

Film/Cinema (East Central Europe)

By [Karina Pryt](#)

Until 1914, cinema in the Polish lands was shaped by borders between the partitioning powers. Unlike the territories in the Prussian partition, Austrian-ruled Galicia and Russian-ruled Congress Poland hosted Polish filmmaking. Whereby Warsaw became the centre of the Polish film industry and a hub for Jewish filmmaking. The First World War had a substantial impact on cinema in the Polish lands, as it changed the geopolitical framework and created new borders. The armed conflict also involved Polish cinema in the war propaganda of both belligerent sides.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 The Exhibition Sector](#)
- [3 Polish Film Production](#)
- [4 Conclusion](#)
- [5 Selected Filmography](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

After first describing the development of Polish [cinema](#) before 1914, this article will explain the impact of the First World War on both the screening sector and domestic film production. In doing so, it leans not only on film history^[1] but also considers the perspective of cinema history, which shifts the focus from films to exhibition places, cinema programs, and cinema audiences. The article builds on Mariusz Guzek's monography with its comprehensive look at film culture in Polish territories during World War I.^[2]

Starting with the changed geopolitical and political framework, the article demonstrates how cinemas grew despite general impoverishment amid the devastating war. While shifting the attention towards film programs, it portrays the involvement of exhibition places in the war [propaganda](#) of both fighting sides. Afterward, the article describes the devastating effect of the war on domestic film production and focuses on the adaptive strategies of the one surviving production company. Finally, it demonstrates how this company's changed geopolitical position influenced the contents of its film productions.

In the twenty years preceding World War I, cinema in the Polish territories unfolded within the larger geopolitical framework that had been created by the partitioning of [Poland](#) in the late 18th century. Cinema in the Polish lands functioned within the state markets of the respective ruling powers, [Germany](#), [Austria-Hungary](#), and [Russia](#). As such, it was subject to the borders between the monarchies, as well as to their policies towards the Poles and other national and religious minorities. Under these unpropitious conditions, about 300 films were made between 1895 and 1914. Most of them were short and had only a few copies. With a few exceptions, they are regarded as lost today.

In the Prussian partition, where restrictions on Polish national life were the harshest, no attempts at Polish filmmaking occurred.

Conversely, in the Austrian partition, in autonomous Galicia, film exhibition took place within the established framework of an urban entertainment culture in which the Polish language was privileged compared to the languages of other national minorities like the Ukrainians and Jews. Enjoying relative freedom, local film companies in cities like Krakow and Lviv contributed to cottage film production.

However, it was Warsaw, the capital of Russian-controlled Congress Poland, that became the heart of the Polish film production industry. As the largest Polish city and an important railway hub, Warsaw offered an attractive local market and provided convenient access to other urban areas of the multi-ethnic Russian Empire. After the Russification policy was loosened as a result of the [1905 Revolution](#), cinema thrived, benefiting from the ensuing economic recovery and cultural revival. Relying on growing purchasing power, the first two longer Polish feature films were made as early as 1908, whereas film production on a regular basis started in 1911. By that time, cinema owners Mordechaj A. Towbin (ca. 1872-ca. 1922),^[3] Aleksander O. Hertz (1879-1928) and Juliusz Zagrodzki (1880-1965), using actors from the Polish Theatre (*Teatr Rozmaitości*) under the name “Artistic Cooperative” (*Kooperatywa Artystyczna*), debuted with feature films, followed soon afterwards by the [photographer](#) Marian Fuks (1884-1935) and the engineer Henryk (Chaim) Finkelstein (ca. 1876-ca. 1942). Here, it should be noted that Towbin with his company *Sila* (1911-1912) and Finkelstein with his company *Kosmofilm* (1913-1915) also shot Jewish feature films. They were based mainly on [Jakub Gordin's](#) (1853-1909) plays and performed with actors from the Jewish Theatre, headed by [Abraham Izaak Kaminski](#) (1867-1918).^[4] On the whole, Jewish films constituted about one-third of domestic production. That gave Warsaw the leading position within the worldwide Jewish filmmaking industry before World War I.^[5]

World War I had a substantial impact on both the exhibition sector and domestic film production. First, the war changed the geopolitical position of the film market, as the Polish lands found themselves in the middle of the military conflict between Russia and the combined forces of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Apart from the Prussian partition, Polish territories became the stage for military operations on the [Eastern Front](#) and therefore experienced terrific material and [human losses](#). Remaining initially under Russian rule, the Warsaw-based film industry had to adjust to German [occupation](#) beginning on 5 August 1915. After that date, the film markets in all Polish lands were controlled by the Central Powers.

Simultaneously, the war changed the political framework as both belligerent sides competed for Polish loyalty and army recruits (3 million Polish soldiers fought in the armies of the partition powers). They offered pledges of future autonomy and altered their cultural policies towards the Poles accordingly, trying to win them over. Consequently, both sides, which exploited their enlarged film productions for their own war [propaganda](#), started to release films based on Polish [literature](#), culture, and history.

The Exhibition Sector

At the same time, the war generated new borders and consequently limited the flow of films. Whole segments of the partition powers' markets, including the Polish lands, had been cut off from the former leading countries in film production. The shortage of imports, therefore, posed a constant problem for cinema owners, whereas the demand for feature films and newsreels with information from the front lines increased. Despite the general impoverishment, people, even whole families, flocked to the venues looking for distraction from the fears and [food](#) shortages they were experiencing. Moreover, mobilization brought soldiers – who had mostly been recruited from [agrarian areas](#) – nearer to [cities and towns](#), where they often went to moving pictures for the first time in their lives. There were also field cinemas on the front lines for the soldiers.^[6]

Cinema owners responded to the growing demand for entertainment with flexible repertoire strategies. Lacking a regular supply of new films, entrepreneurs organized cabaret shows and seldom changed their programs. Now and then, they screened old films under new titles. Consequently, the exhibition sector in the Polish lands expanded, benefiting from climbing attendance rates, and cities like Warsaw even gained elegant new venues within the first two years of the war.^[7]

During the war, cinemas took part in charity activities. Bigger venues like the Palais de Glace or Sfinks in Warsaw arranged benefit exhibitions to provide social aid, support [hospitals](#), welfare organisations, and religious communities. Entrepreneurs also covered some educational costs for underprivileged school [children](#) and students, and rented their venues at lower rates for educational shows. In doing so, cinema, at that point still associated with lower forms of entertainment, climbed up the social ladder and took its position among honourable cultural, social, and educational organizations. Moreover, cinema owners came together in the face of a long-lasting conflict with the local authorities over taxes. The conflict peaked in August 1916, when cinemas in Warsaw successfully went on strike. The strike consolidated the entrepreneurs, which laid the ground for future film

industry unions.^[8]

The market in the Prussian partition had been continuously supplied primarily with [German pictures](#). These, for the most part, also dominated the screens in Galicia. Audiences in Russian-controlled Poland, by contrast, witnessed a substantial linguistic and political change in cinema programs. In the first twelve months of the war, [Russian films](#) and newsreels dominated the screens. Among them were Russian adaptations of Polish literary works, like *Maziepa* (*Mazeppa*, 1914) by [Juliusz Słowacki \(1809-1849\)](#) and *Potop* (*The Deluge*, 1915) by [Henryk Sienkiewicz \(1846-1916\)](#) from the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, aiming “to lift up the hearts” of the Poles. Moreover, the Russian administration allowed screenings of Polish films such as *Pruska kultura* (*Prussian Culture*, 1908), which had been forbidden before 1914. Portraying the discrimination of the Poles in the Prussian partition, the film was in line with Russian anti-German war propaganda.^[9]

Pruska kultura was forbidden again after the Central Powers took control of all Polish territories in August 1915. By the same measure, Russian productions and the Russian language disappeared from cinemas in Congress Poland, and venues were supplied mainly with German films until the end of the war and the initial post-war years. Productions depicting Polish suffering under Russian rule aligned with the German politics towards the Poles. The action in *Tyrannenherrschaft* (*Under the Yoke of Tyrants*, 1916) covered, for example, the history of Poland from the decline of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century until World War I. Polish striving for independence was depicted in the [uprisings](#) against Russian rule, while ignoring the protests against Prussian rule. The end showed the Central Powers returning the lost crown to Poland. Similarly, the adaptation of a drama by [Gabriela Zapolska \(1857-1921\)](#), *Der 10. Pavillon der Zitadelle* (*The 10th Pavilion of the Citadel*, 1917) showed the political oppression of Poles in Russian-ruled Warsaw. Focusing on the private love matters of the successor to the throne in an eastern empire, the German-Polish cooperation based on Zapolska’s play *Carewicz/Fürstenliebe* (*Tsarevitch/Prince Love*, 1918) pointed to the problems of autocratic rule in tsarist Russia. The film, however, was not shown until the end of war.^[10]

Polish Film Production

Unlike the exhibition sector, domestic film production had been weakened due to both the displacement of film professionals and distribution problems. Production was already disrupted by mobilization efforts, which drafted cameramen to the front lines. That put an end to cottage filmmaking in Galicia. Cameramen like [Franciszek Zyndram Mucha \(1894-1940\)](#) joined the [Polish legions](#) or the Austrian army and filmed their battles. After the Polish Film Office had been established within the structures of the Polish legions in 1917, Mucha became its technical chief. On the other side, Warsaw-based cameramen like [Jan Skarbek-Malczewski \(1883-1967\)](#) filmed the battles of the Russian army. Mieczysław Domański even commanded the Russian army’s film unit, the *Skobielewski* Committee.^[11]

The Polish film industry also lost one of its best directors, [Edward Puchalski \(1874-1942\)](#). Puchalski started to work in Moscow for [Aleksandr Khanzhonkov \(1877-1945\)](#) as early as the spring of 1914 and, between 1915 and 1917, ran his own production company there called *Lucyfer*. Additional film professionals, like the actor [Antoni Fertner \(1874-1959\)](#), came to Moscow one year later, fleeing the approaching German troops. Starring in around thirty films, Fertner gained a reputation as the Russian Max Linder. Two-thirds of the films were made by Puchalski’s production company.^[12]

Borders also limited the distribution of domestic productions. Most Warsaw-based producers therefore went bankrupt, leaving initially only *Sfinks* and *Kosmofilm* on the market. *Kosmofilm*, which merged with *Sfinks* in 1915, released only three films: *Di farsztojsene tochter/Wyklęta córka* (*The Cursed Daughter*, 1915), *Zajn wajbs man/Mażeństwo na rozdrożu* (*His Wife’s Husband*, 1916), and *Die mishpuche Cwi/Rodzina Cwi* (*The Cwi Family*, 1916). The war that destroyed the leading producer in Warsaw, by the same token, interrupted Yiddish film production in the Polish lands for a long time.^[13]

Sfinks, led by Hertz and with Finkelstein as a vice director, thus enjoyed a near monopoly. Having a profitable rental office and a network of cinemas in Warsaw, *Sfinks* was an independent producer. Hertz initially also benefited from his collaboration with Pathé and Khanzhonkov, and cooperated during the German occupation with the *Projektions A. G. Union*, and later with the *Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft* (UFA). These contacts gave him an advantage when it came to film supplies, providing access to the Russian market, and later to the German one as well. Hertz produced newsreels, war reportage, and twenty-one longer films with his cameraman [Witalis Korsak-Gołogowski \(1873-1936\)](#). Four of the latter were made before 1915, whereas the remaining seventeen feature films were shot during the German occupation.

The most lucrative films were melodramas starring Pola Negri (ca. 1897-1987) (born Apolonia Chałupiec). As Hertz's biggest discovery, she debuted in *Niewolnica zmysłów* (*The Slave of Sin*, 1914) as a Polish femme fatale. Perpetuating this onscreen image, she starred in *Żona* (*The Wife*, 1915), *Studenci* (*Students*, 1916), and in the series *Tajemnice Warszawy* (*Secrets of Warsaw*, 1917), consisting of *Tajemnica Alei Ujazdowskich* (*The Secret of Ujazdowskie Avenue*), *Arabella*, and *Pokój nr. 13* (*Room no. 13*). Before leaving for Germany and later Hollywood, Negri made *Jego ostatni czyn* (*His Last Gesture*, 1917) and *Bestia* (*The Beast*, 1917), her only surviving film from that time. Negri eventually became an international sensation and is still considered to be one of the prime [sex](#) symbols of the era. Another actress who had debuted with *Sfinks* and followed Negri to Berlin was Mia Mara (1897-1960) (born Aleksandra Gudowiczówna). Mara would later be called one of the biggest stars of German silent cinema.^[14]

The war also fostered the patriotic film genre. Just before the German invasion, *Sfinks* brought out a documentary called *Szpieg* (*The Spy*, 1915), a reconstruction of the devastation of the town Kalisz by the German invaders. From 5 August 1915 on, the tsar's empire was the onscreen [enemy](#), meeting both the German anti-Russian war propaganda and audiences' expectations in Congress Poland. Depicting the ruthless activity of the head of the tsarist political police in Warsaw, *Ochrania Warszawska I jej tajemnice* (*The Secrets of the Tsar's Warsaw Police*, 1916) highlighted the legal political oppression of Poles in the Russian partition. Focusing on the life, love, and death of a former officer of the tsar's *Leib* Guard, *Carat i jego sluzgi* (*Tsarism and Its Servants*, 1917) showed similarly brutal anti-Polish activity by tsarist authorities, including numerous interrogations, imprisonment, and [Cossack](#) charges. The melodrama *Carska Faworyta* (*The Tsar's Favourite*, 1918), however, portrayed the complex relationship between the Russian heir to the throne and the prima ballerina of Warsaw theatres.^[15]

In general, twenty-four feature films were shot in Warsaw during the war, whereas more than 150 documentaries were made in all the Polish territories. Most of these films have been lost, so their content can be retraced mainly only through [press](#) announcements.^[16]

Conclusion

Placing the Polish lands in the middle of the military conflict between Russia and the combined forces of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the war involved Polish cinema in the propaganda of both belligerent sides. World War I, also called the first great media war, took Polish cameramen to the front lines. Some of them filmed battles for the Austrian army and the Polish legions, whereas others did the same for the Russian army. Simultaneously, both sides used cinema in the Polish lands to strengthen their political and cultural influence.

Due to the growing demand for films, the exhibition sector was strengthened during the war. However, this development proceeded on credit, as the country had been devastated and the former partitions had to be united into one national state. The newly independent Poland had, in total, fewer cinemas per citizen than other neighbouring countries.

World War I put an end to Polish filmmaking in the former Austrian partition and destroyed most of the Warsaw-based companies, including the former worldwide leader in Yiddish film production, *Kosmofilm*. Due to the business strategies of the one surviving company, *Sfinks*, Warsaw remained the hub of Polish film production and distribution. This would change after the Second World War. Beginning in the mid-1920s, the Polish capital once again hosted Yiddish filmmaking, but the industry's centre had by then shifted to the [United States of America](#). By that time, enduring business connections between *Sfinks* and UFA and the dominance of German films in cinema programs were further consequences of the war.

Karina Pryt, Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main

Selected Filmography

Arabella (Poland, 1917)

Bestia ["The Beast"] (Poland, 1917)

\$Film/Cinema (East Central Europe) (Version 1.1) - 1914-1918-Online

Carat i jego slugi ["Tzarism and its Servants"] (Poland, 1917)

Carewicz/Fürstenliebe ["Tsarevitch/Prince Love"] (Poland/Germany, 1918)

Carska Faworyta ["The Czar's Favorite"] (Poland, 1918)

Der 10. Pavillon der Zitadelle ["The 10th Pavilion of the Citadel"] (Germany, 1917)

Di farsztojsene tochter/Wyklęta córka ["The Cursed Daughter"] (Poland, 1915)

Die mishpuche Cwi/Rodzina Cwi ["The Family Cwi"] (Poland, 1915 or 1916)

Jego ostatni czyn ["His Last Gesture"] (Poland, 1917)

Maziepa ["Mazepa"] (Russian Empire, 1914)

Niewolnica zmysłów ["The Slave of Sin"] (Poland, 1914)

Ochrona Warszawska I jej tajemnice ["The Secrets of the Tsarits Warsaw Police"] (Poland, 1916)

Pokój nr 13 ["Room No. 13"] (Poland, 1917)

Potop ["Swedish Deluge"] (Russian Empire, 1915)

Pruska kultura ["Prussian Culture"] (Poland, 1908)

Studenci ["Students"] (Poland, 1916)

Szpieg ["The Spy"] (Poland, 1915)

Tajemnica Alei Ujazdowskich ["The Secret of Ujazdowskie Avenue"] (Poland, 1917)

Tajemnice Warszawy ["Secrets of Warsaw"] (Poland, 1917)

Tyrannenherrschaft ["Under the Yoke of Tyrants"] (Poland/Germany, 1916)

Zajn wajbs man/Mażeństwo na rozdrożu ["His Wife's Husband"] (Poland, 1915 or 1916)

Żona ["The Wife"] (Poland, 1915)

Section Editors: [Ruth Leiserowitz](#); [Theodore Weeks](#)

Notes

- ↑ Banaszkiwicz, Władysław / Witczak, Witold: *Historia filmu polskiego, 1895-1929* [History of Polish Film, 1895-1929], Warsaw 1966; Hendrykowska, Małgorzata: *Kronika kinematografii polskiej 1895-2011* [Chronicle of Polish Cinematography 1895-2011], Poznań 2012; Hendrykowska, Małgorzata: *Śladami tamtych cieni. Film w kulturze polskiej przełomu stuleci 1895-1914* [On the Traces of Those Shadows. Film in Polish Culture at the Turn of the Century 1895-1914], Poznań 1993; Hendrykowska, Małgorzata: *Historia polskiego filmu dokumentalnego (1896-1944)* [History of Polish Documentary Film (1896-1944)], Poznań 2014; Zajiček, Edward: *Zarys historii gospodarczej kinematografii polskiej* [The Economic History of Polish Cinematography, an Overview], Łódź 2015; Gross, Natan: *Film żydowski w Polsce* [Jewish Film in Poland], Kraków 2002; Hoberman, Jim: *Bridge of Light. Yiddish Film between Two Worlds*, Hanover 2010; Klejsa, Konrad / Schahadat, Schamma / Wach, Margarete (eds.): *Der polnische Film. Von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Marburg 2013; Skaff, Sheila: *The Law of the Looking Glass. Cinema in Poland, 1896-1939*, Athens 2008.
- ↑ Guzek, Mariusz: *Co wspólnego z wojną ma kinematograf? Kultura filmowa na ziemiach polskich w latach 1914-1918* [What do War and the Cinematograph Have in Common? Film Culture on the Polish Lands Between 1914 and 1918], Bydgoszcz 2004.
- ↑ Mordechaj Abramowicz Towbin, sometimes referred to by his nickname "Mordko" or "Mordke," has often been erroneously identified as Mojżesz in the relevant literature.
- ↑ Gross, *Film żydowski* 2002, pp. 145-146.

5. ↑ Hoberman, Jim: Cinema, issued by YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, online: <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Cinema> (retrieved: 14 June 2016).
6. ↑ Guzek, Co wspólnego 2004, pp. 90, 122, 255.
7. ↑ Ibid., pp. 118, 253.
8. ↑ Banaszkiwicz / Witczak, Historia filmu 1966, p. 100; Guzek, Co wspólnego 2004, pp. 283-286.
9. ↑ Ibid., pp. 138-155, 307.
10. ↑ Braun, Brigitte: Film niemiecki w walce o polskie serca w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej [German Film in the Struggle for Polish Hearts During the First World War], in: Dębski, Andrzej / Gwóźdź, Andrzej (eds.): Na drodze do sąsiada. Polsko-niemieckie spotkania filmowe (On the Way to the Neighbor. Polish-German Film Meetings), Wrocław 2013.
11. ↑ Guzek, Co wspólnego 2004, pp. 253-262.
12. ↑ Ibid., pp. 126, 307.
13. ↑ Gross, Film żydowski 2002, p. 148.
14. ↑ Banaszkiwicz / Witczak, Historia filmu 1966, p. 105.
15. ↑ Filmy z roku 1902, issued by Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa, Telewizyjna i Teatralna im. Leona Schillera w Łodzi, online: http://www.filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?filmy_z_roku=d&typ=d (retrieved: 7 October 2019).
16. ↑ Hendrykowska, Historia polskiego 2014, pp. 413-435.

Selected Bibliography

Banaszkiwicz, Władysław / Witczak, Witold: **Historia filmu polskiego, 1895-1929 (History of Polish film, 1895-1939)**, volume 1, Warsaw 1966: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe.

Braun, Brigitte: **Film niemiecki w walce o polskie serca w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej (German film in the struggle for Polish hearts during the First World War)**, in: Dębski, Andrzej / Gwóźdź, Andrzej (eds.): *W drodze do sąsiada. Polsko-niemieckie spotkania filmowe (On the way to the neighbor. Polish-German film meetings)*, Wrocław 2013: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, pp. 239-259.

Gross, Natan: **Film żydowski w Polsce (Jewish film in Poland)** Krakow 2002: Rabid.

Guzek, Mariusz: **Co wspólnego z wojną ma kinematograf? Kultura filmowa na ziemiach polskich w latach 1914-1918 (What do war and the cinematograph have in common? Film culture on the Polish lands between 1914 and 1918)**, Bydgoszcz 2014: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego.

Hendrykowska, Małgorzata: **Śladami tamtych cieni. Film w kulturze polskiej przełomu stuleci 1895-1914 (On the traces of those shadows. Film in Polish culture at the turn of the century 1895-1914)**, Poznań 1993: Oficyna Wydawnicza Book Service.

Hendrykowska, Małgorzata: **Kronika kinematografii polskiej 1895-2011 (Chronic of Polish cinematography 1895-2011)**, Poznań 2012: Ars Nova.

Hendrykowska, Małgorzata: **Historia polskiego filmu dokumentalnego (1896-1944) (History of the Polish documentary film (1896-1944))**, Poznań 2015: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza.

Hoberman, James: **Bridge of light. Yiddish film between two worlds**, Hanover 2010: Dartmouth College Press.

Klejsa, Konrad / Schahadat, Schamma / Wach, Margarete (eds.): **Der Polnische Film. Von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart**, Marburg 2013: Schüren.

Maśnicki, Jerzy: **Niemy kraj. Polskie motywy w europejskim kinie niemym (1896-1930) (Dumb country. Polish motifs in European silent cinema (1896-1930))**, Gdańsk 2006: Słowo/obraz terytoria.

Skaff, Sheila: **The law of the looking glass. Cinema in Poland, 1896-1939** Athens 2008: Ohio University Press.

Zajiček, Edward: **Zarys historii gospodarczej kinematografii polskiej (The economic history of Polish cinematography, an overview)**, Łódź 2015: Wydawnictwo Biblioteki Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Filmowej.

Citation

Pryt, Karina: Film/Cinema (East Central Europe) (Version 1.1), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11435/1.1](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11435/1.1).

License

This text is licensed under: CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works.

