisis

National Thought was established in Warsaw in 1920.²⁶ Its mandate, as its editors proclaimed, was to develop “a nationalist ideology—in an emotional, intellectual, and practical sense—for the generations” and to encourage productive thinking “in a nationalist spirit.”²⁷ The journal was the de facto political-theoretical mouthpiece of the People’s National Union, the political party of Dmowski’s National Democrats. Through its association with National Democracy, *National Thought* formed part of one of the most powerful press networks in Poland. By the mid-1920s, *National Thought* had become a leading journal of the urban right-nationalist intelligentsia generally, and during the post-May period, this segment of the intelligentsia included some of the sanacja’s bitterest opponents.²⁸ Moreover, *National Thought* reached a wide audience, as it often allowed its own articles to be reprinted in other publications, just as it reprinted pieces first published elsewhere. As such, *National Thought* shared views and at least portions of an audience with the National Democrats’ main daily newspaper, the *Warsaw Gazette* (*Gazeta warszawska*), as well as with the *Morning Gazette* (*Gazeta poranna*), and the *Warsaw Courier* (*Kurier warszawski*), for example.

In general terms, *National Thought* echoed the attitudes toward morality, sex, and respectability that were generally associated with the National

Democrats and their founder, Roman Dmowski. “A society in which morality declines, in which shamelessness [and] brutal or subtle immorality flourishes, in which a person loses respect even for himself,” Dmowski wrote, was one in which a person lost his or her ability to aspire to noble goals and one in which the slide toward moral—and therefore national—ruin was assured.²⁹ For Dmowski, declining morals were at least in part the product of contemporary challenges to what he regarded as a natural hierarchical order between men and women. Dmowski was known to despise “feminists,” who, he believed, placed their individual needs above those of their families and the nation. According to his very traditional view of women’s roles, all aspects of political life constituted a man’s preserve, and women held the important job of raising children and creating for their men a happy and comfortable haven away from the hustle and bustle of the public world.³⁰

Given its connection to the nationalist right, *National Thought* constitutes an especially valuable lens through which to explore the relationship between morality, culture, and politics. During the period immediately preceding the May coup, when political tensions were at their peak and the mood was one of anticipation and frustration, the contours of a discursive moral crisis, not coincidentally, followed, reflected, and exacerbated political anxieties. In the first months of 1926, *National Thought* published a number of articles that assessed the moral health of the nation. Some of them were written by Aleksander Świętochowski (1849–1938). Świętochowski had been a leading ideologist of late-nineteenth-century Warsaw positivism. He was an eminent and controversial publicist and National Democratic ideologue throughout the Second Republic, and he contributed regularly to *National Thought*.³¹ On the subject of Poland’s pressing political and moral problems, Świętochowski—or the Parliamentarian of Truth,³² as he was sometimes dubbed sarcastically—had much to say.

Świętochowski’s regular column in *National Thought* was entitled “Liberum veto.” This bold title recalled the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The late-nineteenth-century Kraków school of historians had argued that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth fell precisely because of a weak, self-absorbed nobility that thought little about national interests. The nobility’s irresponsibility and recklessness were best represented by the *liberum veto*, the right of an individual noble to veto any legislation passed during a session of Parliament. Once the veto was invoked against a specific piece of

legislation, all other legislation brought forward during that session was also considered null and void, rendering the work of governing extremely difficult. As the strength of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth weakened perceptibly in the late seventeenth century, and especially into the eighteenth, nobles were known to sell their right of veto to the highest bidder, often a Russian. Ever since the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, many commentators thus used the infamous term *liberum veto* as a shorthand to describe the shortcomings of the ill-fated state and the positively abominable conception of citizenship that its abuse implied.

Świętochowski used “*Liberum veto*” as a painful reminder to his readers in the Second Republic that political institutions and cultural practices could and would demoralize the population and threaten the very existence of the state, as was shown to have been the case with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Świętochowski used the veto as a symbol of desperate opposition, and he used his column as a forum for issuing acerbic and incisive criticisms of the state of independence. He employed the right of veto as a powerful and symbolically rich jumping-off point to rail against the cultural, social, and sexual frivolity of his own day.³³

In February 1926, Świętochowski wrote in his regular “*Liberum veto*” column about the economic and political crises in Poland. But he asked his readers to consider these problems from a very peculiar perspective. Though he certainly recognized the international aspects of the adverse economic situation, Świętochowski assailed women—from all social classes—for having mismanaged household budgets and for carelessly embracing the trappings of modernity. He objected to women’s elaborate hats, their fine hose and delicate shoes, and expressed fear that Poles were again living beyond their means and without due regard for the paramount needs of the nation. “I saw workers digging potatoes while wearing gloves and silk blouses,” he said. This was all the more objectionable in the context of financial crisis. For Świętochowski, women’s profligate ways functioned as an omen of something worse to come. He wrote: “During the time of slavery [the partitions] she [the Polish woman] was a heroine, a priestess, a teacher of virtue and modesty; in independent Poland she is again like she was in the period of her passage into slavery over one hundred years ago.”³⁴ Świętochowski read the general state of national morality through women’s actions and attitudes and in the mid-1920s was loathe to find that women were showing a

wanton disregard for “Poland.”³⁵ Behind Świętochowski’s statements was the sense that Polish independence was not yet secure and that the legacy of the partitions had not yet been overcome completely. Świętochowski feared that the nation would again be hurled into an abyss, as in the late eighteenth century. He revealed a belief that true independence could only be achieved through displays of moral fortitude and rigor. Further, he understood women to play a central role in shaping not just a private and individual morality but a wider public and national morality as well. According to Świętochowski, moral chaos reinforced and reflected political chaos and vice versa.

While parliamentary politics in the republic became especially unstable in early 1926, Świętochowski, one of the most notable personalities of the day, writing in a very prominent journal of the nationalist right, focused his attention specifically on Poland’s moral health and drew his readers’ attention to women’s delicate shoes. So precarious and strained was the situation that Świętochowski observed that he felt compelled to introduce into the discussion the most frightening specter possible: the demise of the political state. In the same breath, Świętochowski implicated women directly in what he viewed as the dreadful condition of political, economic, moral, and national life, suggesting that the formal realm of politics was linked irrevocably to what was understood to be the private sphere.

National Thought columnist Zygmunt Wasilewski (1865–1948), writing not long after Świętochowski, addressed some of these same themes and probed openly the relationship between rigorous moral codes and effective political systems. Wasilewski was a key National Democratic ideologue. At one time he had served on the editorial board of the National Democrats’ main publication, the daily *Warsaw Gazette* (*Gazeta warszawska*), and since 1925, he had worked as editor of *National Thought* and had become very influential in National Democratic publishing circles.³⁶ He outlined his views plainly: “The loosening of morals lays the foundation for the disintegration of responsibility to society and the nation—and vice versa. . . . A person must battle the weakness of his nature, and society has to help in this . . . so that the nation can live in a civilized fashion.”³⁷ At the top of the list of dangerous moral trends, Wasilewski, not unlike Świętochowski, placed women’s changing positions in society and, following from this, a disruptive individualism. He pointed to the dire effects that women’s changing

styles and scope for action were having on the institution of the family, and thus, on the nation itself. The culture of “everything goes” disturbed Wasilewski a great deal. He singled out all forms of “pornography”—art, literature, theater, dance halls, film, and women’s fashions—as constituting what he called “the elementary school of moral, social, and political breakdown.” This produced a situation in which everything that “the church and the family” had built over the centuries was threatened with wholesale destruction.³⁸ For Wasilewski, these issues went to the heart of Polish nationalism: “The Polish spirit is creative only when it is clean, when it does not indulge, when it is inspired by the social psyche and by its own strong ethical standard.”³⁹

What concerned commentators like Świętochowski and Wasilewski was that citizens of the Second Republic generally, and women specifically, seemed to have become satisfied with official independence and believed naively that the formal recognition of a Polish state somehow guaranteed its long-term existence. Instead, the argument these men wished to make was that territorial independence was simply one aspect of real independence, and indeed, that the moral rebirth that had to accompany physical rebirth was still lacking. As suggested above, these emphases were rather typical for the nationalist-right camp generally, which understood that the nation was based on the family and that the Polish-Catholic modest and moral woman played a vital role in maintaining the family, and therefore the nation.⁴⁰

Provocative dance styles and revealing fashions had not caused the problem, and “modernity” would have arrived on the Polish scene whether or not the parliamentary system of the Second Republic was functioning smoothly and whether the economy was strong or weak. But given the significant political and economic problems in Poland, the examples of “immorality” that the critics revealed served to emphasize just how very sick the new republic was and how far it was from solving some basic problems. Women’s new fashions and forms of behavior became such an issue for men like Wasilewski and Świętochowski precisely because women’s ostensibly private behavior was seen as contravening basic conceptions of Polishness at a time when Poland continued to show signs of weakness and instability.

Behind these ideas rested the assumption that the so-called public and the private realms reflected and influenced one another. It made sense, then, to turn the fox-trot or women’s new fashions into pressing national issues. Zygmunt Wasilewski articulated the connection well when he warned his

readers in another *National Thought* piece not to believe that political problems were merely skin-deep: "To heal life, one must reach beyond politics into morality, . . . which is the foundation of public life."⁴¹ Wasilewski submerged public and private life into a single category, and suggested that together, the private and the public realms imprinted themselves on the nation. This is one of the key ideas that is later taken up after the coup and that underpins many of the sanacja-era discourses about the nation.

The Crisis Mounts: The National Forum on Morality

Precisely because the Second Republic faced so many monumental problems, a reliance on a language of crisis and doom came easily, and a vocabulary that emphasized moral culpability and imminent demise was widespread even before the official political sanacja emerged. The idea of sanacja was able to take hold after the coup in part because the foundations for a national forum on morality had been laid before the coup; the idea of sanacja, that is, had been invented long before May 1926. What critics like those examined above were calling for when they railed against women's fashions, changing gender roles, and the general state of moral life in the newly independent nation was a sanacja, a cleansing and purge, albeit of a very different kind from the one advocated by the Piłsudskiites. Precisely because some people had grown accustomed to thinking about moral health and to employing language that teased moral implications from any event or trend, they were that much more receptive in May 1926 to the idea of a nationwide project of cleansing and moral reform and were that much more eager to accept in principle the need for a sanacja. From the start of independence, Poles had been experiencing what historian Jerzy Jedlicki calls a "moral hangover," and they were engaged in a very difficult process of learning how to reconcile expectations with contemporary realities. "On top of this feeling of a moral hangover," Jedlicki writes, "there appeared later the sanacja."⁴² The sanacja drew attention to these disappointed dreams and false expectations and provided a focus for debate.

The year 1926 constituted a moment of reckoning. It is to the May coup and to the ensuing period of sanacja that we must look in order to really understand the nature of interwar Poland's moral crisis. The coup unleashed an

ever more focused and consistent emphasis on questions of moral degeneration and regeneration and sparked what we may call a profoundly divisive and serious moral crisis. The postcoup period marked the moment when questions about national identity raged strong, when disputes about culture and nation building asserted themselves with ferocity; it was the moment at which varying interpretations of public, national, and private morality confronted each other. The May events, in part because they brought to the surface the formidable political divisions within the Second Republic, unleashed a deep and painful period of national reflection that turned on definitions of morality.

How and why could the coup work in this fashion and how could the *sanacja* acquire such potent meaning? Piłsudski's primary aim in May 1926 was to prevent the ascension to power of the political right, to put a decisive stop to political malfeasance and corruption, to guarantee himself a prominent role in the affairs of the state, and to protect the army from what he believed was fatal political interference. The Piłsudskiites had spoken about the coup as marking a political turning point, as initiating a cleansing of Poland's public life and a reform of its malfunctioning political system. They had also spoken about the coup as launching a collective effort on behalf of the nation, as an opportunity for the beleaguered new state to devote attention to much-neglected "imponderables" and to launch an impressive and unprecedented national *sanacja*.

The word *sanacja* seemed ideally suited to characterizing this national agenda. The word had been used in Polish society for a few years before May 1926 to describe reform in various areas of life, from political and economic to social. Piłsudskiite ideologue Adam Skwarczyński (who will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3), first applied the word to Poland's political problems when he used the phrase "sanacja of the state" in 1923.⁴³ *Sanacja* had also been used repeatedly in the press to refer to the efforts of Prime Minister Władysław Grabski (1874–1938) to propose solutions to the nation's crippling financial crisis of 1923 and 1924.⁴⁴

But when Piłsudski used the word after he launched his successful military coup, it reverberated with the public in a way it had never done before. In not defining what exactly the future would entail, in failing to provide a clear vision of what the Piłsudskiite *sanacja* would look like, and in emphasizing only the desire to "strengthen the state above all else," the idea of a *sanacja* be-

came available to anyone and everyone to use as they saw fit. After the coup, *sanacja*, *healing*, *rebirth*, *reform*, *cleansing*, and *the imponderables* became terribly popular terms, as various constituencies attempted to make sense of the great political events of May 1926. Once they were unleashed, the Piłsudskiites were unable to contain how they were used and to what effect, or by whom.

Troubadours of Rebirth

That there had been an official and dramatic proclamation of the need for national rebirth and moral revolution in May 1926 surprised few; indeed, immediately after the coup many rushed in to assert that, in fact, they had been communicating this need for some time. “Everyone” believed in the need for a *sanacja*, though everyone also differed on just what kind of rebirth was necessary and for what end.

The goals of rebirth, the language of moral healing, and the need to emerge on the other side of moral crisis were, of course, most evident in that part of the press that was tied openly to the *sanacja* camp. One article in mid-May in the pro-Piłsudski *Voice of Truth* (*Głos prawdy*) stated what many people, from all positions along the political spectrum, accepted to be true: that Poland had been physically reborn in November 1918, but that this “had not been a complete moral rebirth of society.” The author described how he understood the May coup: “His [Piłsudski’s] name has become a symbol of renaissance. . . . Around him has gathered an unorganized group of all the best yearnings and possibilities.”⁴⁵ With his coup in the spring of 1926, Piłsudski had occasioned a springtime like no other, and the event was nothing short of a national renaissance. The coup itself was the “first act” in a far larger process of reform and rebirth and had given Poland the opportunity to dispossess itself (to use a concept drawn from Polish partition-era history) of the winter covering of mulch (*chochoł*) that had for too long stifled its creative potential.⁴⁶

Similarly, the *Helm of Zagłębia* (*Ster Zagłębia*), the organ of the Józef Piłsudski Social-Political Club (Organ Klubu Polityczno-Społecznego im. Józefa Piłsudskiego), defined the reigning motto in post-May Poland as, simply, “*sanacja*,” and the group declared its unqualified support for the idea of building a better Poland.⁴⁷ One author suggested that the *sanacja* resembled

the period of national reform launched between the first partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1772 and the subsequent partitions in 1793 and 1795. The first partition had sparked great reform efforts in all areas of life and these had produced the famous 1791 constitution; the period is remembered as the Polish Enlightenment. The *Helm of Zagłębia* hoped that May 1926 would mark the start of a similarly illustrious period in Polish history.⁴⁸

A certain marginal group of interwar spiritualists grouped in the Brotherhood of Spiritual Rebirth (Bractwo Odrodzenia Duchowego) expressed no surprise that all of a sudden, after the coup, “everyone” was using the word *rebirth*, talking about morality and claiming a need for some kind of nationwide catharsis. One Brother was anxious to point out, though, that the concept of “moral revolution” predated the coup: “That which we are looking at today is the fruit of the seeds sown in the Polish soul by the greatest thinkers of the nation” many years ago.⁴⁹ The fact could not be denied, however, that a “psychosis of rebirth,” as the Brother referred to it, raged in post-May Poland; the word *rebirth* appeared in the press, in public opinion, in literature, theater, and even in business with an amazing frequency, he noted.⁵⁰ Polish society would do well to “throw some cold water” on what the Brother referred to as the “journalistic troubadours of moral rebirth.” He warned that any word and concept that gets used as much as rebirth has since the May coup would ultimately become meaningless. He joked that soon Poles would be buying “reborn cigarettes” (*papierosy odrodzone*) and would be lighting them with “reborn matches” (*zapałki odrodzone*).⁵¹

Similarly, a poem entitled “The Newest Illness” appeared in the right-nationalist satirical magazine the *Fly* (*Mucha*), just a month after the coup, in June 1926. The poem referred to the various maladies that were appearing across Poland in the post-1918 period and also to “the new illness that has now arisen.” This unspecified new illness, of course, could only be taken as a reference to the recent May coup. This new malady was spreading quickly, through town and country, “entering homes through keyholes,” infiltrating the Sejm, saturating literature and private life. There was no hiding from “the rotten illness,” and it would soon affect everyone. The problem, however, was that no one was certain what its effects would be.⁵²

A similar embrace of a language of transformation, uncertainty, and rebirth was evident in a Warsaw journal called the *Helm* (*Ster*), which was billed as a nonparty journal for and by the intelligentsia. Independent Poland, the

first issue proclaimed, lacked a true appreciation of the crisis that was at hand. The journal had been established, therefore, to awaken people, to inculcate high civic virtues in the populace, and “to effect a collective rebirth of the Polish spirit.”⁵³ With the May coup waged and won, the *Helm* found a focus and inspiration for its ideas. It explained that the coup had been caused by political factors, certainly, but that it had also evolved out of “deep moral causes.” Though associates of the *Helm* generally had reservations about the May coup, they nevertheless understood why the civil war had happened and they agreed that the coup was a symbol of profound problems in Poland. These revolved primarily around the ways in which people were (or were not) expressing their responsibilities as citizens.⁵⁴ One contributor asked readers “to look into their hearts” and to determine whether they were doing enough to build honor, to foster decency, and to define the great imponderables, or whether, conversely, their commitment was to the frivolous worship of “wine, women, and song.”⁵⁵ The *Helm* hoped that the coup would awaken people to the bitter reality that reigned in Poland and that it would motivate them to work for change.

The potential for collective action on behalf of Poland that the coup had popularized was further reflected in the morally conservative *World and Truth*. The journal's associates saw the coup as “a removal of the cancer” in Polish life, and they were prepared to wait and see what kind of change would follow. Their analyses of contemporary life in post-May Poland were infused with references to health, cleansing, and rebirth, and, as we have seen in a number of previous examples, their assessments included a criticism of contemporary femininity.⁵⁶ One author, for example, published a story in the summer of 1926 about the increased incidence of drunkenness among “beautiful, elegant, charming” young women, “most often from the best families.” While their parents were out on the town, shirking both parental and national obligations, these “daughters of the citizenry” followed suit and got drunk. Such lapses in moral judgment were all the more offensive, the author stated, during a period of “national rebirth.” Women in particular, he continued, had a special role to fulfill in ensuring that the good of the collective was protected: “The work of the mother-educator, mother-Pole . . . is as necessary as life itself. . . . Polish woman! History calls you to do right by your nation.” Women's responsibility was to God and nation, and at no time was this more apparent than the present moment.⁵⁷

A vocabulary of healing and rebirth was ubiquitous and powerful after the coup. Regardless of what people felt about the Piłsudskiites and about the coup specifically, the notion of *sanacja* had wide appeal and was applicable to a broad range of topics. The idea of moral revolution permeated the contemporary discourses of the post-May period. And as soon as the Piłsudskiites released the term *sanacja*, the idea acquired a life of its own; contemporaries used it to refer to much more than the strictly formal realms of politics and state administration.⁵⁸

The idea and language of spiritual and moral rebirth were especially prevalent within Catholic circles, which were often tied to the parties of the nationalist right. However, before the war Roman Dmowski and his National Democrats had had an ambiguous and sometimes strained relationship with the Catholic Church; National Democratic nationalism had been a decidedly secular nationalism. But by the first decade of independence, Dmowski embraced Catholicism as an integral component of Polish national identity. Dmowski articulated this point unambiguously when he wrote in 1927: “Catholicism is not an appendage to Polishness . . . [I]t is embedded in its essence, and in a large measure it *is* its essence.” To remove Catholicism from Polishness, Dmowski continued, was to destroy the nation itself.⁵⁹

The fusion of Catholicism with right-nationalism is perhaps best represented in the Camp of Great Poland (*Obóz Wielkiej Polski*). The camp was established by Dmowski in Poznań in December 1926 as a supraparty far-right political and social movement. Its goal was to rejuvenate the nationalist right, especially in light of the existence of the *sanacja* political camp, and to effect a kind of rebirth within National Democracy. The camp described itself as “an organization of the conscious strengths of the nation” and affirmed its commitment to the Roman Catholic faith, to fighting Jewish influences on Poland, as well as to maintaining “a high level of morality and moral discipline.” It operated outside the Sejm, was extremely hierarchical, and incorporated elements of Italian Fascism into its structure and ideas. The camp served as a radical right-nationalist counterweight to the *sanacja* vision of moral rebirth and as such offered an altogether different kind of rebirth for the Polish nation.⁶⁰

In addition to the Camp of Great Poland, we can point to many other examples of Catholics embracing after the coup a vocabulary that emphasized the need for moral regeneration. The relationship between mass Catholic or-

ganizations and the sanacja regime, or between the Polish Catholic hierarchy and the sanacja, is outside the scope of this study, but it is nevertheless appropriate to note here that the early sanacja era was one of peaceful relations between the regime, the Vatican, and the Polish Catholic Church hierarchy. This obliged the Church hierarchy in Poland to tread carefully when it came to criticizing the sanacja.⁶¹ Yet when it came to “moral” issues, to questions of private morality, the Church (and Catholics generally) had far more in common with the National Democratic camp than with the sanacja.

In an opening address to a Catholic meeting in Poznań in early November 1926, Poland's primate, August Hlond, referred to the “crisis of spirit” in the eight-year-old independent state and to the “deep fissures” that thus far Poland had been unable to heal. At the end of 1926, Poland stood at a critical crossroads and was engaged in full-scale soul-searching. That Poland was occupied with this process was hopeful, but the moment required sustained vigilance, according to Hlond. In one breath, he railed against petty party wrangling and against divorce and broken homes. He called on all Poles “to rest the entirety of our private and public lives on a Christian base” and work toward rebirth. Hlond emphasized the need for a spiritual cleansing to accompany the purification of public life, for fear that neither would succeed alone.⁶² In his exhortations, made just months after the coup, during a time when it was not yet absolutely clear which way the political sanacja would go, Hlond kept a safe distance from commenting directly on politics, and he underscored that the role of the Church was located outside the formal political realm. At the same time, Hlond spoke about the paramount need for traditional values to prevail, for people to remember that politics and private morality were intertwined, and that together they determined the future of the state: “We call in vain for the healing of public life if we do not heal our individual souls with Christ.” Hlond referred a number of times throughout his address to rebirth and to the need to effect a cleansing of the Polish soul.⁶³ He recognized the potential power of the idea of moral rebirth that the Piłsudskites had popularized and attempted to stake a Catholic claim to the idea.

A Catholic monthly entitled the *Knight of the Immaculate* (*Rycerz niepokalanej*), one of the best-selling periodicals in the country, also accepted the need for rebirth.⁶⁴ The *Knight*, however, was openly hostile to the sanacja and believed that the new regime portended a morally spent and physically prostrate Poland. Shortly after the coup, the *Knight* reprinted a speech given by

Andrzej Strug, “a prominent Mason,” to illustrate the bases for its trepidation. Strug praised the May events, called them a “victory of decency,” and looked forward to building the new Poland. The *Knight* responded by condemning Masons as “backward pagans” and as a threat to the moral health of schools, art, theater, film, and literature.⁶⁵ Implicit in this condemnation of the Masons was a criticism of the very sanacja behind which Strug had thrown his support. According to the *Knight*, the connections between the post-May camp and international Masonry were all too clear. Articles in the *Knight* appearing in the months following the coup continued to refer obliquely yet assuredly to “the danger hanging over Poland” and to “the assaults on the Church and faith” that had recently emerged.⁶⁶ Piłsudski’s coup, in depriving the nationalist right of political power, also shut out the *Knight*’s supporters from the government.⁶⁷ As a result, it became all the more important for the *Knight* to defend and to promote Catholic-nationalist virtues; the coup and the ensuing sanacja provided the paper with a concrete event around which to mobilize. The *Knight* became a forceful disseminator of the view that the moral and cultural qualities of the state affected directly its political well-being as well as its international potential and security. Its position was that the sanacja would deprave the nation’s moral health and would thus jeopardize the very existence of the state. As one author in the *Knight* stated, “The times when it was sufficient to be a Catholic in private life have passed. Today one must be [a Catholic] everywhere.”⁶⁸ The rebirth the *Knight* hoped for in Poland would not find support among Piłsudskiites.

After the coup the right-Catholic-nationalist *Current* was quick to outline its views on what had occurred in Poland in the spring of 1926. The editors agreed that Poland needed to be rebuilt from its very foundations and stated that for the last seven years Poles had been talking about just this need. It was only with the May coup, however, and the rise to preeminence “of those who are furthest from us” that the calls for rebirth became louder and more focused. And this state of affairs, the journal’s associates agreed, was troubling. Sanacja-era Poland would witness a very different kind of “moral rebirth,” one inconsistent with the *Current*’s basic approaches to private and public life: “Without a doubt, more than ever before, religious, moral, and national values are threatened in Poland.”⁶⁹

Together, these examples show that the coup and the official public declaration of the need for a nationwide sanacja resonated with journalists and,