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POLONISATION PROJECTS FOR POLESIA AND THEIR DELIVERY IN 1921–1939

Abstract

The western part of Polesia (Polish: *Polesie*) was made part of Poland resulting from the Treaty of Riga, 1921. Characteristic to the area were specific economic and ethnic traits. Civilisational retardation and, in a number of cases, underdeveloped ethnic/national awareness of the locals caused Polish authorities to formulate projects with respect to this region aimed at gradual Polonisation of its populace. The process was regarded as an element of civilisation-instilling mission, as well as a precondition for achievement of the desired goals related to internal and external safety. These projects, and the results of Polonisation process, are analysed herein.

Keywords: Polesia, Polonisation, ethnic minorities, Orthodox Church, education.

The annexation of a western part of Polesia to Poland, resulting from the Treaty of Riga, posed a host of problems for the Polish authorities to solve. The challenges were rooted in the region's specificity, with its underdeveloped infrastructure (urban-area and transportation networks) and agriculture, and extremely tough geographical conditions (numerous forest and marsh areas), as the serious development inhibiting factors. In parallel, the geographic inaccessibility of the area and its central situation among the eastern voivodships of the Second Republic made Polesia a very important element of Polish war planning, in the event of a conflict with the USSR.¹

The Polesie Voivodeship spanned across an area of 36,600 sq. km, thus amounting to almost 10 per cent of the area of Poland.² Before

¹ Rajmund Szubański, *Plan operacyjny 'Wschód'* (Warsaw, 1993), 8–11, 97; Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia 1921–1939. Zarys stosunków społeczno-ekonomicznych* (Warsaw, 1963), 169, 170.

² Franciszek Leszczelowski, 'Stosunki narodowościowe i potrzeby kulturalne na Polesiu', in *Polska Macierz Szkolna na Polesiu* (Warsaw, 1939), 14.

WWII broke out, the local population was probably around 1,300,000. The population density, in terms of the voivodeship as a whole, was thus merely *ca.* 34 per 1 sq. km, which was partly due to a large wasteland area (18% of the area). In consequence, even large farm-holdings of more than one hundred acres, if poorly developed or managed, may have not been the source for their owners to provide for themselves.³ The degree of the voivodeship's civilisation advancement was regarded the lowest in Poland. In the Second Republic's first years, the railroad network was almost fourfold less dense than the national average for the period; moreover, this coefficient was deteriorating over the years.⁴ In the second half of the 1930s, beaten paths accounted for less than 10 per cent of all the local roads' total length. *Circa* 65 per cent of the voivodeship's residents were found to be literate around 1939.⁵

These factors were essential determinants for construction among the Polish ruling elite of projects aiming at changing the region's ethnic face. Polesia tended to be regarded as the target of a civilisatory mission, the responsibility for which was to be taken by the Polish State, according to the projects' originators. It was also seen as a territory of particular military importance, whose maintenance would be substantial in terms of the outcome of a possible armed conflict involving Poland's eastern neighbour. These plans would prove successful, it was believed, if the dominant local populace could be attracted to Polish culture and language.

Situated on the Belarusian–Ukrainian–Polish borderland, Polesia was quite specific in terms of its ethnic mix. A large group of people lived there who often were called 'locals' [*tutejsi*]; although having a sense of their specific identity, they would not declare their nationality based upon the classical twentieth-century nationality key (i.e. in terms such as Belarusian/Ukrainian/Polish). The general census of 1931 showed that these 'locals' accounted for some 62 per cent of the total Polesie Voivodeship population.⁶ The issue of real ethnic

³ *Ibidem*, 15; Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia*, 12, 39.

⁴ *Gospodarcze i kulturalne potrzeby województwa poleskiego. Według memoriału wręczonego w dniu 17 XII 1936 roku Prezesowi Rady Ministrów* (Warszawa, 1937), 12; Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia*, 18.

⁵ Leszczyłowski, *Stosunki narodowościowe*, 18.

⁶ *Drugi powszechny spis ludności z dn. 9. XII 1931 r. Mieszkania i gospodarstwa domowe. Ludność. Stosunki zawodowe. Województwo poleskie* (Statystyka Polski, series C, fasc. 87, Warsaw, 1938), 20.

relations in Polesia has remained a controversial issue, though it seems characteristic that even the scholars who verify the relevant data postulate a cautious approach in assessing the phenomenon in question.⁷ However, for the purpose of these considerations, it seems most important that exponents of Polish authorities recognised, at least periodically, that a large (in fact, dominant) group of 'locals' existed, as a consequence of which concrete solutions aimed at Polonising this community were proposed. However, the region's specific ethnic situation was not the only reason for proposing Polonisation schemes; it was seemingly decisive for representatives of Polish authorities to recognise Polesia, in the 1920s and, especially, 1930s, as an area where Polonisation would be necessary.⁸

In the second half of the 1930s, Polonisation programmes were also targeted at the local Jewish community, which formed *ca.* 10 per cent of the region's population⁹. The local Jewry's economic role was considered by the public administration not to be compliant with the interests of the country. This particular aspect of planned Polonisation actions was based upon completely different premises and methods compared to those formulated and applied with respect to the 'locals', and thus is out of the scope of this article.

The ethnic situation in Polesia was dynamic, particularly in the first half of the 1920s. It is accepted that the general census of 1921, regardless of its methodological weaknesses, soon became outdated with respect to that territory.¹⁰ Continued repatriations from the

⁷ Henryk Majecki, 'Problem samookreślenia narodowego Poleszucków w Polsce okresu międzywojennego', *Zagoroddze*, 3 (2001) (Matérýyalý navykova-krayaznawchái kanferéntsýi 'Palesse w XX stagoddzi' 1–4 chérvénya 2000 g.), 153; Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Ojczyzna nie tylko Polaków. Mniejszości narodowe w Polsce w latach 1918–1939* (Warsaw, 1985), 46, 52, 77; *idem*, *Z dziejów Polesia*, 25–32.

⁸ For the possibly lengthiest enumeration of factors determining the Polonisation of Polesia, see Alyaksandr M. Vabishchévich, *Natsýyanal'na-kul'turnae zhytstse Zakhodnyaï Belarusi (1921–1939 gg.)* (Brest, 2008), 34.

⁹ *Drugi powszechny spis ludności*, 20.

¹⁰ Let it be indicated that no 'local' group (of *ca.* 4.4%) was disclosed in the census, while recording a much larger share of Polish population (*ca.* 24.3%) compared to its 1931 counterpart; *Skorowidz miejscowości Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. Opracowany na podstawie wyników pierwszego powszechnego spisu ludności z dn. 30 września 1921 r. i innych źródeł urzędowych*, viii: *Województwo poleskie* (Warsaw, 1924), X ('Tablica Wojewódzka' [Voivodeship Table]); Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia*, 25–32.

Soviet Russia and Soviet Union areas exerted a fundamental impact on the dynamism of the changes taking place. As a result, the population grew from a few to a few dozen per cent per county (*powiat*). Since the evacuation waves initiated by the Russian authorities in 1915 mainly extended to the Orthodox, i.e. non-Polish people,¹¹ the return of the refugees observable in the former half of the 1920s caused the increase of, mainly, the Belarusian, Ukrainian, and 'local' groups.¹² The inflow of Polish people was the other factor that changed the ethnic relations, albeit certainly not as radically and not in such a short timeframe. This was connected with the functioning and expansion of administration, in the broad sense, and – to a much lesser extent – with the colonial settlement action.

The development and evolution of Polonisation projects can be seen as related to the Polesia Voivodes in office at the time. This seems legitimate all the more that those officials did not restrict themselves to executing the instructions of the superior authorities but, in practice, made decisions with respect to the policies pursued, sometimes contributing to the concepts.¹³ Within the two interwar decades, six voivodes were in office: Walery Roman (1921–2); Stanisław Downarowicz (1922–4); Kazimierz Młodzianowski (1924–6); Jan Krahelski (1926–32); and, Wacław Kostek-Biernacki (1932–9 [in 1937, replaced for a few months by Jerzy de Tramecourt, as acting voivode]). The relevant available material enables the reconstruction of the programmes of S. Downarowicz, J. Krahelski and, in particular, W. Kostek-Biernacki. The strategic objective of their actions was in fact common, focused on maintaining the integrity of Poland as a state – through development of conditions for integration of Polesia with Poland whilst, on the other hand, eliminating threats to this process. However, each of these province governors took a different approach toward Polonisation of local non-Polish people as a means to achieve the thus defined goal.

¹¹ Eugeniusz Mironowicz, *Białoruś* (2nd extended edn., Historia Państw Świata w XX Wieku, Warsaw, 2007), 28–30.

¹² The global number of repatriated persons who returned to the north-eastern territory of Second Republic is estimated at 500,000 to 700,000; Mikhail P. Kastyuk (ed.), *Gistorjya Belarusi*, 5 vols. (Minsk, 2005–8), v, 379.

¹³ Wojciech Śleszyński, 'Polesie w polityce państwa polskiego', in *idem* (ed.), *Polesie w polityce rządów II Rzeczypospolitej* (Dokumenty do Dziejów Kresów Północno-Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej, Białystok and Cracow, 2009), 15.

Of socialist background, Stanisław Downarowicz devised a cohesive concept for Polonisation of the region. He officially articulated the theses claiming an ethnic singularity of Polesia and underdeveloped national awareness of its Orthodox populace, which, as he observed, was not a permanent situation, given the onrush of ‘Belarusianness’ and ‘Ukrainness’. In his view, these facts ought to incline the public authorities to launch a separate political scheme for the region, with Polonisation as the governing rule.¹⁴ Although Downarowicz’s concepts remained unimplemented during his term of office, one can acquiesce to the opinion that he outlined the strategic objectives that were delivered at a later stage – particularly, in the 1930s.¹⁵

The years when Polesia was administered by Voivode Jan Krahelksi marked, in turn, the most liberal ethnic policy.¹⁶ Krahelksi publicly

¹⁴ This is how his thesis claiming the necessity to “force a Polish wedge between the Belarusian factor, in the north, and the Ukrainian one, in the south” ought to be understood. Downarowicz warned that “it would be a reprehensible misprediction and negligence on our part, and a highly dangerous thing to the Polish State, if the Belarusian and Ukrainian factors manage to shake hands above the Prypeć [today, Pripjat] [River]”; Official report of the Voivode of Polesie, to the Ethnicity and Nationalities Department, Ministry of Interior, 28 Feb. 1923, in Śleszyński (ed.), *Polesie w polityce*, 23–4.

¹⁵ Downarowicz’s projects are quite frequently – and, sometimes, extensively – discussed by Belarusian historiographers; e.g. P.A. Ablamski, ‘Planŭ intėgratsŭi Paleskaga vayavodstva z ėtnichnai Pol’shchai’, *Moladz’ Berastseŭshchynŭ*, 12 (2009), 91–3.

¹⁶ The material gathered hitherto is insufficient for reconstruction of Młodzianowski’s political concepts with respect to Polesia. Two contradicting premises are identifiable. Młodzianowski is mainly associated in the historiography with the compilation of ‘Guidelines on the attitude of Governmental authorities toward ethnic minorities’, which he signed in the summer of 1926, then as Minister of Interior. The document is regarded as expressing relatively liberal trends in the ethnic policies – so-called State-based assimilation concepts. On the other hand, Młodzianowski’s appointment as Voivode of Polesie in October 1924 occurred in dramatic circumstances of fierce armed incidents inspired by the Soviet intelligence, which culminated in an attack on the train onboard which Downarowicz travelled. The necessity to stave off a serious internal security crisis ought not to have been advantageous to liberal policies toward minorities; Andrzej Chojnowski, *Koncepcje polityki narodowościowej rządów polskich w latach 1921–1939* (Polska Myśl Polityczna XIX i XX wieku, 3, Wrocław, 1979), 74–7; Piotr Cichoracki, *Stołpce – Łowcza – Leśna 1924. II Rzeczypospolita wobec najpoważniejszych incydentów zbrojnych w województwach północno-wschodnich* (Łomianki, 2012), 196–8; Wojciech Śleszyński, *Bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne w polityce państwa polskiego na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej* (Seria Wschodnia, Warsaw, 2007), 304.

attacked what he called ‘Polish Eastern-Borderland nationalism’ whose adherents “succumb to a naïve illusion as though the fist and brutal oppression could at all be ... an instrument efficient for elimination of the so-called minority issue.” He declared “no oppression whatsoever” in place as the desirable state of affairs.¹⁷ He was capable of openly rejecting the notion of ‘Polonisation’.¹⁸ Like Downarowicz, Krahelski deemed prejudged the assumption of either the Belarusian or Ukrainian option by a part of the ethnically unaware people. To his mind, one would have to resign themselves to such developments, while taking advantage of any opportunity to drag both categories of non-Polish populace into collaboration to the benefit of the country and state.¹⁹

The period whose beginning is definable at 1932–3 was marked with conceiving Polonisation enforcing schemes in the State administration circles. Krahelski’s successor Waław Kostek-Biernacki decided that the ‘minority question’ in Polesia was restricted but to the local Jewish people. The Belarusian, Ukrainian, or Russian national claims with respect to Orthodox population are illegitimate because the language spoken by the ‘locals’, which Kostek-Biernacki named a ‘local dialect’, is unique but closest to Polish.²⁰ As a result, the voivode started promoting a whole array of actions meant to render the Slavonic minorities dwelling in Polesia culturally and, some day, also linguistically Polonised.

Schooling was regarded from the beginning as an obvious instrument for Polonisation of Polesia’s Orthodox inhabitants, regardless of what nationality they might have declared (if any).²¹ Similarly to the other areas, the organisation of an educational system, based on Polish as the language of instruction, was to be founded upon

¹⁷ Speech delivered by the Voivode of Polesie (summarised) at a convention of *starosts*, 20 Jan. 1930, in Śleszyński (ed.), *Polesie w polityce*, 38.

¹⁸ Andréi I. Borka, ‘Zakanadawchŭya asnovŭ dzeinastsi administratsyŭnykh ulad pershaŭ instantsyŭ na terytorŭi Zakhodyaŭ Belarusi (1921–1939 gg.)’, *Vesnik GrDU*, ser. 1, no. 1 (2007), 18.

¹⁹ Memo from Voivode of Polesie to the *starosts*, 22 Aug. 1930, in Śleszyński (ed.), *Polesie w polityce*, 45.

²⁰ Piotr Cichoracki, *Droga ku anatemie. Waław Kostek-Biernacki (1884–1957)* (Monografie – Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, 56, Warsaw, 2009), 263.

²¹ Official report of the Voivode of Polesie, to the Ethnicity and Nationalities Department, Ministry of Interior, 28 Feb. 1923, in Śleszyński (ed.), *Polesie w polityce*, 35.

the schooling law of 1924.²² It ought, however, to be remarked that the proportion of non-Polish education system had been negligible since the first years of Poland's independence. As for the school year 1925/6, schools other than Polish amounted to 1.4 per cent of all.²³ Some, arguably small, number of non-Polish schools (particularly, Belarusian) had been closed down by then, which was justified by low teaching and personnel standards.²⁴ Actions of this kind resulted not only from politically-grounded administrative decisions but also, possibly, a relatively low degree of interest of the local people in establishing schools with an instruction language other than Polish.²⁵

Belarusian historiographers are among those who admit that the Polish authorities liberalised, to an extent, their approach to education in non-Polish languages after May 1926. By the school year 1927/8, the number of Belarusian-language schools increased from two to seven, with seven (previously, six) *utraquist* Belarusian-Polish schools available.²⁶ As a token of positive attitude toward the Belarusian aspirations, the consent granted for organisation of Belarusian language courses for teachers is quoted. The consent probably stemmed from the stance of the schools inspectorate which postulated that a command of Belarusian was a must for Polish teachers.²⁷ This situation was to last not too long, though. Just a few years later, in the late 1920s / early 1930s, before the most resolute Polonisation action was taken, there was not a single school with Belarusian or Ukrainian as the language of instruction within the *voivodeship*; the number of *utraquist* schools (Belarusian-Polish as well as Ukrainian-Polish)

²² For a concise discussion of the matter, see Jerzy Ogonowski, *Uprawnienia językowe mniejszości narodowych w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 1918–1939* (Warsaw, 2000), 96–7.

²³ For comparison's sake: 6.3% in Wilno [Vilnius] region; 0.5% in Nowogródek [Navahrudak] region; Alyaksandr M. Vabishchévich, *Asveta w Zakhodnyai Belarusi (1921–1939 gg.)* (Brest, 2004), 21. 1925 reportedly saw the rejection of a total of 22 applications for opening a Belarusian school; *idem*, 'Stan édukatsyi w zakhodnepaleskim régiëne w 1921–1939 gg.', *Berastseïski Khranograf*, 2 (1999), 199.

²⁴ *Idem*, 'Stan édukatsyi', 199.

²⁵ *Idem*, *Natsyyanal'na-kul'turnae zhýtstsë*, 39, 223.

²⁶ Twenty-two such education initiatives are reported to have been rejected; Vabishchévich, 'Stan édukatsyi', 200.

²⁷ *Ibidem*; A.M. Zagidulin, 'Dérzhawnaya palitika Pol'shchÿ w galine belaruskai adukatsyi (1921–1939 gg.)', *Vesnik GrDU*, ser. 1, no. 2 (2005), 16.

dropped to a dozen-or-so.²⁸ In the school year 1937/8, merely two ultraquist schools were available in the voivodeship area.²⁹

Polonisation of the school system did not however mean that Polish was the language of tuition on an exclusive basis. Therefore, since the end of 1932, a resolute offensive aimed at establishing such exclusive status was launched under the aegis of the local Voivodeship Office. That the Orthodox people outnumbered the remainder of the population meant that it was a dominant confession in the religious instruction, which was made obligatory in light of the Constitution of March 1921. Due to the cast of the Orthodox clergy, their background and the tradition they adhered to, the religious education, meant to be delivered in the ‘native speech’, was in most cases taught in Russian or, less often, in Belarusian or Ukrainian.³⁰ The assumption made by the administration, as aforementioned, with regards to the language spoken in Polesia as an ‘local dialect’ deemed ‘alien’ with respect to the said languages resulted in acknowledging that only the ‘dialect’ or Polish could be the languages of instruction. And, since the ‘dialect’ was not based on codified rules, Polish, its ‘related’ language, became privileged.³¹ Judging by the declarations made by the Polesie Voivodeship authorities, it became the only language in which Orthodox religion was taught within the public educational system by the end of 1934, at the latest.³² Timid attempts to resist, made by Orthodox Church authorities in the subsequent years, were held back and nipped in the bud, in the cause of “preventing any attempts at altering the existing state of the affair.”³³ Ever since then, it can be accepted that in Polesia, all the “new notions concerning the contemporary world were getting through to the children, in the first place, by intermediation of the Polish language.”³⁴

²⁸ Vabishchévich, *Asveta w Zakhodnyaï*, 24; *idem*, ‘Stan édukatsyi’, 202.

²⁹ Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia*, 149.

³⁰ Brest, Gosudarstvennõi arkhiv Brestskoï oblasti (hereinafter: GABO), f. 1, o. 10, d. 2570, p. 11, Memo from the Inspector of the School District of Brest to the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment, 1 Feb. 1935.

³¹ Cichoracki, *Droga ku anatemie*, 267–8.

³² Warsaw, Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereinafter: AAN), Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych 1918–39 (hereinafter: MSW), ref. no. 62, p. 135, Minutes of periodical meeting of united authorities of the Voivodeship of Polesie, 14 Dec. 1934.

³³ ‘Pismo kuratora Okręgu Szkolnego Brzeskiego do UWP z 18 V 1938’, in Śleszyński (ed.), *Polesie w polityce*, 196.

³⁴ Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia*, 150.

The available sources clearly indicate that the Orthodox Church had its part to play in the plans of integrating Polesia to the Polish state, since the early 1920s. The priority in this respect at that time was not literally to Polonise the Orthodox Church, in terms of elevating the importance of Polish in the life of this Church. The goal, as initially declared, was to partly de-Russify the Church, by breaking the hierarchs' and clergymen's ties with the Russian structures, impersonated by the Moscow Patriarchate. What this meant was to coax the local clergy into regarding the independence of the Polish Orthodox Church as a permanent state. In practice, an influence on the personnel policy was pursued, targeted at eliminating from the Polesia territory those individuals for whom it would have become apparent, based on their actions and stances, that they did not accept autocephaly.

The turn in the administration's attitude toward the question of language in the Orthodox Church is identifiable for the early 1930s, which probably should be related to the appearance of W. Kostek-Biernacki in Polesia. The Polonisation action essentially altered the everyday functioning of the local Orthodox Church, thereby influencing the behaviours of the faithful. The focus was initially on enforcement of use of Polish in register-office records kept by the clergy, as well as, in the cause of harmonisation, Polish spelling of names. The second half of the 1930s saw actions taken to case the clergy to deliver sermons in Polish as well as to accept the Gregorian calendar. Once again, let us mention the changes taking place in the religious education.

The reservation has to be made that Polonisation of the local Orthodox Church was not integral. The policymakers distanced themselves from intervening in the language of liturgy. Interestingly, the Orthodox Church was not contended with on an institutional basis. Contrary to Volhynia or Lublin Land, Polesia witnessed no brutal 'religious reclamation' methods employed against the Orthodoxy, consisting in liquidation of sites of cult, in the late interwar period. Before then, divestments of Orthodox-Church buildings to the benefit of the Catholic Church were rather cautious.

The administration's attitude to the Uniate Church ought to be described as ambivalent. The interests advocated by the Orthodox Church and the Polish administration were completely concordant with respect to Uniate proselytism. The Orthodoxy feared outflows of its faithful to the Greek Catholic Church. The Polish authorities were of opinion that the development of Catholic Eastern Rite would

give impulse for nationalistic attitudes, Belarusian and Ukrainian. No doubt beneficial for the authorities' policy was the replacement in 1932 at the Catholic Episcopal seat in Pińsk [Pinsk]. The Diocese of Polesie was ruled before then by Bishop Zygmunt Łoziński, a determined adherent of the Uniate Church, who did not hesitate to come into a conflict in this respect with Vilna Catholic Archbishop Romuald Jałbrzykowski. After he died, Bishop Łoziński was replaced by Bishop Kazimierz Bukraba, who was much more sensitive to the desiderata of the administration.

The authorities' doings with respect to social organisations which pursued educational and cultural activities should probably be interpreted in terms of educational actions. In the 1920s, development of non-Polish structures of this kind was tolerated in Polesia area, among which the Ukrainian *Prosvita*, established there in 1923, and the Society for Belarusian School (Tavarystva belaruskai shkoly, TBS), developed since 1926, deserve being named. Based on the Polish administration files, such organisations pursued their activities with noticeable success, gaining some popularity and expanding their organisational network. One may sometimes get the impression that under Krahelski's umbrella, the county-level authorities downright supported the nationality-oriented cultural activity of the local ethnic minorities.³⁵ In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the authorities began oppugning the said organisations. Interestingly, however, no charges were propounded against the organisations on an ethnic or national basis: the charges were political instead, or, more specifically, referred to their supposed seditious activities. *Prosvita* and TBS were namely regarded in Polesia to have been infiltrated, to a lesser or greater extent, by communist influences.³⁶

³⁵ GABO, f. 1, o. 9, d. 1956, p. 373, 377, Memo of the Head of the Security Department, Voivodeship Office of Polesia to the Head of the Security Department, Ministry of Interior, 29 Sept. 1932.

³⁶ Vabishchévich, 'Stan édukatyŭi', 201–2; V.S. Misiyuk, 'Fenomen "tuteishikh" i natsional'nye protsessy v polesskom vovodstve (1921–1939 gg.)', in *Gistorykalkul'turnaya slachyŭna Bréstska-Pinskaga Palessya: pamizh minulým i buduchyŭnai (da 45-goddzya g. Stolina). Zbornik matérjyalaw navukovai kanferéntsji 28–29 verasnya 2005 goda*, pt. 1 (Brest, 2006), 209; 'Rozwój białoruskiego ruchu narodowościowego na Polesiu', a paper [1933], in Śleszyński (ed.), *Polesie w polityce*, 119–24; Paper of the Security Department, Voivodeship Office of Polesie, re. the Ukrainian movement in Polesia, 29 Jan. 1934, *ibidem*, 141–6.

In 1933, the Slavonic ethnic minorities' cultural social organisations were almost completely liquidated.³⁷ Let us add that two years earlier, in the circumstances of tightened policy of the government against the political opposition, legal political structures virtually ceased operating locally. This caused that Polish structures alone remained within the voivodeship. The authorities focused on development of youth-oriented structures, among which special mention is deserved by the Riflemen's Association (*Związek Strzelecki, ZS*) and the Rural Youth Union (*Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej, ZMW*) 'Siew'. Polonisation by way of cultural initiatives was also carried out by the Association of Fire Brigades, an apparently thoroughly apolitical organisation, which offered contact with cinema shows or theatre performances, based on the infrastructure (lodgings) it had at its disposal.³⁸ All these institutions received in the 1930s quite substantial financial, material, and organisational support.³⁹

The actions related to compulsory military service form a separate issue. Not the basic-military-service soldiers (who were liable to Polonisation in a natural manner) but only conscripts and, later on, reservists were subjected to Polonisation projects and practice conducted under the aegis of the administration and targeted at non-Polish dwellers of Polesia. The local school authorities pursued publication activity aimed at popularising the Polish arms tradition among male young people. This was done by printing publications containing descriptions of heroic episodes from the history of Poland, as well as by proposing theatrical scripts for use of amateur ensembles.⁴⁰

The administration started exhibiting their intensified interest in the problem of nationality declarations submitted in the course of conscription in 1933, which was also meant to facilitate for the basic-service soldiers the transition into the sphere of Polish cultural influences. It was acknowledged then that as many declarations of Polish identity as possible should be obtained, since it was assumed that conscripts so identified would be better treated by their barrack mates. Actions aimed at initiating and conducting the process of

³⁷ Śleszyński (ed.), *Polesie w polityce*, 124, 146.

³⁸ Vabishchévich, *Natsyjanal'na-kul'turnae zhýtstsė*, 162.

³⁹ Alena Dzmitruk, 'Výpratsowka pol'skimi wladami planaw pa palanizatsyĭ belaruskaga naseł'nitsva Paleskaga vayavodstva (1921–1939 gadŷ)', *Gistoryja – prablemŷ vŷkladannya*, 2 (2006), 42.

⁴⁰ Vabishchévich, *Natsyjanal'na-kul'turnae zhýtstsė*, 163.

national assimilation in the army should have, assumedly, taken a more effective course, producing more enduring results, especially when demobbed.⁴¹ The same aim was to be served also by the enlargement of the Reservists' Association, which assembled former basic-service soldiers.

The real efficiency of Polonisation actions ought to be considered separately from the sphere of assumptions and projects. The development of education in the interwar period was a certain thing; in Polesia, it assumed a markedly Polish face, virtually ever since the region became part of the Second Republic. The growth trend in the numbers of teachers is significant: 530 as for the year 1925/6 turned into more than 2,900 a few months before the outbreak of WWII.⁴² In spite of the pace that was, assuredly, not satisfactory for the Polish administration, compulsory schooling was successfully delivered on an increasing curve. As for 1924/5, the percentage of children staying outside the classical education system was estimated at 23 per cent, with 50 per cent attending their classes irregularly.⁴³ Thirteen years later, the commonness of education was assessed at 78 per cent.⁴⁴ Between 1921 and 1938, the number of schools of all types increased from 356 to 1,338.⁴⁵

Belarusian historians highlight that the launch of schools with Polish as the language of tuition came across unfavourable welcome from non-Polish people. This could be evidenced by a report of the Polesie Voivode of autumn 1923, finding that "in most of the counties, the Belarusian populace responded to the Polish schools untowardly."⁴⁶ Yet, this resistance, basically non-organised and caused, to some extent, by the elementary conviction that the teaching was

⁴¹ Cichoracki, *Droga ku anatemie*, 278.

⁴² Vabishchévich, *Asveta w Zakhodnyaï*, 21; 'Stan polskiego posiadania na Polesiu', a study [1939], in Śleszyński (ed.), *Polesie w polityce*, 212. The number was not up to the needs. For certain other aspects of the staffing situation in the Polesian school system, from the authorities' standpoint, see GABO, f. 1, o. 8, d. 1956, pp. 14–15, Memo of the Voivode of Polesie to the Ministry of Interior [Feb. 1937].

⁴³ Vabishchévich, *Asveta w Zakhodnyaï*, 24.

⁴⁴ 'Stan polskiego posiadania na Polesiu', 212. For an individual instance confirming the trend, see Jerzy Tomaszewski, 'Rozprawa Rudolfa Roleckiego poświęcona Czudzinowi', *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne*, xxvi (2006), 207–9.

⁴⁵ A. Nikonov and A. Suvorov, 'Politika 2-ï Rechi Pospolitoï po "uluchshenyu" kul'turnoi situatsii v poleskom voevodstve', *Moladz' Berastseïshchynj*, 1 (1995), 23.

⁴⁶ Vabishchévich, *Asveta w Zakhodnyaï*, 35.

provided in an incomprehensible language, abated very soon, in the first half of the 1920s.⁴⁷

In 1935, the inspector of the local school district notified the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment as follows:

... with respect to the people of Polesia, particularly, the younger generation, observable is their increasing willingness to use the Polish language in their social, community, as well as, more and more frequently, everyday life. They tend to read Polish books and newspapers, take active part in Polish theatrical performances organised by them, more and more willingly sing Polish songs with their choral ensembles, begin feeding on Polish culture and breathing with it ...; thus, little wonder, the Polesia people at large wish to have solely the Polish school⁴⁸

This conclusion is striking with its positive assessment of efficiency of the Polonisation programme delivered in Polesia. To some extent, such statements must have definitely expressed an 'official optimism'. Let us emphasise, though, that there are sources produced outside of the local administration, or other than made under its aegis, that have recorded the phenomena highlighted by the Brześć [Brest] inspector. Based on this category of evidence, whose available pieces are, regrettably, scarce, an attempt can be made to verify the opinions of the contemporary Polish authorities.

Stanisław Tołpa, who later in his career made a name for himself as an eminent botanist, wrote one such independent account describing the attitude of local children to the school. In his opinion, they were simply enthusiastic about it, as the school offered them an opportunity to get detached from their not-quite-attractive rural daily life. Particularly interesting is the description of the activities that gave them the utmost pleasure while at school.

They best like to learn about Polish kings and wars. They are also fond of descriptions of faraway countries Were it possible, they would spend the whole of their day at school; especially when the 'Madam' sets the radio, and music and songs from Warsaw are heard played.

⁴⁷ For a description of this mechanism, as reconstructed based on a village in the county (*powiat*) of Łuniniec, see Tomaszewski, *Rozprawa Rudolfa Roleckiego*, 206.

⁴⁸ GABO, f. 1, o. 10, d. 2570, pp. 11–13, Memo from the Inspector of the School District of Brest to the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment, 1 Feb. 1935.

Tołpa has also noted the parents' attitude toward the instruction in Polish:

I asked whether they would like to be taught in their local language. They bridled, cut to the quick. Their children are permanently talking in *Khakhlak* [*Chachlak* dialect]: "Now, should they be taught this at school moreover?" They responded to me, "Let them learn the language they don't know, which can be of use in their lives."⁴⁹

Although I have not found any other trace of a like straightforward approval for Polonisation of the local schools, this particular piece is not the only testimony, produced outside the administration and not inspired by it, expressing the substantially similar effects of teaching in Polish. It was this language that became, in the early 1930s, the instrument of communicating with teachers as well as among the schoolchildren.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the longevity of skills such as writing and reading in Polish appeared doubtful to some contemporaries, since the so-called functional illiteracy was a common phenomenon in Polesia.⁵¹

As mentioned, a considerable Polonisation role was assigned to social organisations devised for the youth. In the first half of the 1930s, the ZS and ZMW numbered each several hundred circles and enjoyed popularity.⁵² The number of local cultural institutions (day-rooms, choirs, folk houses) increased threefold in the 1930s.⁵³ The network of libraries, which also were regarded as a Polonisation tool, was remarkably increased, albeit it has to be borne in mind that, given the local Polesian realities, the proportion of users of such outlets was rather small.⁵⁴ Let us add that that Polish social and cultural organisations had actually no other choice already in the former half of the 1930s.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Stanisław Tołpa, *Śladami losia. Z wędrówek po Polesiu* (Lvov, 1936), 122–3.

⁵⁰ Tomaszewski, *Rozprawa Rudolfa Roleckiego*, 209.

⁵¹ Józef Obrębski, *Polesie*, ed. Anna Engelking (Studia etnosocjologiczne, 1, Warsaw, 2007), 383–90.

⁵² Vabishchévich, *Natsjyanal'na-kul'turnae zhjytstsë*, 153–4; Jan Widacki (ed.), *Kresy w oczach oficerów KOP* (Katowice, 2005), 195; Obrębski, *Polesie*, 495.

⁵³ Vabishchévich, *Natsjyanal'na-kul'turnae zhjytstsë*, 164 (Table 3.3).

⁵⁴ Nikonov, Suvorov, 'Politika', 23–5; 'Stan polskiego posiadania na Polesiu', 216.

⁵⁵ Very telling is the history of *Prosvita*, the organisation operating in the southern part of Polesie Voivodeship: its fifty-four circles, as of 1929, shrank to only two by 1933; Vabishchévich, *Natsjyanal'na-kul'turnae zhjytstsë*, 227.

Belarusian historians tend to ascertain that the expansion rate of these organisations (ZS being the example) proved relatively smaller than for the two remaining north-eastern voivodeships.⁵⁶ It should, however, be remarked that there have been more than 600 ZS units alone appearing by 1938, whilst the monopolistic position enjoyed by the Association, along with the several abovementioned pro-Government organisations in Polesia, rendered them considerably influential.⁵⁷

Their drawing power – and thus, indirectly, the catchiness of Polonisation – is attested by documents produced by illegal communist structures, whose authors admitted that young people locally clang to the organisations such as ZS or ZMW.⁵⁸ Thus, the guess can be risked that the decidedly Polish character of these organisations was not deterring to the extent that those willing to be further educated or win additional professional qualifications would quit the opportunity. While the material, if not mercantile, aspect was at work there (i.e. uniform worn, opportunity to use the infrastructure, etc.), it nonetheless seems doubtless that these organisations attracted the novices also with their opportunity potential with respect to fulfilment of ambitions (as a very broad concept) characteristic to young people, energetic as they intrinsically are.⁵⁹

Also, the efforts oriented to preparation of conscripts and, subsequently, building a national identity based upon the completed military service ought to be deemed rational from the standpoint of Polonisation policy. It is recognised that the basic service with the Polish Army was perceived by Polesia dwellers as a definitely positive experience, and such was their reminiscence of it years afterwards. More importantly perhaps, the contact with Polish culture in ‘out-of-Polesia conditions’ (so to conventionally name it), in an environment that offered making use of civilisation achievements unavailable in Polesian rural areas, definitely weighed in favour of this

⁵⁶ Vitalii I. Krivut', *Molodezhnaya polityka pol'skikh vlastei na territorii Zapadnoï Belarusi (1926–1939 gg.)* (Minsk, 2008), 80.

⁵⁷ E., 'Praca Związku Strzeleckiego na Polesiu', *Gazeta Polska*, 241 (3 Sept. 1938).

⁵⁸ Natsional'nyĭ arkhiv Respubliki Belarus', f. 242, o. 1, d. 504, p. 21, 'Okręg Pińsk' [District of Pinsk], Report of the District Committee of the Communist Party of West Belarus, Pinsk (duplicate, dated 27 Oct. 1935).

⁵⁹ Krivut', *Molodezhnaya polityka*, 31; Tomaszewski, *Rozprawa Rudolfa Roleckiego*, 210.

culture.⁶⁰ Consequently, the soldiers, once demobilised, became carriers of Polishness – at least initially. This was all the more the case for those in whom the military service awoke the ambition of participating in public life. This could be implemented by joining the social organisations which were pro-Government and essentially Polish in their character – particularly the Reservists’ Association.⁶¹ Another thing is that, as Voivode J. de Tramecourt put it, the ‘armour’ of Polishness worn by the reservists was only temporary. Therefore, in order to consolidate it, strivings were made to get the soldiers organised more closely under the actual patronage of the administration.⁶²

Similarly to Polonisation actions taken in the realm of education, also the ecclesial policy was devised for a longer period of time. There was no other way to go about it, since the strategic goal set in the 1930s was described as attainment by the Polish language of the exclusivity status for contacts between the faithful and the Orthodox clergy – the role of Polesian ‘local dialect’ being seen as short-term.⁶³ Thus, it would be rather difficult, again, to identify lasting results in this case. There is no doubt, however, that the authorities managed to build an instrumentation facilitative in achieving this objective. By the end of the 1930s, Polish became the dominant, although in many cases arguably deformed, communication tool for the Polesian Orthodox Church – in its priestly and ministrative (sermons) activities as well as institutional operations (registration).⁶⁴ In 1937, the State administration affirmed that this situation “arouses no objection”.⁶⁵ On the contrary: “the number of clergymen of the Polish national-identity feeling” was, reportedly, growing.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Obrębski, *Polesie*, 299, 352.

⁶¹ Cichoracki, *Droga ku anatemie*, 240; Obrębski, *Polesie*, 495, 546.

⁶² GABO, f. 1, o. 8, d. 1091, p. 16, Minutes of the Conference of Commanders of Corps Districts and Voivodes of North-Eastern Provinces, 24 April 1937.

⁶³ Śleszyński, *Bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne*, 225.

⁶⁴ Alyaksandr M. Vabishchévich, ‘Palanizatsyya pravaslavnaï tsarkvŷ w Zakhodnyaï Belarusi w drugoï palove 1930-kh gg.: planŷ i praktŷchnaya réalizatsyya’, in *Pravoslavie v dukhovnoï zhizni Belarusi: sbornik materialov mezhdunarodnoï nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii*, Brest, 25–26 aprelya 2007 g. (Brest, 2008), 226.

⁶⁵ GABO, f. 1, o. 8, d. 1956, p. 17, Memo of the Voivode of Polesie to the Ministry of Interior [Feb. 1937].

⁶⁶ GABO, f. 1, o. 10, d. 2835, p. 5, ‘The overall political-and-denominational situation in the Voivodeship of Polesie’, a report of the Voivode of Polesie for the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment, 14 Jan. 1939.

The employment of such measures was probably meant to bring about, in the longer run, the emergence of a Polish (or, Polish-speaking) Orthodox Church. Characteristically, the section of the comprehensive policy programme for Polesia related to confessional issues, which was formulated a few months before the war broke out, is almost the briefest. It postulated with respect to the Orthodox Church that the Gregorian calendar be introduced and a diocese theological seminary established to “provide education in the Polish spirit”.⁶⁷

The actions taken under the patronage of the public administration in view of Polonising the Orthodox population of Polesia from 1932–3 onwards began forming a consistently implemented, though formally unnamed and officially not identified, scheme for altering the ethnic face of the Polesie Voivodeship. In spite of its vastly regional character, the originators did not assume that a ‘Polesian identity’ or ‘Polesian ideology’ could be developed to render the people even closer to Polishness and tie them to it.⁶⁸ This might have resulted from a negative stereotype of the region, which functioned in the Second Republic. Moreover, ‘Polesian-ness’ was not of a value to the region’s dwellers, of whom low self-esteem was characteristic.⁶⁹ With increasing involvement of the military in ethnic policies, as observable since the second half of the 1930s, the assumptions of the Polonisation programme delivered in Polesia might have been revisited at that point.⁷⁰

The statement has been prevalent in Polish historiography for many years now whereby, in brief, the chance to render Polesia Polonised would have been considerable, had the Polish statehood proved stable

⁶⁷ ‘Stan polskiego posiadania na Polesiu’, 236.

⁶⁸ The mechanism of using regional threads for intensification of the community’s realised sense of association with things German was employed in the ethnically mixed East Prussia, in the Weimar Republic period. The ‘East-Prussian ideology’, created and propagated with use of tools very similar to those applied in Polesia (education, youth/paramilitary/veteran organisations) was founded on, e.g. the heroisation of WWI episodes that had taken place in this territory in 1914–5; Robert Traba, ‘Wschodniopruskość’. *Tożsamość regionalna i narodowa w kulturze politycznej Niemiec* (Olsztyn, 2007), *passim*.

⁶⁹ Obrębski, *Polesie*, 283.

⁷⁰ That such tendencies occurred is confirmed by the interest shown by the Ministry of Military Affairs with respect to Lemko and Hutsul regions [resp.: *Lemkovyna* (*Lemkivshchyna*), *Hutsulshchyna*]; Piotr Stawecki, *Następcy Komendanta. Wojsko a polityka wewnętrzna Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1935–1939* (Warsaw, 1969), 199–200.

for a longer time.⁷¹ The view that the process had actually commenced could perhaps be cautiously formulated with respect to the young generation, for whom the Polish school and the military service with the Polish Army were a matter of common experience. One more circumstance advantageous to successful Polonisation is, seemingly, the virtual elimination of an organised and legal impact of the other cultures that could offer a counterproposal: the Ukrainian and Belarussian one. The young inhabitant of Polesia would thus become, initially, a participant of the Polish schooling system; afterwards, following the (quite plausible) completion of his/her elementary-level education, s/he could take part in the activities of Polish social organisations devised for him/her. The young man would subsequently be called up for the military service, and dispatched to this end to a garrison remote from his home residence, thus becoming fated to use the Polish language, whether inside or outside the barracks. When back home, especially if he was willing to fulfil an ambition with respect to public life (e.g. becoming a *softys* – village administrator), he would join the Reservists' Association. Any contacts with representatives of the authorities forced him to maintain at least a passive command of Polish. At last, also in his confessional life he would more and more often have to do with this language. And, command of Polish appeared indispensable for a thoroughly elementary functioning. This trend was exemplified, in an extreme fashion, by the instruction of 1937 ordaining obligatory conversion into Polish of all the information boards and signboards in public places.⁷²

It would definitely be erroneous only to list those doubtlessly substantial but not the only drivers of a possible success or failure of Polonisation concepts. The other factors, which inhibited the process, cannot be neglected. Of essence, seemingly, is the fact that the assumption of the role of school student or reservist, as expected by the State authorities, implied resistance from such individual's own milieu that discerned the practical conflict between these functions and the traditional duties and jobs of child – the workforce in the countryside, or young man, who took over the behavioural patterns, morals and way of life from the preceding generation.⁷³

⁷¹ Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia*, 154.

⁷² Vabishchévich, *Nats'jyanal'na-kul'turnae zhytstsë*, 32.

⁷³ Obrębski, *Polesie*, 393–7; Топа, *Śladami łosia*, 109–10.

Also, the social problems recognised by the core segment of the non-Polish populace as unsolved in the spirit of their own aspirations, completely neglected in this article, need being indicated.⁷⁴ In the realities of the country collapsing in September 1939, especially since the Soviet invasion, it occurred that un-Polish Orthodox inhabitants of Polesia, who had thitherto been subjected to Polonisation in various areas, seemingly acquiescing to it without a strong resistance, began rejecting their previous experiences and outward attitudes. The moment the social upheaval desired in the rural areas seemed to be materialising, the periods of their lives, now seeming episodic, ceased to be of relevance: when a schoolboy, fond of 'Polish kings and weaponry'; a soldier, exemplarily doing his military service in a remote garrison somewhere in Greater-Poland or Pomerania; a reservist, regarded by the administration as the mainstay of orderliness in the field; and, a faithful, glozing over his Orthodox priest's altered language of preaching. In so many cases, he would now turn into a 'rebel', 'revolutionist', 'partisan', fighting against Poland, or at least someone who accommodatingly looked at the struggle going on. The effects of this change turned the Polesian September of 1939 into an episode featuring extreme brutality, as encountered by the local Polish community as well as by the other residents of Polesia.

trans. Tristan Korecki

⁷⁴ For a concise but probably quite relevant take of this issue, from the standpoint of non-Polish Orthodox people, see Obrębski, *Polesie*, 302.