

THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR II ON ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE BIALYSTOK PROVINCE

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Abstract: The Białystok Voivodeship, which used to exist before the Second World War, similarly to the rest of the eastern territory of the Second Polish Republic, was characterized by a considerable variety of nations and religions. In spite of minor misunderstandings, there were no serious conflicts. The situation changed completely during the Second World War. One of the reasons was the cooperation between the representatives of some national groups with the invaders. The black page in history was the extermination of Jewish population, which constituted a considerable part of the Second Polish Republic society, by the Germans. All of the above as well as establishing new Polish eastern border after 1944 led to the emergence of new, more homogeneous society.

Key words: Religion, national minorities, Podlaskie Voivodeship, occupation, security apparatus

Many elements, such as religion, language, or nationality, had and still have influence on the relationship between living next to each groups. It was evident especially in the areas of the pre-war Białystok province, which was domiciled by Poles, Jews, Germans, Belarusians and Lithuanians. The relations between them were not always correct due to the internal policy of the Polish state which was formed after 1918, as well as because of the activities of nationalistic minority groups which were aimed against it [1].

Existing diversity translated into denominations, among which functioned: Judaism and Orthodox, in smaller numbers were also present the Old Ritualists, Muslims, Karaites and Protestants [2]. Followers of the largest in this area Roman Catholic Church were part of the Archdiocese of Vilnius (the largest in Poland), the Lomza diocese and the Diocese of Pinsk. Part of the Belarusian population was also related to the Roman Catholic (according to various data 7-25 percent), which demanded, among others, admission of the Belarusian language to services [3]. An important role was played by the Orthodox religion, which according to the data from January 1, 1937, numbered four million two hundred thousand followers in Poland, who were gathered, among others, in the diocese of Vilnius [4]. In the Białystok province lived also a nearly two hundred thousand strong Jewish population, constituting 38.4 percent of urban population and 3.6 percent in rural areas [5].

The existing national and religious structure was virtually annihilated by the events of the World War II, an element of which was also a change in the borders of the Polish state. Also crimes committed by both occupants,

mass extermination of the Polish and Jewish population and national conflicts, contributed to this fact [6].

The element which underwent a change became also a religious structure, which was indirectly affected by the Soviet-Lithuanian agreement of 10 October 1939 on the transfer of Vilnius and part of the Vilnius Region to Lithuania. It gave start to a campaign by the Lithuanian government which aimed to remove the Archbishop Romuald Jalbrzykowski [7,8] from the post of the steward of the diocese and appoint in his place an apostolic administrator [2]. Moreover, the involvement of people of Jewish and Belarusian nationalities in the creation of the structures of the Soviet administration deteriorated relations with the Poles (for example the humiliation of the Polish population, arrests of local officials and local activists, deportations, removal from their positions, elimination of traces of Polish culture), for who any co-operation or participation in the structures of the occupying authorities was a sign of collaboration [9,10].

This situation has partially changed in 1941, when a new German occupant appeared, which shortly resulted in a change in the situation of the Polish population. In the former so-called Western Belarus a new administrative creature was created – Bezirk Białystok, which covered the area of the former province of Białystok and scraps of the Polesie province. Although initially the Polish population took advantage of the situation to get even with the Soviet co-operators (regardless of nationality and religion), ultimately the Nazi army proved to be the new occupant for them, and an ally for Belarusians. The latter were to become a counterweight to the Poles who constituted a majority in

the local administration. Jerzy Turonek, among others, pointed to denunciations which had the nature of settlement of private feuds between Poles and Belarusians [11].

In the years 1939-1944 the Germans conducted a campaign of extermination of the Jewish population in the Bezirk Bialystok. The wave of repression swept after June 22nd, 1941, when the pogroms of Jews took place (Bialystok, Grajewo, Jasionowka, Jedwabne, Trzcianne, Wasosz) and executions of people suspected of collaborating with the Soviet authorities. Next years brought mass executions, the liquidation of the ghettos (in Bialystok, Lomza, Grajewo, Siemiatycze, Krynki, Orla), and deportations of Jews to the death camps [5, 12]. According to Simon Datner it happened to 226 [5] – 254 thousand people in Bialystok District (Bezirk Bialystok) [13].

Another breakthrough was the building of the structures of the communist system which was imposed on Poland by force after 1944. In connection with the entry into the discussed area of the Red Army, the only political force, acting with the Soviet support became the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN). Under its patronage the foundations of the administration were built, and also the structures of the Citizens Militia, Office of Public Security, and the Polish Workers' Party which did not operate up to this point in the area of Bialystok. At the same time, with the support of the NKVD the real and alleged opponents of the new government were liquidated. Such opponents became all those who were operating in the pro-government in London conspiracy, who became the majority victims of next deportations to Ostashkov and Stalinogorska. In July of 1945 a final determination of the territory of the province Białystok took place. The Lomza district, and three districts from the Masuria region: Elk, Goldap and Olecko were also included to the Bialystok province. On the other hand the eastern districts of Grodno and Wolkowysk were attached to the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic [14].

The boundary changes, which were confirmed by international treaties, led to the creation of the new state, which was created on the lands with a very weak (if any) relationship with Poland, while leaving outside of its borders areas that were part of its history. The new territorial divisions of the country caused nationality changes (displacement) and a significant transformations in the functioning of administrative units of the Roman Catholic Church. the Archdiocese of Vilnius was divided by the state border, which before the war lied entirely within the Polish territory. The was true also with respect to the Diocese of Pinsk. Most of the Lomza diocese found itself in the reconstructed province of Bialystok [15, 16]. Equally complex was the situation in parts of Masuria which were incorporated into Poland in 1945, where gradually Polish population began to pour in – both repatriates from Vilnius Region, as well as residents

of the Suwalki region, Kolno, Lomza, Ostroleka, Kadzidlo, Przasnysz and Grudziadz [15, 17]. Southern East Prussia, which fell within the borders of the Polish state as a whole belonged to the diocese of Warmia, which in 1944 counted approximately 373 thousand Catholics (in 1948 already 680 thousand) [18].

The Polish authorities in a decree dated September 19th, 1946 included the Kashubians and Masurians [19] to the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession [3]. At that time, the number of ethnic Germans, thus basically evangelicals, was significantly reduced. As soon as after the first phase of the family reunification, most evangelical parishes were not able to support their church. The pastoral care over the sparse population of evangelicals of German nationality was taken over by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Polish Peoples Republic [20].

The report by the governor of the Bialystok Province dated November 29th, 1944, listed following denominations present in the region: Catholics, Orthodox, Judaists and the Baptists. The governor did not know then the incidences of clergy standing against the Polish Committee of National Liberation, he mentioned sermons sympathetic towards the Polish Army [21]. In the following month it was indicated that there was a large number of Catholic parishes without a priest, to a lesser degree it was similar in the Orthodox parishes, and setting up of a Jewish Religion Community in Bialystok. Also mentioned was the existence of the Mohamadan religious community (Polish Tatars) in the Sokolka area [22].

The changing of the boundaries of Poland and the seizure of power by the communists as a result of implementation of the Yalta order in the post-war Europe, changed the position of the Orthodox Church in Poland. An important element become the resettlements of the Belarusians, as a result of the signed in September of 1944 repatriations agreement between the Government of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and PKWN. In this case, however, the Belarusians used this possibility reluctantly, and also Polish local administration at this time had no reason to encourage them to do so (they favoured the communist regime). Despite the propaganda campaign carried out by the Soviet Commissioners to the end of 1946 From 36 388 people left the region, which accounted for twenty percent of the total number of the Belarusian Orthodox population living in this area [23–25].

As early as 1944 the regional authorities attempted for the first time to get an overview of the size of the non-Polish population. It was a very difficult task, given the fact that administrative structures were just being formed, and a significant part of the staff were came here from outside of the province of Bialystok, and they had no knowledge of the prevailing ethnic relations here. In many cases, estimates,

compiled on the basis of unspecified criteria, were given. Their authenticity depended on the degree of professionalism and integrity of the workers. Many of them did not even know the difference nationality and citizenship. The Bialystok province, which was formed after World War II, was inhabited by 802 812 Poles (87.06 percent), 106 thousand Belarusians (11.55 percent) [26], 3344 Lithuanians (0.36 percent), 1,200 Jews (0.13 percent) [23], and eight thousand Russians (0.9 percent) [27, 28].

In this case, the most interesting seems to be the attitude and situation of the two of the above population groups, who lived in dense groups in the Bialystok region – the Belarusians and the Lithuanians. Today we know, that it was the activity of some of the Belarusians during the Second World War, and above all their membership in the Belarusian National Committee [29] largely resulted in the interest in this community on the side of the security apparatus. At the end of the nineteen forties measures have been taken to establish the identities of people who had contacts with emigration centres in the West, as well as recruitment of agents. Until 1954 it was the task of the Second Division of the Third Department of the MBP, and then, until 1956 of the third Division. Both people leaving Poland for temporary residence or those staying in contact with their relatives there, as well as those working at various objects of military significance were of interest to the security forces [30]. The number of people belonging to the Belarusian Committee in the Bialystok region (not counting Grodno and Volkovysk branches) was estimated at about eight, ten thousand. Most of them, for fear of liability for their activities during the years of occupation left the Bialystok region together with German troops. Interestingly, according to a characteristic drawn up by the Security Office, as soon as the Red Army entered the area, a number of the committee activists were arrested and deported to the Soviet Union [31].

The Security Forces had no doubts as to the role the Belarusian National Committee played during World War II. In a characteristics drawn up on November 13th, 1948 by the head of the Bialystok office of the Provincial Office of Public Security, the committee was described as „a fascist organization operating during the German occupation within the Bialystok province”. For security apparatus it was clear that the committee was organized on the initiative of the German intelligence, shortly after these areas were occupied by the Wehrmacht. According to the information held by the Security Forces the aim of the committee was to allow the Germans to strengthen themselves in the occupied territories [32]. This was confirmed by the testimony of Waldemar Macholl, the deputy chief of the Gestapo in Bialystok, who indicated that one of the purposes of the activities of the Belarusian National Committee was to ti-

ghten the relations between the Belarusian population and the Germans and to strengthen its „chauvinism” primarily against the Poles [33, 34]. The evidence of this cooperation with the posts of the security police and the SD was the organization from among its members two armed troops in the strength of about a hundred people each, which were directly subordinated to the Sipo and the SD and were intended to guard duty at the German offices and facilities, as well as to escort transports of prisoners [35].

Also the Polish-Lithuanian relations before the outbreak of World War II were not the best. This was due to a conflict over Vilnius and the Vilnius region, which existed between the two nations and states, and which in the inter-war period was decided in favour of Poland [36]. Within the Second Polish Republic, the Lithuanians inhabited mainly areas included in the Vilnius province and in Bialystok and Nowogrodek provinces. According to the 1931 census, their number amounted to 83.1 thousand, although, according to Krzysztof Tarka it could have reached up to 200 thousand [37].

During World War II, as a result of the division of the Polish lands, the Vilnius region with Vilnius ended up in the hands of the USSR and were transferred to Lithuania, and the Suwalki region was occupied by Germany. In the summer of 1940, after the occupation of Lithuania by the Soviet army and the creation of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic the first wave of political emigration, which destination point became the territories of East Prussia and German-occupied Polish territory, took place [38]. The situation changed again after the German aggression against the Soviet Union in June 1941, when the Lithuanian community opted for far-reaching cooperation with the new occupant [36]. According to the security apparatus, in this period, anti-Soviet and nationalist activities were carried out by, among others, Jan Pojawis, Jozef Wojna and Jozef Maksymowich, who lived in Poland after the war [39].

The not so good Polish-Lithuanian relations during the World War II initially were not changed after the entry of Soviet troops into Lithuania either. The rising anti-Communist underground was active in the Suwalki area, it preached the slogans of inclusion of the so called Suwalki triangle into the „new Lithuania” [40]. The situation was also complicated by the evacuation agreement, signed by the Government of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic and the PKWN on September 22nd, 1944 r. Polish citizens of Lithuanian nationality [37, 41], inhabiting mainly Bialystok province were subject to deportation. The relocation was voluntary and people wishing to move to the Soviet Union had to, among others, express in writing or verbally their willingness to resettle. The attitude of the Lithuanians to the evacuation was reluctant, for example, in May of 1945, in the Krasnowo commune, none of the 77

families gave their consent to leave. District authorities pointed to the hostile attitude of the Lithuanians towards the evacuation and towards the Polish population, and the District Settlement Inspector in Suwałki to the formation by the Lithuanian population of armed groups which disorganised the work of the National Office of Repatriation in the field. The situation was also complicated by the matter of the return of a number of Lithuanians who were deported by the Germans in 1941, who were considered as Lithuanian citizens, without the right for settlement in Poland. Despite this, a number of them managed to settle, for example in the commune of Berżniki, where in May and June of 1945 people who came from Lithuania occupied 35 farms [37,42].

The security apparatus has not lost sight of the Lithuanian partisans. In reports and summaries, which were emerging until early fifties, there were information about the meeting which took place in March of 1945, near Olkieniki, between the representatives of the Lithuanian underground and the Polish Home Army, and the commitment to avoid fratricidal fighting and exchange of information about the movements of the Soviets. The consequence of this was, according to the materials of the Provincial Office of Public Security, was the crossing of the border by Lithuanian partisan groups, members of which, according to the security apparatus, were deployed among the local populations in the areas Punska and Krasnow, and who had Polish documents made in order to blend in with the local community [43]. In conclusion, it is worth mentioning, that both the Poles and the Lithuanians in the summer of 1945 fell victims to the operation of „cleansing” of forests which was conducted by the NKVD on both sides of the border. By December of 1946 the Lithuanians were regarded by the Polish anti-Communist underground as a natural ally in the fight against the communist authorities, and the Suwałki region has become a major transit point for correspondence and couriers from Lithuania to the West [37, 43].

Considering only the above examples there is no doubt that World War II changed not only the territorial shape of the Białystok province. Obviously, as result of it within its borders were found parts of the so-called Recovered Territories but also Poland lost cities like Grodno for example. Above all, however, it led to a change in the ethnic and religious nature of these areas, especially physically eliminating the Jewish minority. Changes which were conducted from mid-1944. Changes were also contaminated by a „foreign factor” for most of the inhabitants of the region – communism.

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