

Polish Experts and American Internationalists in the Field of Social Science

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Abstract

The archival holdings of the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) are a valuable resource for the history of expertise. I have used several of the RAC collections to write a social history of the interchange of knowledge between Polish social scientists and American internationalists in the 1920s and the 1930s. I would like to see this story as the Continental prehistory of American area studies. This report offers an overview of my work at the RAC, in particular, the types of materials I have looked through. It briefly discusses how the evidence enriched my understanding of the ways that expert knowledge traveled between Eastern Europe and the United States.

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The collapse of empires and the emergence of national states established a new order in Europe and international politics. This turn of events generated interest in Eastern and East Central Europe, particularly among American liberal internationalists. They claimed that this part of Europe could serve as an arena for observing phenomena and transformations typical of interwar Europe. Indeed, some countries, such as Hungary, Romania, and Poland, presented a number of key problems that defined the new order, such as ethnicity, ethnic conflicts, nationalism, and minorities. The interest in these issues and their consequences for world peace inclined American philanthropists and organizations – primarily the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) – to invest in scientific endeavors in the region. In the late 1920s and 1930s, their representatives – including social scientists from leading American universities – traveled to Eastern and East Central Europe. Eastern European social scientists, in turn, used the RF and other resources to come to the US to study, work, and establish professional networks. They were interested in the same set of key problems as their American counterparts, but tended to look at them from the perspective of their own national interest.

My research focuses on the case of Poland. The collaboration between Polish and American experts was established in connection with the creation of the new national state. They contributed to the preparations for the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, and later participated in planning for the League of Nations' plebiscites. From the beginning, their discussions and research projects, which followed these discussions, centered on a few key questions. Aside from ethnicity, nationalism, and the issue of minorities (in particular, the so-called Jewish question), the main research concerns explored migration and assimilation, race, and the colonial question in the context of the vast territories of the Second Polish Republic, as well as Poland's colonial aspirations.¹ It is important to note that all

these questions were closely interconnected. Moreover, increasing mobility allowed scholars to consider these same questions through a different lens across geographical and cultural contexts. For instance, Józef Chałasiński, sociologist and the director of the State Institute of Rural Culture (*Państwowy Instytut Kultury Wsi*) in Warsaw, carried out research on migration both in Poland and the United States. Max Weinreich, linguist and a leading figure of the Yiddish Research Institute (YIVO) in Vilna, incorporated observations he made during a short stay in the southern United States into his thinking about the Jews of Poland – particularly their exclusion from society, as it related to the African American experience.²

The research agendas and interests of philanthropic organizations changed during the 1920s and 1930s, and the shifts in their policies – sometimes sudden – can be seen in regard to their support for particular fields, disciplines, and questions.³ The group of Polish beneficiaries of the Rockefeller Foundation I am interested in received their fellowships in the early- and mid-1930s; that is, after the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial merged with other RF programs and activities into the Division of Social Sciences.⁴ This was when other philanthropic institutions such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Social Science Research Council joined the RF in their efforts to build knowledge of the situation in Eastern and Central Europe through collaboration with scientific agencies and European specialists. This moment coincided with a major turn in Poland. After Józef Piłsudski's coup d'état of 1926, the new *Sanacja* regime began to recognize the importance of research in the social sciences – ethnology and sociology particularly – that could then be employed for the benefit of the nation state.⁵ *Sanacja* was especially interested in questions related to ethnicity and nationalism, and their investigations in the borderland regions of the multi-ethnic Second Polish Republic served as a platform for guiding policy decisions. This coincidence resulted in a significant rise both in the mobility of scholars and contacts between Polish and American experts.

I want to examine the collaboration in detail and, to do so, I turned to three major types of sources at the RAC: materials which speak directly about the Rockefeller Foundation fellowships and fellows, internal and external correspondence of the

RF, CEIP and SSRC, and, finally, diaries and reports of the RF officers and other representatives of philanthropic organizations. I approach these materials from the perspective of a historian of Eastern Europe who tries, however, to talk about the region transnationally. This requires a reconstruction of intellectual and political networks across borders which involved experts from all over the world.⁶ Such a perspective changes the way we interpret Eastern European and international politics and societies during the interwar years. I am interested mostly in those social scientific projects that engaged with the big questions of the era – such as nationalism, minorities, migration, and colonialism – and which can illustrate how domestic and international agendas blurred. At the same time, I want to know how the personal experience and ideologies of these experts influenced the ways they addressed these questions.

My protagonists' backgrounds and views are, thus, central to this story. The first group I trace in the RAC records are Poles and Polish Jews who were, at the time, early career Rockefeller Foundation fellows. They either came to one of the leading universities in the United States (often Yale University or the University of Chicago), or to London to take part in the famous seminar led by social anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski at the London School of Economics (LSE). At the RAC, I discovered details about these people mostly through fellowship recorder cards,⁷ officers' actions⁸ and officers' diaries.⁹ The files are partly based on observations the RF officers made during their visits to Poland, and phone conversations they had with candidates for fellowships and other scholars. Apart from factual information, they also contain opinions of scholars and remarks on the socio-political situation in Poland. The officers' actions and diaries provide a broader, scientific and political context for the circulation of knowledge in Europe and beyond – essential information for my thinking about the particular case of Poland.

The second group I investigate are American experts and internationalists: scholars and politicians showing an interest in East and Central Europe from at least the time of the Paris Peace conference in 1919 and Woodrow Wilson's Inquiry. James T. Shotwell, a historian and scholar of international relations, is one of the major characters in this group. Shotwell was an advocate for peace, and led the work of the CEIP and SSRC on Eastern Europe. In the early 1930s, a group

of experts on East Central European issues, mostly based at Columbia University, traveled to various parts of the region to meet with scholars and organize local research agencies.¹⁰ At the time, they were focused on Poland and Hungary. Evidence of their activities can be traced in correspondence and institutional files, such as reports, minutes, and memoranda.¹¹

Finally, the third group consists of various “bridge figures,” to use Camille Robcis’ term; that is, scholars who were well-connected to both sides of the story – Polish and American – and served as intercultural translators.¹² Bronisław Malinowski is a case in point. Based at the LSE and later Yale University, Malinowski advised the Rockefeller Foundation and established close relationships with two RF officers working at the Paris branch of the Foundation: Tracy B. Kittredge and John V. Van Sickle. Malinowski was in favor of “native” (insider) anthropologists writing about cultures close to their cultural or ethnic background. Malinowski, originally from Kraków, maintained contacts with several Polish scholars and was an ardent supporter of young Polish candidates for fellowships. Certainly less well known, but also a crucial figure for my story, is William J. Rose, Slavicist and professor at Dartmouth College. During a sojourn in Cieszyn Silesia, Rose accidentally got stuck there as World War I broke out. He used the time to learn Polish and befriend local activists. This experience made him a staunch supporter of Polish issues, including Poland’s territorial ambitions. His contacts with experts on both sides were established and he served as an amateur diplomat on a number of occasions, including at the Paris Peace Conference. Later, Rose carried out research on Upper Silesia – a disputed territory between Poland and Germany, and the subject of a 1921 plebiscite.¹³ Malinowski, Rose, and the other so-called bridge figures – essential for practical and symbolic aspects of the exchange – appear in all types of sources I have already mentioned. In particular, they are present in correspondence,¹⁴ officers’ diaries and actions, and SSRC files on various programs, such as the Yale Seminar on Personality and Culture, conducted by Edward Sapir and John Dollard, which was attended by Max Weinreich and sociologist Jan Krzyżanowski.¹⁵

The exchange between experts, regarding projects, methods, and key questions, was simultaneously a confrontation between entities that my protagonists viewed

as fundamentally of the “West” or “East.” Despite the variety and complexity of views, this basic assumption structured the relationship between Poles and Americans. In other words, their conversations were accompanied by attempts to situate Poland between the essentialized markers of East and West, and to assign it a place on the civilizational ladder. As the exchange between experts intensified rapidly in the 1930s, there was more room to confront suppositions and prejudices, to verify one’s judgments and, often, to reinforce previously held views. Various expressions of superiority and inferiority can be detected in nearly all types of documents the RAC collections contain. Both sides displayed arrogance, though in slightly different ways. Poles, confident about their views and opinions, had a constant need to impose their interpretation of the Polish political situation upon their Western counterparts and to prove they were right about their vision.¹⁶ Although the idea of the cross-fertilization of knowledge was fundamental to the Rockefeller Foundation programs, RF representatives and other American experts believed that – since these programs were intended to produce knowledge – fellowships should take place either in the US or Great Britain. The rest of the world should therefore “catch up.”¹⁷ Yet, it should be stated that among the Poles some held skeptical and critical attitudes toward the Second Polish Republic and Polish nationalism. Among American experts, in turn, many expressed enthusiasm toward independent Poland and the allegedly exceptional qualities of Poles such as a “free spirit.” Moreover, the country’s cultural achievements led them to see Poland as a representative of the West. Despite generalizations, both sides made interesting observations about their counterparts.

My study sets out to investigate projects on the key questions of the 1920s and 1930s that brought together Polish and American experts. In sum, the sources generated from within the Rockefeller Foundation, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Social Science Research Council offer a fresh perspective on the study of Eastern European history. First, they contain a large body of data on the involvement of the American experts in Eastern Europe during the interwar years. Second, they show Eastern European issues from the perspective of an outsider. This perspective contributes to the conclusion that the studies of key questions, such as ethnicity, nationalism, colonial questions, and migration in relation to Eastern Europe, are closely intertwined. Finally, various types of

sources from the RAC collections unravel mutual observations, cultural prejudices, and assumptions which structured the relationships between experts.

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¹ See Piotr Puchalski, “The Polish Mission to Liberia, 1934–1938: Constructing Poland’s Colonial Identity,” *The Historical Journal* 60, 4 (2017), pp. 1071–1096.

² Jennifer Young, “Race, Culture, and the Creation of Yiddish Social Science: Max Weinreich’s Trip to Tuskegee, 1932,” in *Choosing Yiddish: New Frontiers of Language and Culture*, eds. Laura Rabinovitch et al., Wayne State University Press, 2012, pp. 217–232. See also, Leila Zenderland, “Social Science as a «Weapon of the Weak»: Max Weinreich, the Yiddish Scientific Institute, and the Study of Culture, Personality, and Prejudice,” *Isis* 104, 4 (December 2013), pp. 742–772.

³ To understand the policies of the Rockefeller Foundation, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Social Science Research Council, and associated organizations, I have studied a number of files including the following: Rockefeller Foundation Records, Administration, Program and Policy, SG 3.1 and SG 3.2 (FA112), Box 1, Box 2, Box 7, Box 15, RAC. Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records, World Affairs, Series Q, Box 1, RAC. See also, David L. Seim, *Rockefeller Philanthropy and Modern Social Science*, Routledge, 2013.

⁴ For a comprehensive account of the RF Polish fellows, see Morgane Labbé, *The Rockefeller Foundation Turns to the East: Polish Social Sciences Fellows during the Interwar Period*, <https://www.issuelab.org/resource/rockefeller-foundation-turns-to-the-east-polish-social-sciences-fellows-during-the-interwar-period.html>

⁵ On the *Sanacja* regime and the development of ethnology in Poland, see Olga Linkiewicz, “Scientific Ideals and Political Engagement: Polish Ethnology and the «Ethnic Question» between the Wars,” *Acta Poloniae Historica* 114 (2016), pp. 5–27.

⁶ Michael David-Fox, “The Implications of Transnationalism,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, 4 (Fall 2011), pp. 885–904.

⁷ Rockefeller Foundation Records, Fellowships, Fellowship Recorder Cards, SG 10.2 (FA426), Box 5, RAC.

⁸ Rockefeller Foundation Records, Officers’ Actions, SG 16.3 (FA474), Box 59, Box 60, Box 63, Box 64, RAC.

⁹ I have been using mostly notes by John V. Van Sickle and Tracy B. Kittredge which could be found under John Van Sickle diary. Rockefeller Foundation Records, Officers’ Diaries, RG 12 (FA394), Box 482, RAC.

¹⁰ Apart from Columbia, the other important center was Harvard. See, Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, Stanford University Press, 2020, p. 5.

¹¹ See, for instance, Rockefeller Foundation Records, General Correspondence, RG 2, 1924–1939 (FA308), Box 77, Box 93, Box 168, RAC. Rockefeller Foundation Records,

Field Offices, Paris, RG 6, SG 1, (FA395), Box 40, Box 47, RAC. Rockefeller Foundation Records, Projects, SG 1.1 (FA386a), Series 200S, Box 403, RAC.

¹² Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 6.

¹³ Social Science Research Council Records, Record Group 1 and Group 2 (FA021), Box 64, Folder 344, Box 66, Folder 347, RAC. See also, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Projects, SG 1.1 (FA386a), Series 200S, Box 403, RAC.

¹⁴ A part of the correspondence, for obvious reasons, can be found elsewhere than the RAC.

¹⁵ Rockefeller Foundation Records, Projects, SG 1.1 (FA386a), Series 200S, Box 408, RAC.

¹⁶ See, for instance TBK to SHW, January 9, 1938. Rockefeller Foundation Records, General Correspondence, RG 2, 1924–1939 (FA308), Series 1938-789, Box 168, Folder 1223, RAC.

¹⁷ The phrase is used in an inter-office correspondence (A.M. to A.G.), March 1, 1944. Rockefeller Foundation Records, Projects, SG 1.2 (FA387b), Series 700, Box 9, RAC.