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The crisis of the thirties. The Poles: out!

Abstract

The economic crisis began in France in the second half of 1930. It reached its peak in 1934 and 1935 and resulted in a very high unemployment rate. To cope with these difficulties, the French government decided to protect French workers by limiting the number of foreign workers. The Poles had to return to their country under increasingly restrictive conditions. Woe betide strikers, union members and communists. The number of Poles fell by 17% between 1931 and 1936. After the respite provided by the Front Populaire, which was more concerned about foreign workers, the Poles lived in fear of having to leave France. The most politically committed joined the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War.

Keywords: Unemployment, strikes, Spanish Civil War, repatriations, trade unions, xenophobia

For a long time, Polish immigrants, like others, thought of returning home, as Bertolt Brecht wrote in *Pensées sur la durée de l'exil*¹:

Don't hammer a nail in the wall!
Throw your jacket on a chair!
Why plan for four days?
You'll be back tomorrow.

This was the prevailing view of the French authorities after the First World War, as they had established a labour recruitment policy rather than an immigration policy. And this recruitment policy was aimed at supplying

¹ B. Brecht, *Poèmes 4, 1934–1941, Pensées sur la durée de l'exil*, Paris 1966, p. 131–132.

the most thankless sectors of the labour market: workers in the extractive, metallurgical and chemical industries, as well as in agriculture, all jobs that French workers did not want to occupy. As Abdelmalek Sayad points out:

It is work that 'gives birth' to the immigrant, that makes him or her exist; it is also work, when it ceases, that makes the immigrant 'die', pronounces his or her negation or pushes him or her back into non-existence².

It is therefore inconceivable that an immigrant does not work; in this case, his place is not in France. But while the unemployment rate is constantly rising, it is just as inconceivable for the French unemployed to see an immigrant working. The slogans express this xenophobia: "French work, for the French", "Go back to where you came from", etc. The immigrant has no place anywhere; not only is he a competitor, but he also becomes an outcast. This is how a long-lasting xenophobic wave was born. In his diary, the Hungarian Paul Löffler noted on 31st October 1931: "Xenophobia, like the crisis, is at its peak and will remain a stain of shame on the history of the French people"³.

The dilemma : protectionism or liberalism ?

The solution seems very simple to some, and the far right is not shy about stating it: reserve work for the French and send back useless immigrants. In other words, introduce labour protectionism. The far right is not the only one calling for this. The xenophobic wave affects the whole of society and all political parties, with the exception of the Communist Party, at least its leaders, but not its base. The humanistic radical Édouard Herriot and the socialist Georges Monnet demanded that work be reserved for French people first. The unions were also affected, even the Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU), which had a communist tendency and was nevertheless concerned with workers' internationalism: the leaders maintained the course, but the rank and file balked. However, this solution is not as simple as it seems. Indeed, if protectionism is the option of the liberal professions and traders/artisans, the big companies remain faithful to liberalism. Indeed, they fear losing a workforce that has cost them, that accepts "dirty jobs", that has adapted and acquired skills that are difficult

² A. Sayad, *L'immigration ou Les paradoxes de l'altérité*, Bruxelles 1997, p. 61.

³ P. Löffler, *Journal de Paris d'un exilé*, Rodez 1974, p. 95.

to find again (miners in particular, but also workers in large-scale industry), that makes up for the lack of manpower in agriculture. How will it manage when the crisis ends? One of the main leaders of the Comité Central des Houillères de France (CCHF), Henri de Peyerimhoff, declared in 1934: "French coal mines cannot do without foreign workers if they want to maintain production standards"⁴. Faced with these two options, and at least until 1934, the government tried to find a way around them, especially as it had to respect the Franco-Polish conventions of 3rd September 1919 and 14th October 1920, which stipulated equal rights for French and Polish workers in employment contracts. On the one hand, it could not ignore the pressure of public opinion, and on the other hand it was receptive to the demands of large companies. It therefore promulgated the law of 10th August 1932 on the quota of foreign labour in professions and territories, but it left the content of this law to the promulgation of subsequent decrees which most often concerned only one profession, and more rarely a territory. In fact, this law was only an announcement effect that allowed for a delay. Until November 1934, the decrees were few in number and did not concern those in large-scale industry or agriculture; they concerned musicians, hotel employees, leather workers, for example, and then doctors, lawyers and shopkeepers. Polish workers were not yet very much involved. The situation then changed.

The implementation of a policy of labour protectionism

The situation changed because of several factors: the xenophobic wave became stronger and stronger because of the assaults committed by foreigners: the assassination of Paul Doumer on 6th May 1932 by the Russian Gorgulov, the assassination of the Yugoslav king Alexander I and Paul Barthou on 9th October 1934 against a backdrop of settling of accounts by the foreign mob. We must also take into account the Stavisky⁵ scandal (January 1934) and the anti-parliamentary riots of 6th February 1934. As far as the Poles are concerned, the effect of the bad relations between Poland and France can also be seen: Non-aggression pact between Berlin and Warsaw in January 1934, coming to power in May 1935, after Pilsudski's death in March, of Joseph Beck, who was not very much appreciated by France, and then of the colonels' regime (the new Marshal Rydz-Śmigły) in October,

⁴ J. Ponty, *Polonais méconnus. Histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, Paris 1988, p. 301.

⁵ Con man born in 1886 in the Ukrainian part of the Russian Empire.

a regime that felt sympathy for Franco in the Spanish war and approved of Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia.

The first to be affected were the women. Textile workers were dismissed from one day to the next because they often came without a contract and were therefore not protected. Agricultural workers were not affected. Among men, there were not the same brutal dismissals. From 1931 to 1934, the Poles, like the French, suffered partial unemployment, for one day, two days, sometimes two and a half days. They were entitled to unemployment benefits paid by the municipalities. But as the number of unemployed increased, the functioning of this system became problematic. In the xenophobic atmosphere of the time, there was a strong temptation to help only the French. The Ministry of Labour pushed companies to lay off people, especially single people, without making any fuss (they paid for the return journey).

The laboratory of the Alsace potassium basin

In fact, it was the potassium basin of Upper Alsace, with the Mines Domaniales d'Alsace (MDPA), which played the role of laboratory⁶. This public company (at the time, the only one with the Manufacture des tabacs et allumettes and the Compagnie ferroviaire de l'Ouest)⁷ which depended on the Ministry of Labour and Charles Picquenard, Director of Labour at the same ministry, who sat on its board of directors, developed the method which would later be followed in the other companies. Indeed, the potash mines were affected much earlier than the others because of the early agricultural crisis, while the market was not protected like the coal market.

In December 1931, the general manager of the MDPA, inspired by Picquenard, transmitted his plan which was based on five principles:

- No mass dismissal of foreign workers to limit the emotion and protests of the countries concerned;
- Individual dismissals affecting as a priority single or isolated volunteers and in small groups each week;
- Dismissed workers deported to their country;
- Costs paid by the company;
- Implementation by the prefect.

⁶ Y. Frey, *Polonais d'Alsace. Pratiques patronales et mineurs polonais dans le bassin potassique de Haute-Alsace, 1918-1948*, Besançon 2003, p. 309-343.

⁷ The great wave of nationalisations took place after the Second World War.

It is a question of disguising the dismissal of workers as voluntary departures, of encouraging departure by paying for the journey to their country of origin, and of manoeuvring so that it is not too obvious. Candidates for departure are chosen by the MDPA who offer them either repatriation, all expenses paid, or dismissal without compensation. The choice is biased, but the fiction of individual voluntary departures is thus safeguarded. In concrete terms, the departures were by train from Strasbourg once a week; the first convoy left Alsace on 4th February 1932. Everything went off without a hitch. This method proved to be effective, since in the first half of the year, 437 workers were repatriated with 168 women and 300 children, i.e. 905 people. From the second half of the year onwards, it was necessary to send back families who did not want to leave. Also, the MDPA agreed with the prefecture not to renew the identity cards of workers who were ill or physically diminished, those whose performance was mediocre, as well as those of "strong heads" and union and/or political activists, who were few in number in the basin. From the beginning of 1932 to the end of 1936, 819 miners were repatriated, 486 women and 1027 children, roughly a third of the Polish population of the potash basin.

Three kinds of administrative measures were tried out to make foreigners leave French territory

Repatriation was not strictly speaking an administrative measure because the decision was taken by companies under political pressure. It takes place after a mock negotiation: either you leave and are paid for the trip to Poland, or you stay in France, but you lose your housing and all other rights.

Refoulement concerns foreigners in an irregular situation: illegal immigrants, foreigners with irregular papers or without papers. Non-renewal of the identity card is widely used by the authorities. Indeed, a foreigner could not work if he did not have a foreigner's identity card. He must then leave the country with his family. Refoulement is often equated with repatriation because it was in fact a forced repatriation. The journey is paid for.

In addition to these two most commonly used measures, expulsion is also used. This can be pronounced in accordance with the law of 3rd December 1849, in the event of a conviction or if the attitude of the person concerned was likely to disturb public order, such as going on strike, for example, in the 1930s. In this case, there is no family responsibility. The worker was deported, alone, to the border, like Thomas Olszanski. He was a naturalized

French citizen in 1922 and one of the main leaders of the Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU), in charge of propaganda for foreign workers (MOE). The authorities wanted to get rid of him. In 1932, he was stripped of his French nationality (law of 1927). His expulsion order was signed in April 1934. He then went into hiding, only to be arrested in October and expelled.

The generalisation of repatriations

Until the end of 1933, the coalmines and other industrial companies protected a workforce that they knew would be needed during the recovery that would come sooner or later. In the meantime, they had to keep their heads down. But in the face of the continuing crisis and the growing xenophobia, they had to apply government orders and organise repatriation convoys. The method had worked so well in the potassium basin of Upper Alsace that the Ministry of Labour, which was in charge, generalised it in 1934 to all the coal basins and industrial companies⁸. It became more brutal. The humanist philosopher Simone Weil, who was involved in social and trade union struggles, was shocked by the method, which gave all the power to the heads of department (see Appendix 1). The Ministry of Labour then asked the Nord-Pas-de-Calais coalmines to send back 5,000 to 6,000 Poles. It obtained more: over 7,000. There were attempts at resistance, the most famous of which was the Leforest strike in the Pas-de-Calais coalfield.

The „historic and heroic” strike: Leforest, August 1934

This is how Thomas Olszanski describes this strike, which is in line with other strikes decided following the dismissal of Polish mineworkers⁹. They participated, but quickly gave up because they were threatened with expulsion, as in Thivencelle in September-October 1932. But not in Leforest, two years later.

The Leforest strike is undoubtedly historic because it was the first strike which took place at the bottom of the pit; it was an „underground strike”,

⁸ Y. Frey, *Histoire des Polonais en France*, Paris 2019, s. 101–130; J. Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, p. 287–318.

⁹ T. Olszanski, M. Mihout (texte traduit et commenté par), *Un militant syndicaliste franco-polonais – „la vie errante” de Thomas Olszanski (1886–1959)*, Lille 1993, p. 311–315.

the strike with occupation which was to become widespread under the Front Populaire. It is undoubtedly less heroic if not in the words that transformed it into a real saga. But it is also, as Thomas Olszanski omits, the manifestation of the division between Polish and French workers, and more widely between the Polish and French populations.

In 1934, the Compagnie de l'Escarpelle employed around 2,500 miners, including 1,350 Poles who worked at the bottom of the mine, where they outnumbered the French, who numbered around a thousand. This was a general phenomenon in French mines at the time. In Leforest, where pit No. 10 was located, the Poles made up 37% of the population of the town: 1,700 compared to 2,800 French and 150 other foreigners. Thus, the Poles were in the majority at the bottom of the mine and in the minority in the commune. In the spring of 1934, massive lay-offs and the repatriation of Poles began. In Leforest, pushed by the CGTU union, the miners resisted. In this movement, two sequences can be distinguished. The first took place in May: 200 Polish miners stopped work and locked themselves in the showers as a protest. On 21st July, eleven expulsion orders were signed by the Minister of the Interior, Albert Sarraut, on the grounds of "violence and rebellion". They arrived on 5th August and concerned Poles suspected of belonging to the communist party. The CGTU reacted immediately by having a new work stoppage voted for the day after. The strike therefore began on the morning of 7th August. The morning shift was occupied by 347 Poles and 88 French. The Poles, who were reluctant, took action after two of them were arrested by the gendarmes on the mine floor. They barricaded themselves at the bottom while most of their French colleagues and some of them escaped through another shaft.

Let's summarise the situation: the majority of the mine workers, Polish, barricaded themselves at the bottom of pit N° 10, along with a few French people who were neither forced nor mistreated, as the management confirmed. They remained for a day and a half at the bottom, without light or supplies. At the surface, because of the ambient xenophobia, the situation is much more tense than at the bottom. The wildest rumours were circulating, in particular that the Polish miners had taken their French colleagues hostage. The Polish population could only escape by retreating to the safety of their homes. The next day, the intervention of the CGTU miner delegate, accompanied by a representative of the non-communist CGT union, brought the strike to an end. The miners went back up. The decision already taken by the authorities is announced: 122 Polish miners were sent back and 7, considered to be the leaders, were prosecuted. The 122 were repatriated

with their families, their transport costs paid by the company. Among them was Edward Gierek¹⁰ (known under his father-in-law's name, Jaros). Of the seven prosecuted, one escaped; the other six were convicted and deported, thus without their families and without financial support. In total, with the families, France sent back 250 people. This strike became a mythical battle, a symbol of the resistance of Polish miners to French brutality. But above all it shows that the French government does not tolerate any social movement to defend these workers and that it hunts down communist leaders and activists, Polish and foreign, who are considered undesirable.

The year 1935 was a terrible year, and not only for the Poles who could no longer find a way to escape repatriation. Indeed, the decree of 6th February 1935 made workers' identity cards, which were compulsory to find a job, valid only in the department where they were issued. In addition, in order to obtain a renewal of this card, it was necessary to produce a valid work contract.

This is a real nightmare for Poles. At the same time as they received their fortnightly pay, they could also receive the famous little card on which they were told to report within 48 hours to the departure of the next convoy back to Poland, with thirty kilos of luggage per person, which meant that they could not take their furniture and bulky objects with them. They sell to their neighbours, usually at low prices, what they have spent years trying to buy. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry left us a testimony of these returnees in Poland: "And here they seemed to me to have half lost their human quality" (see Appendix 2). Not all of them left, but all of them felt threatened, even the fathers of families who, as a precaution, had made a declaration of French nationality for their children. French children with Polish parents, Westphalians born in the Ruhr, who knew nothing about Poland, were sent back to Poland. As long as the repatriations only affected the coal companies, they paid the transport costs to the border of the country of return; with their generalisation and the financial problems of the companies due to the crisis, the Ministry of Labour took over the costs of repatriation from the workplace.

¹⁰ Edward Gierek arrived in France in 1927 in the small Ronchamp coalfield at the age of fourteen. He then left for Leforest where he worked as a miner. He became the first secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (UWP) and thus the real leader of the country from December 1970 until September 1980.

The balance sheet

The decrease in the number of Poles is very clear, around 17%. France, which had 508,000 Poles in 1931, had only 423,000 in 1936, this decrease not only being due to repatriations, but also to the cessation of recruitment. The most affected was the Upper Alsace potash basin, where the number of Poles fell from 3,180 in 1930 to 1,046 in 1936, a drop of 66%. Then came the other mining basins, the Ronchamp basin with a drop of more than 36%, the Meurthe-et-Moselle iron basin with a drop of 35%, then the other coal basins, with a drop of 23% for the Pas-de-Calais basin, 22% for the Nord basin and 19% for the Saône-et-Loire basin. When they arrived in Poland, they found themselves unemployed again, with less aid and under the reproachful eye of the inhabitants who pejoratively called them *Francuz*.

The popular front pause and the resumption of expulsions in 1938

The Popular Front

With the arrival in power in May 1936 of the Front Populaire government led by the socialist Léon Blum, although the regulations concerning foreigners were neither repealed nor modified, their application became more humane. Poles received authorisation to change departments and their identity cards were renewed, which meant that they could stay in France. Polish immigration, although predominantly Catholic, appreciated the socialist government. Indeed, foreigners benefited from social measures like the French (with the exception of agricultural workers). Foreigners joined unions en masse: in the Nord and Pas-de-Calais coalfields, the CGT miners' union (the CGT and the CGTU reunited in March 1936) had 30,000 Polish members out of a total of 38,000 of this nationality, i.e. around 80%¹¹. At the national level, the CGT had between 100,000 and 120,000 Polish members. They actively participated in strikes, sometimes leading them.

¹¹ J. Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, p. 327.

New expulsions in 1938

But the Popular Front was in decline by the summer of 1937. Xenophobia resumed. Raymond Millet, a journalist with the liberal newspaper *Le Temps*, wrote in 1938:

In these days of economic crisis, our people are beginning to view with suspicion the categories of unassimilable foreigners who live among themselves, marry among themselves, have their own religion, their own priests, their own newspapers, their own morals, but who seek and often receive unemployment benefits¹².

It is not difficult to see that the Poles are mainly targeted. In March 1938, the new government led by the radical Édouard Daladier obtained full powers from Parliament and adopted a series of decree-laws between May and November which, on the one hand, called into question the social advances (the 40-hour work week in particular) and, on the other hand, exacerbated the repressive policy towards immigrants and refugees, which resulted in increased police pressure and measures to revoke nationality. This is primarily a response to the influx of political refugees: Spanish republicans, German and Polish Jews, and anti-Nazis. They were not intended for immigrants brought in under the Immigration Conventions, but they were nonetheless affected by them. This is how foreigners once again see their freedom of movement restricted. They also have to remember to renew their identity card, otherwise they risk one month to one year in prison... and without an identity card, no work! The improvement brought in by the Popular Front is over. Immigrants are afraid again. They distanced themselves from the unions.

As a reaction to these legal decrees, the CGT launched a general strike on 30th November. The government warned foreigners that participation would lead to deportation. The strike was a failure, mainly because the vast majority of foreigners did not participate out of fear. However, some of them were dragged along and fell into the trap. On 13th January 1939, the Minister of the Interior published an expulsion order against striking foreigners. The expulsions started again. Some committed suicide. In the

¹² J.C. Bonnet, *Les pouvoirs publics français et l'immigration dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, Lyon 1976, p. 341.

potash basin of Haute-Alsace, a miner killed his family before hanging himself¹³. The truce due to the Popular Front was a distant memory!

The Poles in France in the Spanish War and the making of stateless people

There were other departures that were not expulsions, even if some of them, particularly those of the unemployed, could be due to a desire to escape. These departures mainly concerned communists, who accounted for about 80% of the Poles who volunteered for Spain.

The Spanish Civil War began in the summer of 1936¹⁴. From the end of August, the first Poles from France, nine communists sent by the PCF, fought on the Basque front in Irun¹⁵. It was only in September that the constitution of the International Brigades was decided, and they were officially created on 12 October. It was the French Communist Party (PCF) that served as the backbone of the organisation of this international army, with the Frenchman André Marty as its main leader. Although the French volunteers were the most numerous, estimates put the number of Poles arriving from France at 3,500, sometimes more, to which must be added 800 to 900 Poles from Poland, among them many Jews, who had often gone underground¹⁶. Enrolment took place in the party cells, but also in the back rooms of cafés. Jean-Marie Fossier, a permanent member of the party, testifies:

From the beginning of the struggle, in the North, a solidarity committee was created [...] very quickly, by an insensitive shift, solidarity was accompanied by recruitment. Cell meetings were called during which the problem was presented from the point of view of the fight against Nazism¹⁷.

The same propaganda can be found in the Polish “language groups” (sections) of the Immigrant Labour Force (MOI – an autonomous structure

¹³ Y. Frey, *Polonais d’Alsace*, p. 361–364; Y. Frey, *Histoire des Polonais en France*, Paris 2019, p. 136–137.

¹⁴ B. Bennassar, *La guerre d’Espagne et ses lendemains*, Paris 2004 (Tempus 2006), passim.

¹⁵ Rémi Skoutelsky, *L’espoir guidait leurs pas. Les volontaires français dans les Brigades internationales, 1936–1939*, Paris 1998, p. 36.

¹⁶ G.E. Sichon, *Polonais d’origine juive volontaires de la guerre civile en Espagne (1936–1939)*, „Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps” 2004, No. 73, p. 44–48.

¹⁷ R. Skoutelsky, *L’espoir guidait leurs pas. Les volontaires français dans les Brigades internationales, 1936–1939*, Paris 1998, p. 114.

composed of immigrants of all foreign nationalities within the PCF). The PCF organised convoys to Spain. The Poles, but not all of them, joined the Dabrowski Battalion, which was also composed of Spaniards and Hungarians. Many of them lost their lives, others tried to return to France, the return being general after the decision of the Spanish government, in September 1938, to send back the non-Spanish combatants. Returned to France where they had no or no longer residence, they were interned in the camps of Argelès, Saint-Cyprien and Gurs. The French government very quickly wanted to send them back to their country. But the government in Warsaw deprived them of their nationality and, as most of them had not become naturalized, they became stateless, not deportable¹⁸. For many, Spain was a trap. Many joined the Resistance.

It is not up for us here to make a list of the Poles in France involved in the International Brigades. We can nevertheless mention Joseph Kolorz, an immigrant in 1922, who became a coal miner and then a CGTU trade union representative, killed during the battle of the Ebro in August 1938¹⁹. But there are more famous ones because they belong to the Manouchian group, a group of resistance fighters of the MOI. For example, Stanislas Kubacki was sentenced to expulsion in March 1936, but remained in France because of the more liberal policy of the Popular Front. On his return from Spain, he was interned in the Vernet camp and then in Gurs. He was then deported to Germany, escaped and joined the communist resistance fighters of the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP) – MOI. He was arrested, tried and executed on 21st February 1944. In his last letter to his wife, he wrote: “I die for freedom, for France and for Poland”²⁰. He was shot at the same time as the other Poles of the Manouchian group. Szlama Grzywacz, who arrived in France in 1936, preferred to join the International Brigades rather than be deported to Poland. Interned, he escaped and joined the resistance²¹. Among those who did not immigrate to France, Jonas Geduldig was stuck in the southern camps after the return from the Spanish war. Coming

¹⁸ É. Temime, *La guerre d'Espagne et les volontaires d'Europe centrale* [in:] *De l'exil à la résistance. Réfugiés et immigrés d'Europe centrale en France 1933–1945*, Paris 1989, p. 85–93.

¹⁹ R. Lemarquis, C. Pennetier, notice M. Dumont (Joseph Kolorz), https://maitron.fr/spip.php?Article_111355, on-line 24 November 2010, last modification 15 September 2019.

²⁰ J.P. Besse, notice S. Kubacki, https://maitron.fr/spip.php?Article_73555, on-line 26 August 2009, last modification 15 May 2022.

²¹ The other Polish members of the Manouchian group shot on 11 February 1944 were the Jews Mosca Fingerowieg (21), Mieczysław Rajman (21), Salomon Schapira (34) and Wolf Wajrbrot (19), all of whom were communists. Only Lejb Goldberg (19 years old) was not a militant. He joined the FTP-MOI after the arrest and deportation of his entire family in August 1942.

from Palestine to join the International Brigades, interned in the camps of Gurs and Argelès, he escaped and joined the Manouchian group²². Joseph Epstein, “Colonel Gille” of the Resistance, finished his law studies in France, then fought on the Irun front. Wounded, he became a political commissar. Interned in France, then taken prisoner by the Germans, he escaped and fought in the communist resistance. He was arrested with Manouchian and shot on 11th April 1944. We should also mention Mieczyslaw Bortenstein, a Polish Jew who was undesirable in France and who was in Spain from 1936 to the fall of Barcelona on 26 January 1939, first as a fighter and then as an administrator of an arms factory. When he returned to France, he had to live illegally (no papers) before being deported to the Vernet camp in February 1940. In 1942, he was transferred to Drancy and then to Auschwitz where he died²³.

The crisis of the 1930s led to the expulsion of many foreign workers. The conservative deputy Pierre Amidieu du Clos exclaimed in the Chamber on 18th December 1931: “We are not suffering from a crisis of national unemployment, but from a crisis of foreign invasion”²⁴. This opinion was general; criticism of foreigners led to their dismissal. In 1936, France had 500,000 fewer foreigners than in 1931. The Poles were the second most affected nationality after the Italians. However, they were not proportionally the most affected nationalities, unlike those from the Iberian Peninsula.

Nationality	1931	1936	Percentage balance
Italians	808 100	720 900	-10,8
Poles	507 800	422 700	-16,8
Spanish	351 900	253 500	-28,0
Portuguese	49 000	28 300	-42,2
Czechoslovakians	4 700	35 000	-25,3
Total	2 714 700	2 198 200	-19,0

Changes in the number of foreigners between 1931 and 1936 (Source: censuses)

In 1937, the balance of entries over departures became positive again (+9,000) as well as in 1938 (+6,000)²⁵. This recovery seems to be mainly due to the arrival of Polish Jews who fled the country because of the anti-Semitism

²² J.P. Besse, D. Grason, notice J. Geduldig, [https://maitron.fr/spip.php? Article 76022](https://maitron.fr/spip.php?Article=76022), on-line 24 January 2010, last modification 20 November 2020.

²³ R. Prager, notice Mieczyslaw Bortenstein, [https://maitron.fr/spip.php? On-line 20](https://maitron.fr/spip.php?On-line=20) October 2008, last modification 26 December 2017.

²⁴ R. Schor, *Histoire de l'immigration en France de la fin du XIX^e siècle à nos jours*, Paris 1996, p. 121.

²⁵ J. Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, Paris 1988, p. 425. Data from the French Ministry of Labour.

phase. France became either a refuge or a step towards more distant horizons (United States for example) for Jews from Central Europe and Germany. This contribution compensated for the commitments in the International Brigades. However, the atmosphere was gloomy in the Polish population, with fear growing as the threat of war became clearer. Indeed, xenophobia was always present. In Revin, in the Ardennes, during the evacuation by train in the face of the German army's advance in the spring of 1940, Edmond and Alain Szelong report:

The still young man helped the unwilling travellers to get into the compartments, to pass the luggage. The Polish neighbours gathered in the same carriage. The spirit of the parish, of the street, of the neighbourhood, of the community or of the nationality took over at that moment. Many Poles spoke in their own language. It was as if we were in a different country. Mrs M., a resident of the housing estate, got carried away. Feeling like a stranger in a carriage she considered her own, she could not contain her resentment – I'm fed up with these Poles, we're at war because of them, and they're bothering us until we leave²⁶.

The economic crisis and then the war had blocked the process of integration of the Poles into French society.

APPENDIX 1: Letter from Simone Weil to an engineer and factory manager (Bourges, April 1936?)

"I have been thinking about what you told me about the way in which the choice of workers to be dismissed is made in the event of a reduction in staff. I know that your method is the only one that can be defended from the point of view of the company. But take a moment to look at it from the other point of view – from below. What power does it give to your department heads to designate, among the Polish workers, those who are to be dismissed as being the least useful! I don't know them, I don't know how they use such power. But I can imagine the situation of these Polish workers who, I think, suspect that one day or another you may be forced to dismiss some of them, before the head of the department who would be responsible that day for designating such and such a person as being less useful than his comrades. How they must tremble before him and fear to displease him! Will you still

²⁶ E. Szelong, A. Szelong, *Polonais en France*, Montricher 2001, p. 160.

consider me ultra-sensitive if I tell you that I can imagine this very well, and that it hurts me? Suppose yourself placed in such a situation, with wife and children in your charge, and ask yourself to what extent you would be able to maintain your dignity"²⁷.

APPENDIX 2: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des hommes*

"Some years ago, during a long journey by rail, I wanted to visit the country on the move where I was locked up for three days, a prisoner for three days of the sound of pebbles rolled by the sea, and I got up. I crossed the entire length of the train around one o'clock in the morning. The sleeping quarters were empty. The first cars were empty. But the third cars contained hundreds of Polish workers who had been dismissed from France and who were returning to their Poland. [...] A whole people sunk in bad dreams and returning to their misery. Big shaven heads were rolling on the wood of the benches. Men, women, children, all turned from right to left, as if attacked by all these noises, all these shocks that threatened them in their oblivion. They had not found the hospitality of a good sleep".

"And here they seemed to me to have half lost their human quality, tossed from one end of Europe to the other by the economic currents, torn from the little house in the North, from the tiny garden, from the three pots of geraniums that I had once noticed in the window of the Polish miners. They had collected only kitchen utensils, blankets and curtains in loosely tied, hernia-ridden packages. But everything they had stroked, everything they had managed to tame in four or five years in France, the cat, the dog and the geranium, they had had to sacrifice and they took with them only these kitchen utensils".

"[...] And I went back to my carriage. I said to myself: these people are not suffering much from their fate. And it is not charity that torments me here... What torments me, soup kitchens do not cure. What torments me is not these hollows, nor these bumps, nor this ugliness. It is a little bit in each of these men, Mozart murdered. Only the Spirit, if it blows on the clay, can create Man"²⁸.

²⁷ S. Weil, *La condition ouvrière*, Paris 1951, p. 150.

²⁸ A. de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des Hommes*, Paris 1939, p. 179–180.

The conservative deputy, Paul Reynaud, wrote more or less the same thing, but in a more prosaic way: "To throw out foreigners whose children were, in fact, little Frenchmen is one of the signs of the lack of imagination from which we suffer". "It is truly monstrous for a depopulated country"²⁹.

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²⁹ R. Schor, *Français et immigrés en temps de crise (1930–1980)*, Paris 2004, p. 142.