

# Is marriage so Sacred?

## Extramarital Births in West Prussia circa 1900<sup>1</sup>

---

Hadrian Ciechanowski<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract** This article deals with the issue of how extramarital reproductive behavior was connected with the official religion and culture canons. The article is based on the data from the three civil status registry offices in West Prussia, where the mixed Polish, German, and Jewish population lived. Based on the data, author analyzed extramarital births among Catholics, protestants, and Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

### Introduction

The article's topic refers to two aspects addressed in the volume – family and reproduction. Although the article is decidedly practical, it corresponds to other texts in the volume, which treat the problems of reproduction and family planning more theoretically. On the example of selected registry office districts established by the Prussian authorities on the territory of West Prussia, the article will trace the reproductive behavior of the local population beyond the traditional canons, set by the framework of culture and religion, and therefore mainly concentrated inside the marriages.

West Prussia was considered an excellent area for this type of research. The partitions of Poland carried out in 1772, 1792, and 1795 led to the country's division between Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Part of the Prussian partition was West Prussia, which included the area of former Royal Prussia. This was an area with a mixed German and Polish population. Traditionally the German popu-

---

1 Funding: National Science Centre, Poland, grant number 2019/32/C/H53/00121.

2 Faculty of History, Nicolaus Copernicus University Toruń, Poland.

lation was Protestant, while the Polish population was Catholic. There was also a tiny population of Jews, living mainly in the cities.<sup>3</sup>

These aspects make West Prussia a great research field because that territory was always a place where different cultures mixed and were transferred from Germany to Poland and back again. This situation creates a unique research opportunity and allows us to observe different populations, groups, and behaviours.

Prussia at the turn of the century was experiencing a strengthening of nationalism among German and Polish subjects.<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon was also associated with a religious revival among adherents of both Christian denominations. This was in turn connected with the significant development of grassroots groups that sought to educate and transmit the Protestant faith and morality among the German population.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the Polish Catholic population gathered around the Catholic Church, seeing it as a unifying force that carried forward Polish national traditions. Attachment to faith and deep devotion to it is traditionally emphasized in historiography.<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally, the Church's teaching placed great emphasis on the sexual sphere of believers; it paid particular attention to their moral conduct and marital fidelity. It seems, therefore, that strong commitment to church and religiosity should be reflected in fertility trends, especially in the small number of extramarital children. However, was this the reality? In this paper, the author will try to answer this question in part.

Therefore, adherence to religious practices and church teachings should be closely linked to reproductive behavior, which connects this article to the main title issues addressed in this volume: sexuality, family, and reproduction.

## Methodology

The research presented in this article is based on archival materials from the State Archive in Toruń. To gather the appropriate research data five registry offices were drawn upon in the territory of West Prussia. As a random sample, the following archives may paint a picture of available research material:

3 Chwalba, *Historia Polski* 2000, p.435-465.

4 Kucharczyk, *Prusy*. 2020, p. 633. Frackowiak, *Ethnizität*, 2014, p. 39.

5 Clark, *Powstanie*, 2009, p. 367.

6 Kucharczyk, *Prusy*, 2020, p. 659.

- Registry Office Dusocin,<sup>7</sup>
- Registry Office Golub Zamek,<sup>8</sup>
- Registry Office Biergławo,<sup>9</sup>
- Registry Office Książki,<sup>10</sup>
- Registry Office Małe Czyste.<sup>11</sup>

In the selected archives registers of births were analysed from the years 1875–1910. These years were not selected at random; 1875 was the first full year of civil registries in West Prussia. 1910, however, was chosen based on the availability of records on the Internet. Pandemic constraints did not allow for a search for records not available online. However, this is not the entire period of the functioning of Prussian Registry Offices on Polish territory; nonetheless, it was possible to see some fertility trends. The gathered data were compared to the information about fertility in the Polish People's Republic and the Republic of Poland to draw some conclusions.

The division into denominations was established according to the mother's religion. In the case of information about illegitimate children, there is usually no information about the father and his religion. The only specific information in this case, therefore, concerned the mother. That is why only she could be taken into account. All Protestant denominations were counted together.<sup>12</sup> The data gathered during the research is presented in the graphs in the article.

## The Demographic Structure of the Districts

Prussian administration regularly took censuses of the people living in the kingdom. According to these censuses, it is possible to look at the demographic structure of the researched territory. To show the population of the drawn districts the censuses of 1885 and 1905 were compared. Each of the censuses makes it possible to trace the total population of a given registry office and its denominational structure.

<sup>7</sup> State Archive in Toruń, fond numer 69/1125, Urząd Stanu Cywilnego Dusocin.

<sup>8</sup> State Archive in Toruń, fond numer 69/1134, Urząd Stanu Cywilnego Golub Zamek.

<sup>9</sup> State Archive in Toruń, fond numer 69/1105, Urząd Stanu Cywilnego Biergławo.

<sup>10</sup> State Archive in Toruń, fond number 69/1161, Urząd Stanu Cywilnego Książki.

<sup>11</sup> State Archive in Toruń, fond number 69/1177, Urząd Stanu Cywilnego Małe Czyste.

<sup>12</sup> Birth registers do not discriminate protestant denominations but only give the information a person is "ewangelic".

In 1885 the Registry Office Dusocin district was inhabited by 1,618 people, of whom 1,377 were Protestants, 232 were Catholics, and only nine were Jews.<sup>13</sup> By comparison, in 1905, the district had a population of 1,424. Of this population, 1,177 were of Protestant faith, and 247 declared themselves to be Catholics. In that census, however, no residents of the Mosaic faith were recorded.<sup>14</sup>

The Registry Office Golub Zamek had a population of 1,243 in 1885. Among them, there were 342 Protestants, 893 Catholics, and eight Jews.<sup>15</sup> In 1905, on the other hand, the district was inhabited by 1,528 people, 427 of whom were Protestant and 1,088 Catholic, as well as 13 Jews<sup>16</sup>.

The next district analyzed is the Registry Office Bierzgłowo. In 1885 it had 1,892 inhabitants. There were 498 Protestants, 1,378 Catholics, and 16 Jews as far as religion is concerned.<sup>17</sup> In 1905, however, it was inhabited by 2,297 people. Among them, there were 815 Protestants, 1,477 Catholics, and five Jews.<sup>18</sup>

According to the 1885 census, the population of Książki was 1,939. 1,594 of them were Protestants, 177 were Christians of other kinds, 157 Catholics, and 11 Jews.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, in 1905 there were 2,234 people, of whom 1,872 were of the Protestant faith, 139 of other Christian faiths, and 223 of the Catholic faith.<sup>20</sup>

In the Registry Office Male Czyste, there were 1,612 inhabitants in 1885. Among them, there were 835 Protestants and 777 Catholics.<sup>21</sup> In 1905, on the other hand, there were only 1,503 people. Of these, 804 were Protestants, and 699 were Catholics.<sup>22</sup>

13 Gemeindelexikon, 1887, p. 126–135.

14 Gemeindelexikon, 1908, p. 52–55.

15 Gemeindelexikon, 1887, p. 106–111.

16 Gemeindelexikon, 1908, p. 8–15.

17 Gemeindelexikon, 1887, p. 112–119.

18 Gemeindelexikon, 1908, p. 142–145.

19 Gemeindelexikon, 1887, p. 106–109. It is not clarified in the source what “other Christians” means.

20 Gemeindelexikon, 1908, p. 8–13 It is not clarified in the source what “other Christians” means.

21 Gemeindelexikon, 1887, p. 120–127.

22 Gemeindelexikon, 1908, p. 14–19.

Summarizing the data collected, the population living in the study area is as follows:

*Table 1: Population living in the study area*

Registry office	Population		Protestants		Catholics		Jews	
Year	1885	1905	1885	1905	1885	1905	1885	1905
Dusocin	1618	1424	1377	1177	232	247	9	0
Golub Zamek	1243	1528	342	427	893	1088	8	13
Bierz- głowo	1892	2297	498	815	1378	1477	16	5
Książki	1939	2234	1771	2011	157	223	11	0
Małe Czyste	1612	1503	835	804	777	699	0	0
Together	8304	8986	4823	5234	3437	3734	44	18
Percent	100%	100%	58,08%	58,25%	41,39%	41,55%	0,53%	0,2%

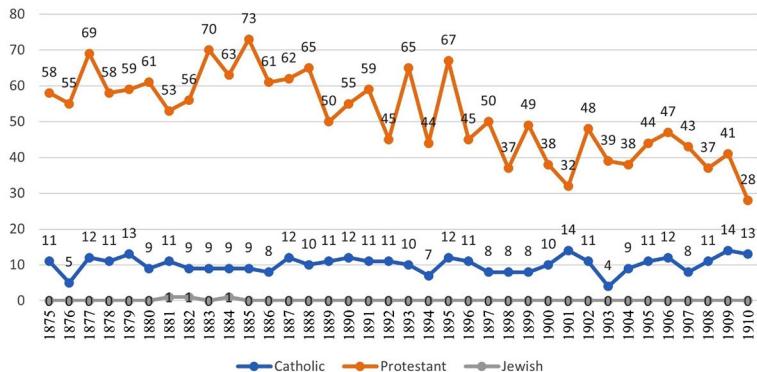
Source: own study

The censuses show that Protestants dominated in the chosen districts, far outnumbering Catholics. Jews, on the other hand, made up only a fraction of one per cent of the total population. Generally, these proportions remained unchanged during the whole period under study. As far as particular registry offices are concerned, Protestants prevailed in Registry Office Dusocin and Registry Książki. On the other hand, there was a predominance of Catholics in Registry Offices Bierzglowo and Golub Zamek. In Registry Office Małe Czyste, the population of both denominations remained in relative balance, with a slight Protestant advantage.

## Fertility Rates in Registry Offices

The first point of the analysis looks at fertility rates among religious groups in each selected registry office.

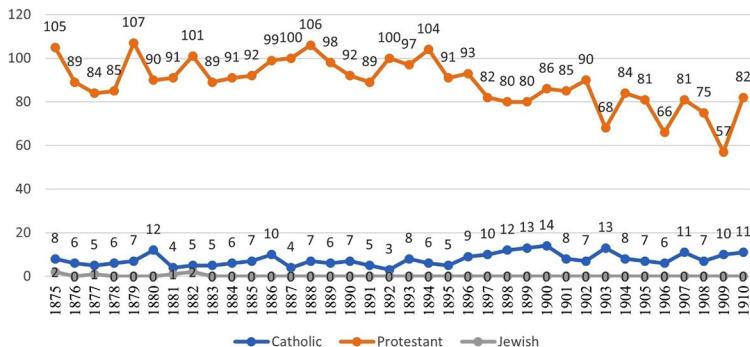
Figure 1: Registry Office Dusocin fertility rates by religion



Source: own research

The gathered data shows that, during the entire period, in the Registry Office Dusocin there was a clear predominance of births to children of Protestant denominations. However, from 1896 we note a clear decreasing trend in the number of Protestant births. At the end of the period, we find a 30% drop. In contrast, the number of Catholic births was almost constant throughout the whole period. The number of Jewish births was marginal. There were only three such cases during the entire period under study, one each in 1881, 1882, and 1884.

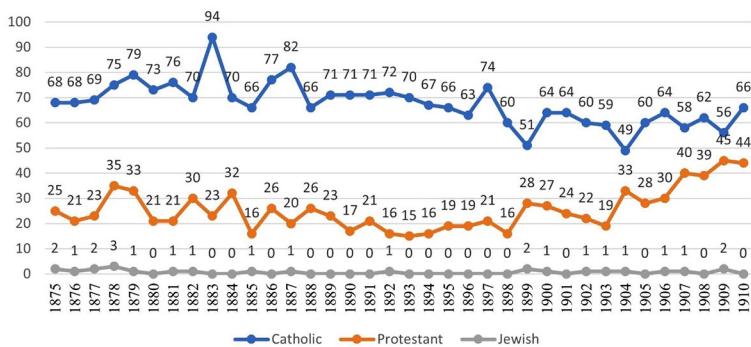
Figure 2: Registry Office Książki fertility rates by religion



Source: own research

A similar trend can be observed in the Registry Office Książki. However, in this district, the decrease in Protestant births was not as significant as in the Registry Office Dusocin. Except for 1903, 1906, and 1909, it oscillates between 10% and 26%. Furthermore, in this registry office, the number of catholic births was constant throughout the whole period. As in the Dusocin, the number of Jewish births was minimal. There were recorded only six births – two per year in 1875 and 1882, and in 1875, one each in 1877 and 1881.

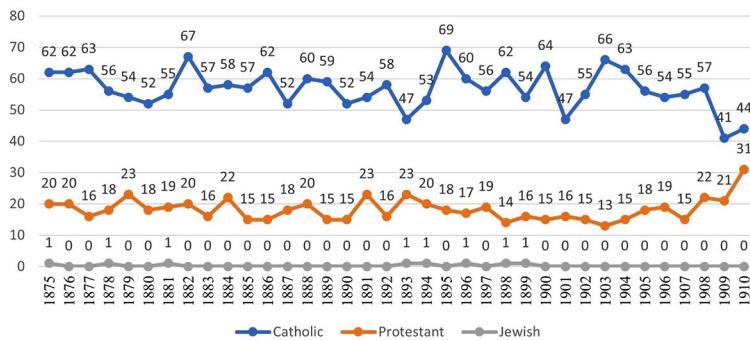
Figure 3: Registry Office Bierzgłowo fertility rates by religion



Source: own research

Unlike the previous two districts, in the Registry Office Bierzglowo, the dominant part of the population throughout the entire period under study was that of Catholics. However, the observed disproportion between denominations was smaller than the previous. The observed trend shows that from 1897 the number of Catholic births was slowly decreasing. At the same time, the number of Protestant births was growing. This growth from the beginning to the end of the research period was almost twofold. Jewish births are slightly higher for this Registry Office and were recorded more frequently, sometimes even annually. Compared to Catholics and Protestants, however, this number is still minimal.

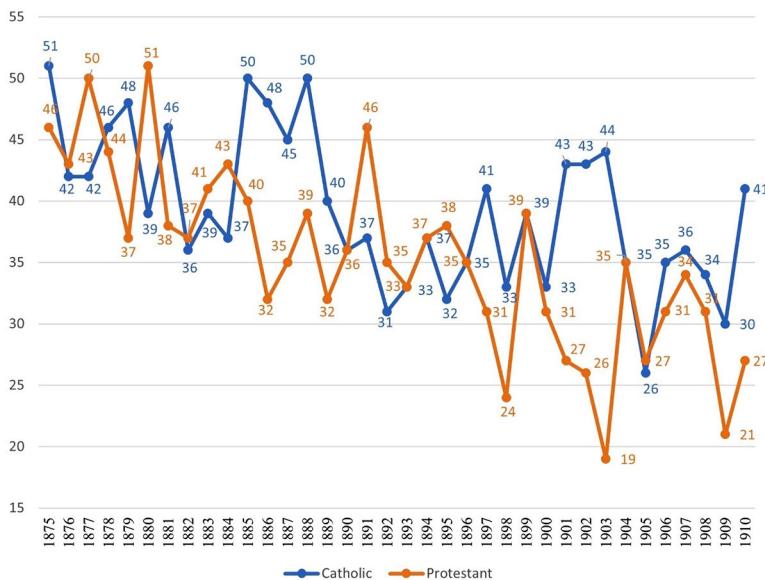
Figure 4: Registry Office Golub Zamek fertility rates by religion



Source: own research

Catholic births also dominated in the Registry Office Golub Zamek. Their number was almost constant throughout the entire period. A sharp decline was noted only in the last two years, but the lack of data from the following years makes it impossible to say that this was a trend. Also, more or less constant was the number of Protestant births. In the whole period, Protestant births account for 30 to 50% of Catholic births. As in the previous districts, the number of births to Jewish children is minimal. They occurred only eight times during the entire period.

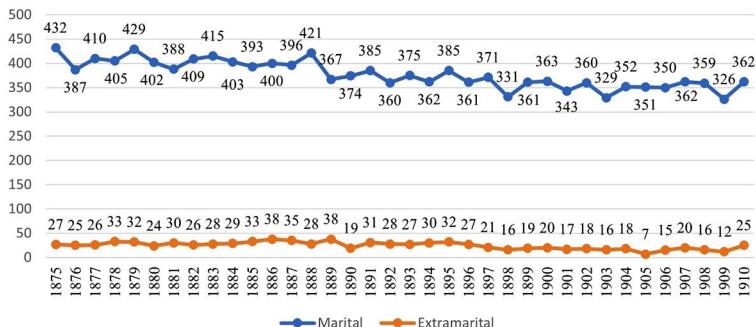
Figure 5: Registry Office Male Czyste fertility rates by religion



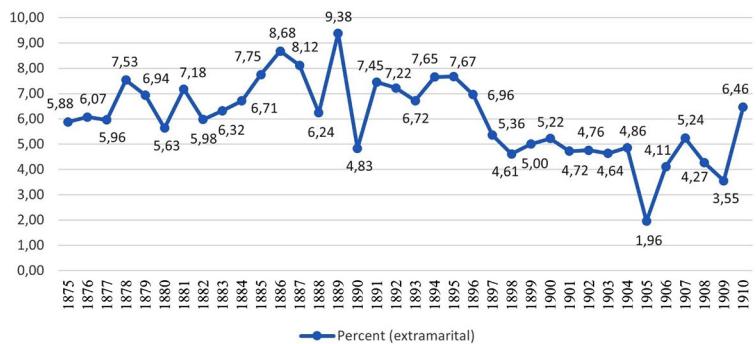
Source: own research

In the last drawn district, the situation was slightly different than in the other registry offices. The Registry Office Male Czyste was the only office studied in which were no clearly dominant denomination. However, in both Christian religions the number of births was slowly decreasing. In the whole period there were 142 more Catholic births. This is very interesting because in this registry office were living more Protestants, and the number of Catholics declined more significantly than Protestants between 1885 and 1905.

As can be seen, the number of births in all registry offices corresponds with the demographic structure of the districts under study. However, it is necessary to integrate the data for the whole territory to analyze the research problem. Chart 6 shows the total number of marital and extramarital births.

*Figure 6: Total number of marital and extramarital births*

Source: own research

*Figure 7: Total percent of extramarital births*

Source: own research

Looking at the absolute numbers of the population between the beginning and the end of the research period, a clear downward trend in the number of births and births to legally registered unions can be observed. While in 1875, 459 children were born, of whom 432 were "legitimate", in 1910 only 387 children were born, of whom 362 were legitimate. The difference in the number of births was therefore 72, compared to 70 for legitimate births. The number of extramarital births was relatively stable, fluctuating only slightly, especially towards the end of the period under study. It seems that the decline in the to-

tal number of births may have been caused by the general depopulation of the eastern provinces of Prussia as a result of emigration and the so-called "Ostflucht".<sup>23</sup> These movements generally affected the population of German origin more than that of Poles, who remained in the areas they had inhabited.

Extreme values can be found in 1879 and 1909 when accordingly, 461 and 338 children were born. However, considering the legal status of children, the highest number of state-recognized children was born in 1875 – 432, and the least in 1909 – 326. The highest number of illegitimate children was born in 1889 – 38, and the lowest in 1905 – only 5.

Also, in terms of percentage, the highest number of illegitimate children – 9.38%, was born in 1889. The lowest number of illegitimate children was in 1905 when they accounted for only 1.96%. More non-marital births occurred until the mid-1890s. There was a marked decline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a spike in 1910. On average, non-marital births account for 6.13%. Overall, however, there is a downward trend throughout the period under study.

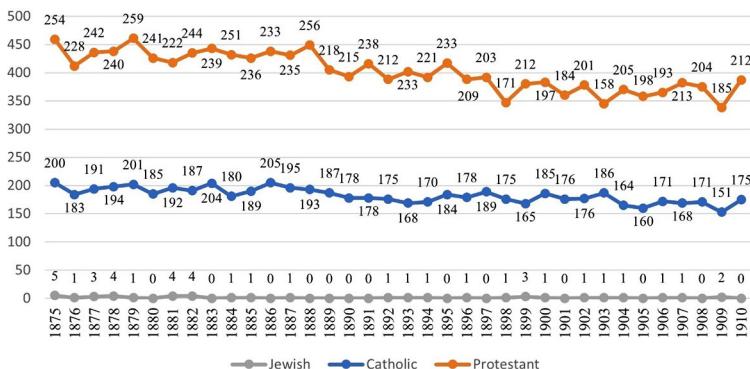
## Extramarital Births According to Religious Groups

The next problem is how the distribution of children from non-marital unions looked for each religious group. This question will be analyzed in the following section. Chart 8 shows the total fertility rate by religion.

The cumulative data show that Protestant denominations predominated among the rural population in the study area, which was reflected in the number of births, which, apart from 1898 and 1903, was generally higher among Protestants. The total disproportion between Protestant births (7,895) and Catholic births (6,529) is 1,366. Only 41 Jewish births were registered during the whole research period. Therefore, the number of births corresponds to the data on the demographic structure of the districts under study.

---

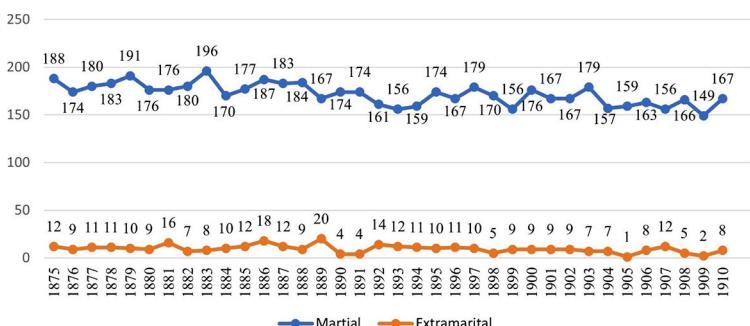
23 Trzeciakowski, Relations, 1990, p. 181.

*Figure 8: Total fertility rates by religion*

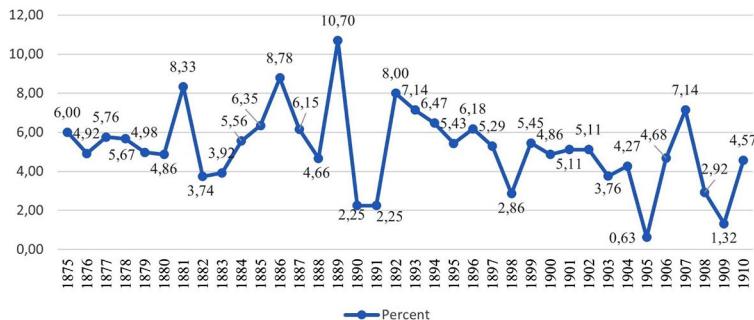
Source: own research

The trend of a decreasing birthrate can be observed among both Christian groups. However, the decline is more significant among Protestants than among Catholics. Among the Protestant population, a sharp drop in the number of births occurred from 1896 onwards. The decline in the number of births among Catholics, although pronounced, was significantly less.

The data on births is also worth analyzing in more detail regarding the various religious groups living in West Prussia.

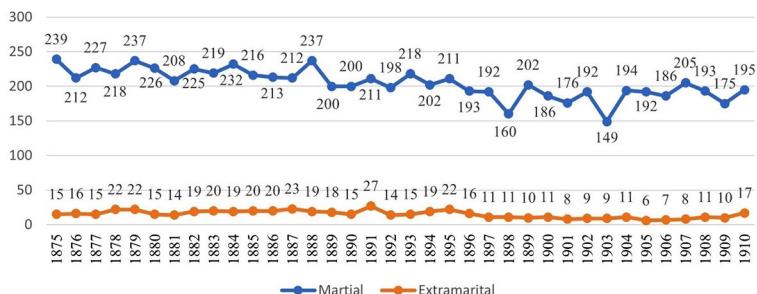
*Figure 9: Number of marital and extramarital births – Catholics*

Source: own research

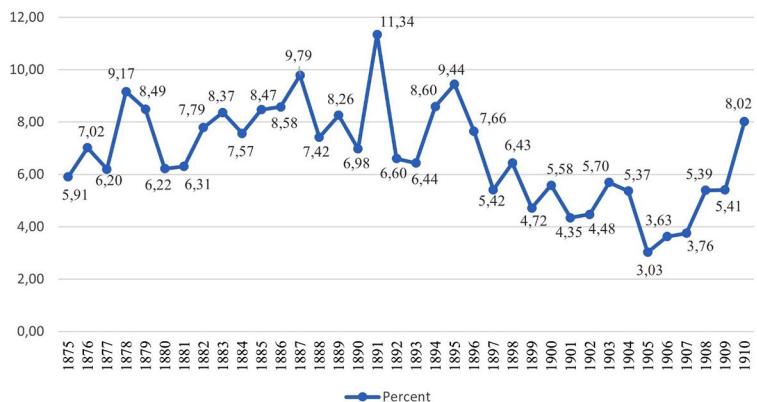
*Figure 10: Percent of extramarital births – Catholics*

Source: own research

Charts 9 and 10 collect data on marital and non-marital births among Catholics living in the surveyed districts. The first chart presents data on absolute numbers. The second, on the other hand, shows percentage data. The number of illegitimate births among Catholics is relatively constant. In the entire period there were 341 extramarital births compared to 6,188 births from formal unions. The highest number of illegitimate births was 20 in 1889 and the lowest in 1905, only one. The percentage of children born out of wedlock was also the highest in 1889 (10.7%) and lowest in 1905 (0.63%). For the period as a whole, illegitimate births account for 5.22%. However, it is clear that until 1889 the percentage of extramarital births increased. Then, after two years of decline in 1890–1891, it returned to a relatively high level of 8% in 1892, before falling consistently for the rest of the period under study.

*Figure 11: Number of marital and extramarital births – Protestants*

Source: own research

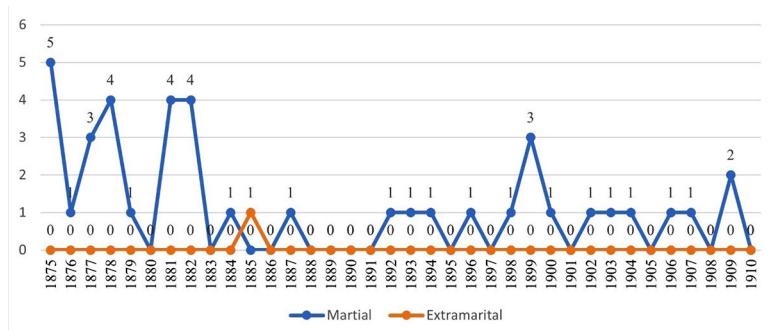
*Figure 12: Percent of extramarital births – Protestants*

Source: own research

The Protestant population shows a very similar pattern to the Catholic population. The number of legitimate-births is more or less constant with a slight downward trend. The number of extramarital births was stable up to 1896, except for 1891, when the number of extramarital births was higher than in the other years, amounting to 27. From 1897 onwards, there was a sharp decline, ending with an increase in 1910.

The percentage figures generally confirm the trend seen based on absolute numbers. They show, however, that the upward trend in the number of non-marital births begins again from 1905. This change appears to have been relatively stable, as an increase was recorded annually until 1910. Ultimately, 7,351 legal births and 544 extramarital births were recorded. Births from illegitimate marriages accounted for 6.89% of all recorded births.

Figure 13: Number of marital and extramarital births – Jews



Source: own research

It is difficult to say anything definite about trends in the Jewish population due to the minimal amount of data collected. The highest number of births – 5, was registered in 1875. Interestingly, a child born out of wedlock was recorded only once in 1885. This single birth represents 2.44%. In this case, it makes no sense to analyze the percentage data.

*Figure 14: Percent of extramarital births by religion*

Source: own research

To compare the data presented, one must look at the percentages because of the differences in absolute numbers. In summary, presented on the chart above, the Jewish population was not taken into account,<sup>24</sup> because the number of illegitimate births was 0%, except for 1885, when it was 100%. However, returning to the summary, there is a clear predominance of illegitimate births among the Protestant population, with the exceptions of 1881, 1886, 1889, 1892, 1899, 1901–1902, 1906, and 1907. Apart from these years, the difference between the Christian denominations is relatively significant and amounts to 4 percentage points.

In summary, it should be stated that the most significant number of children from extramarital unions were born to mothers of the Protestant denomination (6.89%). Compared to Catholic women (5.22%), there were 1.67% percentage points more of them. In absolute numbers, it was 203 more children. The lowest number of illegitimate births was in Jewish families, only 2.44%.

<sup>24</sup> For different activities of the Jewish population (but outside statistical data) see in this volume Izabela Spielvogel: The Jewish Women's League of Breslau, and Heidi Hein-Kircher: Debating Birth Control in Interwar Polish-Jewish Contexts.

*Table 2: Marital and extramarital births according to the denomination*

	Marital	Extramarital	Total	Percent
Catholic	6188	341	6529	5.22%
Protestant	7351	544	7895	6.89%
Jewish	40	1	41	2.44%
Total	13579	886	14465	6.13%

Source: own research

## In West Prussia and Poland

To answer the question posed at the beginning of the paper, the historical data must be juxtaposed with another sample. To find some contrast, the author decided to compare the gathered data with the information about the fertility of the population of Poland in the period of the People's Republic of Poland and the Third Republic of Poland. This comparison is presented in Table 3.

*Table 3: Per cent of extramarital births in Poland*

Year	1875 - 1910	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2019
Per- cent	6.13%	6%	4.5%	5%	4.7%- 4.8%	6.2%	12.1%	20.6%	25.4%

Source: P. Szukalski, *Płodność pozamążęńska w Polsce*, *Studia demograficzne* 2(136), 1999, p. 111; Demographic Yearbook of Poland, Warsaw 2020 (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/roczniki-statystyczne/roczniki-statystyczne/rocznik-demograficzny-2020,3,14.htm>), 05.06.2025), p. 250

As can be seen, until 1990 in formally secular, communist Poland, in which the state placed great emphasis on shaping attitudes and traditions detached from the Church's teachings, the percentage of children born out of wedlock was lower than in 1875–1910. It was not until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the

21<sup>st</sup> century that the number of out-of-wedlock births increased significantly, even by leaps and bounds.

## Conclusion

What conclusion, then, can be drawn on this basis? The Protestant population appears to have more extramarital partners than the Catholic population based on the random sample surveyed. The difference between the Christian denominations is 1.67 percentage points. The lowest number of extramarital births was recorded among the Jewish population. However, it is challenging to analyze this data due to the decidedly small number of recorded Jewish births in general. Of course, the author is aware of the limited nature of the sample, but it seems to provide a good starting point for further research on this topic.

The second conclusion can be found by comparing 1875–1910 and the period after the Second World War. The picture emerging here shows that the population circa 1900 was no less susceptible to the temptations of the flesh than subsequent generations up to the turn of the next century. So the close bond with churches and religiosity was not so important when it came to intimacy between men and women.

The preliminary research presented in this article opens up the field for further research into the actual state of the influence of society's religiosity at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the sexuality of the population, which will provide insight into the actual state of the churches influence on the morality of the population during the period under study. This research will also be a prelude to studying changes in this area in other historical periods. The results presented here are thus only the first stage and an exemplification of the possibilities offered by statistical research based on marital status registers kept by the state, and therefore devoid of a religious component. Of course, this is only one of the many possibilities opened up by the broader use of these historical sources.

## Bibliography

Gemeindelexikon für die Provinz Westpreussen. auf Grund der Materialien der Volkszählung vom 1. Dezember 1905 und anderer amtlicher Quellen, Verlag des Königlichen Statistischen Landesamts, 1908.

Gemeindelexikon für die Provinz Westpreussen. auf Grund der Materialien der Volkszählung vom 1. Dezember 1885 und anderer amtlicher Quellen / bearb. vom Königlichen statistischen Bureau, Verlag des Königlichen statistischen Bureaus, 1887.

CHWALBA, Andrzej, Historia Polski 1795–1918, Kraków, Literackie, 2000.

CLARK, Christopher, Prusy. powstanie i upadek 1600–1947. Christopher Clark, przeł. z ang. Jan Szkudliński., Warszawa, Bellona, 2009.

FRACKOWIAK, Johannes: Eine longue durée polnischer Ethnizität? Polen in Mitteleuropa von 1880 bis zur Gegenwart, [In:] Deutsche und polnische Migrationserfahrungen. Vergangenheit und Gegenwart, ed. Dorota Praszałowicz, Frankfurt am Main, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Warszawa, Wien 2014.

KUCHARCZYK, Grzegorz, Prusy, pięć wieków, Warszawa, Bellona, 2020.

MORISON, John (ed.), Eastern Europe and the West. Selected Papers from the Fourth World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies, Harrogate, 1990, 1st ed. 1992., London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1992.

POCIECHA, Józef, The Process of Demographic Transition in Lands of the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Other Areas with Polish-Speaking Populations, 1865–1912, in: Przeszłość Demograficzna Polski, 42 (2020), p. 123–146.

SZUKALSKI, Piotr, Płodność pozamążęńska w Polsce, in: Studia Demograficzne, 136 (1999), p. 109–123.

TRZECIAKOWSKI, Lech, Relations between the Polish and German Population of Prussian Poland, 1772–1918, in: Eastern Europe and the West. Selected Papers from the Fourth World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies, Harrogate, 1990, ed. John MORISON, 1st ed. 1992, London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1992, p. 173–185.

