Among the factors which contributed to the growth of ethnic conflict in Poland before 1939 the publicly enunciated views of Roman Dmowski (1864-1939) and Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935) were singularly significant. Dmowski was one of the founders of the Polish National Democratic Party in 1897 and the leading ideologue and publicist in that Party until his death in 1939. Piłsudski, co-founder and leader of the Polish Socialists (PPS) in the nineteenth century, was Poland's Chief of State from 1918 to 1922, and also her defacto chief executive from 1926 until his death in 1935. Both men were recognized as patriarchal, quasi-legendary figures among their respective supporters, and both exercised a profound influence on Polish public opinion between the wars.

With Dmowski, every facet of xenophobia was intimately bound up with the idea of the “nation,” a concept at once seemingly simple yet elusive. For Dmowski the Polish “nation” was made up not of those who merely inhabited the territories of pre-partition Poland of 1795 or 1793 or 1772, nor even of those inhabitants who wished to see the restoration of a Polish state in those territories. It included those whose language and culture were Polish and whose religion was Catholic, but, as in the case of converts from Judaism, outward conformity to any or even all of these standards was not enough. On the other hand, Dmowski identified as members of the Polish nation at least some individuals who were not Catholics, although he qualified this admission by the proviso that acceptance or understanding by such non-Catholics of the “Catholic character” of Poland, and behavior in accordance with such understanding was an essential part of their Polish national identity.

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Dmowski insisted that a society becomes a true “nation” only by virtue of its existence as a state at least at some juncture of its development. But he did not see the bond of common citizenship and the subjection of men to a common and in some sense indigenous authority as sufficient to create the “nation.” Certain prior and substantially independent factors were required for the rendering of a human collectivity into this higher, spiritually more homogeneous entity. The ultimate appeal with Dmowski, as with other integral nationalists of nineteenth century Europe, was to subjective factors, to spiritual and emotional bonds and the perceptions of a common tradition and future destiny.

Thus, in 1927 he expressed the problem quite characteristically as follows:

The population of a state and the nation are not identical terms. There are elements within the state which because of their lineage (pochodzenie) do not feel a common identity with the nation which possesses them; there are also within the nation, understood in ethnic terms, some elements which are on such a low level of cultural development, intellectual or moral, that they do not realize the nature of the national bonds and the nature of their obligations which flow from [them].

Dmowski’s conception of the nation was that of an organic entity based upon distinctive, subconscious or instinctive bonds which gave unity, force, cohesion and character to the “nation” throughout its recorded history. The national interest for Dmowski lay first of all in the preservation and maintenance of the undefiled purity of those bonds which conferred an identity of “nationhood” upon men; indiscriminate ethnic mixture was a folly and a crime. Secondly, the national interest required what might be termed external achievements, such as cultural, economic or political exploits on behalf of the nation. These two aspects of the national interest were clearly complementary. Those who were strong and cohesive would triumph in all sorts of endeavors. For Dmowski retreat and retrenchment were signs of weakness and decay; expansion was indicative of vigor and vitality. Specifically, Dmowski advocated the “ingestion” of non-Polish ethnic elements so long as, and to the extent that, they would eventually add to the collective strength of the Polish nation. Directed principally towards Ukrainians and Byelorussians, this was clearly a policy of polonization, i.e., absorption of presumably “lower” cultures by a “higher” Polish one, through assimilation. In his 1903 treatise Dmowski wrote: “When we leave a territory on which we are a minority it means only that we capitulate there, that

5. Ibid., pp. 70-1, 78. Cf. p. 108.