

'Aspects of Social Revolt in the Second Republic of Poland in the Great Crisis Years, 1930–5: Determinants, Scale, and Consequences'. A Research Project\*

The research project in question, contributed to by several scholars,<sup>1</sup> kicked off in 2014.

The social unrest occurring in the Polish territory between the late nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth century was until very recently dealt with almost only by Polish and Soviet historiographers whose background was leftwing or leftist, primarily Marxist. In their approach, selected incidents were interpreted in terms of manifestation of class or class-and-ethnic conflict, an expression of the workers' and peasants' rebellion against capitalism, and an effect of the political combat that was waged in Poland in the 1930s between the governing camp and the opposition parties.<sup>2</sup> Marxist historians

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<sup>1</sup> The team has been composed of three academic teachers from Polish universities (the authors of this text), an associate professor at the Lesya Ukrainka Eastern European University in Luck (Dr Olex Razyxrajew), along with younger contributors who are working, at the University of Wrocław [UWr] and the Jagiellonian University [UJ], on their PhD theses on aspects of Poland's twentieth-century history (Piotr Ruciński [UWr], Mariusz Gawlik, Jan Sadkiewicz [UJ]).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jan Borkowski, *Postawa polityczna chłopów polskich w latach 1930–1935* (Warszawa, 1970); Józef Kowalski, *Trudne lata. Problemy rozwoju polskiego ruchu robotniczego 1929–1935* (Warszawa, 1966); Antoni Czubiński (ed.), *Historia polskiego ruchu robotniczego 1918–1939* (Warszawa, 1988).

were practically interested in those instances of social unrest which could be associated with the activities of radical Left parties, such as the Communist Party of Poland [KPP] or the Communist Party of West Ukraine [KPZU]. The spontaneous social disturbances, other than inspired by the communist propaganda, tended to be passed over in silence. Moreover, in relation to the interwar period, Polish research has heretofore extended to the areas of the Second Republic where Poles were ethnically dominant, whereas Soviet historians only focused on the territories dominated by Slavic ethnicities – Byelorussians and Ukrainians.

Our project seeks to remarkably enlarge the concept. It primarily analyses occurrences of social unrest, the reasons behind them, and the short- and long-term consequences occurring during the Great Depression all over the country.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of the project, we have proposed a much broader definition of the incidents that were subject to analysis. Our focus has namely extended to all the instances of social unrest which were deemed illegal by the State administration and in the course of which physical confrontation with representatives of public institutions, such as tax collectors or police officers, occurred. The common denominator for the instances under analysis is violence occurring between a group of citizens and State authorities.

Thus, outside the scope of our focus have been:

- criminal unrest;
- instances of individual terror or sabotage;
- street demonstrations not intervened against by the police;
- the incidents described by us as internal. This means no intervention from law enforcement (the police) occurring or the forces not being a party to the conflict, acting as the arbitrator instead and striving to reinstate order. Included in this category are clashes between workers on strike and strikebreakers, conflicts over proprietorship emerging in the countryside (peasants vs. landowners; natives vs. colonists); political disputes (disturbances of political rallies and internal meetings of party members; and, family unrest (e.g., enforcement-related in rural areas), wherever during police intervention members of the involved individual's family gained no support from unrelated residents;
- lockouts and industrial strikes. If not stretching beyond the factory's area, such conflicts were ones between the employer and the employees, whilst government institutions were not perceived as a party to the dispute.

The query encompassed archival material, the press, accounts, and iconography. Archive and library search was carried out in several dozens Polish central archives where material for the interwar period is kept, as well as in

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<sup>3</sup> For the chronological framework of the economic crisis that affected the Second Republic of Poland, the historiographically typical caesura of the years 1930–5 has been assumed; see, e.g., Zbigniew Landau and Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Gospodarka Polski międzywojennej*, iii: 1930–1935 (Warszawa, 1982).

a few regional archives. The search extended moreover to fourteen foreign institutions in a total of five countries (Belarus, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, Great Britain). As for Poland's eastern neighbour countries, the query was done at the central state archives (Lithuanian Central State Archives, Central State Historical Archives of Ukraine in L'viv, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus), regional state archives (in Belarus and Ukraine), and thematic (Central State Archives of Public Organisations of Ukraine, Russian State Archives of Socio-Political History, Russian State Military Archive). Most of the archival material obtained had been produced by the state apparatus of the Second Republic. Institutions such as general administration and the military are represented most completely, the judiciary and the fiscal apparatus having lesser correspondent items. Among the political trends, material related to communist structures has appeared the most complete. This material is interesting as the movement was subversive, its leaders striving to upkeep and escalate the social ferment, as an introductory phase before the expected political upheaval.

Analysis of the period's press (Polish, Ukrainian, Jewish, and Byelorussian) has importantly and valuably complemented the archival query, enabling a fairly broad reconstruction of the stances assumed by the time's major political currents and ethnic groups whose representatives partook in the incidents or riots. On the other hand, it enables to trace the ways in which political leaders attempted to make use of the existing social tensions in reinforcing their social influence. The press will moreover be of use when it comes to capturing the resonance of the occurrences in question in the public opinion, while its role in reconstructing the actual course of the incidents. The latter is due to the censorship exacerbated by the authorities, which affected the value of the content disseminated by the mass media. Relational sources, produced mostly after the Second World War, form a complementary resource. The iconographic query has produced a not-quite-satisfactory result: of the mere dozen-or-so photographs directly connected with the events being described, some are obtained from press stock, with an impact on their quality.

The diverse value of individual source categories does not affect the fact that, in the opinion of the project authors, a material has successfully been gathered which will critically broaden, complement, and verify the existing knowledge on the Second Republic's society. On the one hand, an opportunity has been provided for reconstructing the ideas about the situation of the individual groups of citizens, their aspirations, and attitudes toward the state; on the other, knowledge will be provided on how the local administration functioned and what was the role of the local authorities in fomenting and toning-down of social conflicts.

At the initial stage we developed a form which we used to draw up a table specifying a catalogue of events corresponding with our assumed definition. Our intent was to compile a possibly complete set of incidents having occurred within the entire territory of the Second Republic. The

catalogue was primarily based upon the weekly and monthly reports of the voivodes (province governors) on public security situation. In the course of the query we have managed to gather as much as approx. 96 per cent of the sources thus classed, dating to 1930–5. The detected gaps have been filled, wherever possible, with a relevant reporting documentation, mostly of a police origin, of which the police's daily reports on the state of security have proved the most useful. The catalogue is constructed in a way that enables to determine the following details for the incident in question: locality, district (*powiat*), date the incident occurred, the course of the event (to be briefly described), number of persons involved; method of summary response of the authorities on the spot; number of killed/injured (persons involved and police force members), number of detained/arrested, sentences passed. The last column contains additional remarks, mostly related to the accompanying circumstances. The columns are filled in a fairly complete manner – save for the section meant to detail the verdicts, which we finally decided to quit as in a definite majority of cases they could not be specified. The catalogue will serve as the main aid when it comes to preparing the monograph. Importantly, it already forms the basis for specifying the following categories of social disturbances:

- rebelling against duties, obligations and modernisation processes;
- strikes;
- unrest of the unemployed;
- unrest resulting from political conflict;
- resistance against the order-keeping services (fire brigades, chimney-sweepers, etc.);
- armed actions.

Annexing this catalogue to the monograph will allow us not to reconstruct the course of the events in vast amounts of detail; instead, it will enable analysis of the occurrence of the specified categories of social unrest in terms of: quality (scale and intensity of unrest, by category); statistics (number of persons involved and victims); chronology (distribution in time); and, geography (countrywide, voivodeship-wide, district-wide). Moreover, in the opinion of the authors, the catalogue may serve as a 'lexicon' of instances of social unrest, thus becoming the reference for scholars researching into histories of individual social groups, regional history, or social and economic phenomena, such as joblessness.

The other auxiliary tool that was developed in the course of the query is breakdowns of the participants of the five incidents of significance (in terms of persons involved or reach). The breakdowns are based on the files of interrogations carried out as part of the investigation procedure. Unfortunately, due to no universal interrogation form present in place, the collected pieces of information are not always mutually coincident, which prevented constructing a uniform table. In all the cases, however, information has been acquired on

the sex, age, ethnicity and religion, marital status, education, profession, abode, and political membership. For occurrences in rural areas, the size of the farm possessed, and for demonstrations with active participation of the jobless, the recorded unemployment period were taken into account as well. A 'Remarks/comments' column was included in the breakdowns, with information inserted on the participants' actual role in the incident(s) or their previous criminal record. The breakdowns vary by number of people concerned (thirty to two-hundred-odd names).

The aforementioned tables, meant to be annexed to the monograph, will help us create collective portraits of individuals involved in the incidents under discussion. Not only the very possibility of describing in such terms the specified groups of those involved seems interesting: it might prove valuable to juxtapose them against one another and compare them in the generational, ethnic, or geographic context. Also, determination of their family affiliations might produce interesting results. A dense network of kinships characteristic of rural communities in the eastern borderlines of the Second Republic facilitated and, certainly, accelerated the dissemination of anti-state canvassing or winning new members to partake in subversive or revolutionary actions.

Once accepted for printing, the column specifying personal names will be deleted. We have taken into account the fact that a number of instances of unrest occurred in territories not quite affected by the migrations of people after the Second World War, with the result that the communities living there today are closely associated with the participants of the incidents. This, in our opinion, supplies another argument in support of leaving those mentioned in the said column anonymous.

The project is meant to produce, as a final effect, a two-volume publication consisting of the monograph and a collection of edited sources, containing archival documents. The publication is scheduled in 2019. The monograph's structure will be problem-oriented. Four chapters are envisioned, the first to describe the determinants of the social commotion in the Second Republic; discussed will be the social, political and economic factors which, in the author's opinion, formed the essential background of the events. The first mentioned category encompasses demographic issues, nationality questions in the context of state loyalty of individual ethnic groups, and the problem of civilisational advancement of individual regions of the country, with a special focus of how this latter aspect translated into political context (as a broad concept). Reflection on a variety of disintegration phenomena appearing in the interwar Polish society and manifesting themselves in, in *inter alia*, conflicts inside social groups, will be focused on separately.

Among the political contexts, the processes of exacerbating the internal policies by the ruling camp on the verge of the 1930s decade will be deemed crucial, along with the condition of the state apparatus, and the landscape of social organisations and the evolution of their situation on the local level.

Another essential phenomenon was the radicalisation of the communist movement, which occurred around 1930. The economic factors, being key to the origin of the social unrest, were connected with the course of the Great Depression in the Second Republic. The deepness of the breakdown was primarily manifested by a considerable reduction in the general consumer's purchasing power, which was caused by decreased income, the structure of the fiscal system, and the rocketing unemployment.

Chapter two is to deal with the incidents as such. Our intent is to reconstruct the course and dynamics, scale, geographical reach of the unrests, number of their participants and victims. Taken into account will be, among other aspects, the motivations driving those involved, ways of their mobilisation, popularity of unrests within individual communities. Emanations of mythical thinking, revealed on the occasion of the incidents, are an interesting issue. In a few cases, the hearsay that the state authorities planned to reinstate serfdom catalysed a social eruption among rural residents. Chapter 2 will also discuss the involvement of women, the stance of the Catholic and Orthodox clergy, and the interactions between local representatives of various political milieus. Analysis of 'collective portraits' of the participants of a few incidents we have found to have been of key importance will form a separate chapter, to be compiled based on the aforementioned breakdowns of persons suspected of participation in the riots.

The third chapter will discuss the response from state institutions to the events occurring. General administration will be of interest to us in the first place; hence, we will ask about the ways in which its members could recognise potential threats. A closer look will also be taken at the measures they used in order to alleviate social disturbances. The functioning of the fiscal and local-government administration will be dealt with separately, as will the officials' responsibility for escalation of tensions appearing within the society. A number of riots propelled by the jobless were caused by local authorities failing to keep the dates announced for disbursement of social benefits. The police was the key formation in service of the authorities. Reconstructed is, therefore, not only the array of attitudes assumed by police officers in the course of riots or incidents but also the formation's image as perceived by the society the regional aspect. The eastern borderland of the Second Republic, where Ukrainians and Byelorussians were the two largest ethnic groups, serves as a case in point. Being part of Polish social and political elite, policemen usually had a weak contact with the local people, which seemingly contributed to the brutalisation of measures applied by functionaries when suppressing the unrests, apart from the prevalent social and ethnic conflict. The army had a different function in restoring order: soldiers were mainly used by the authorities to isolate the area where riots were taking place; combats involving armed action were exceptional in this respect. A role of importance in pacifying the sentiments was performed by the justice apparatus: here, our

focus will be to attempt to reconstruct the conditions of judgment, application of summary procedure, as well as conflicts that occurred in the context of the unrests between the judicature and the combined administration. We will try to answer the question whether the nationality or political affiliation of the accused person (incl. his/her connections with the communist movement) actually affected the sentences passed. A similar question will be posed in regard of the place of jurisdiction.

The fourth, and last, section will present the echoes and consequences of the radical manifestations of social dissatisfaction in the former half of the 1930s. It will be critical to determine in what ways the state apparatus absorbed the experiences occurring; and, whether summary action or implementation of a systemic change was the case. The chapter in question will discuss the positions assumed by the main political currents of the time and by the broadly understood public opinion. Due to the particular role of the communist movement at the time, a separate section will deal with the consequences implied for it by the wave of social rebellion. This refers to the fieldwork pragmatics as well as to the theoretical assumptions of the communists' programme. A separate subchapter will take account of the differences that appeared after the outbreak of the Second World War. Of importance in this respect is the interest taken by the Polish Government in Exile in the occurrences happening, and the post-war repressive measures applied by the communist authorities with respect to public servants in service before 1939, who were involved in suppressing the unrests in the first half of the 1930s. The forms of memory of the social rebellion in the Great Depression years, crucially shaped by the communist rule circumstances, will be presented.

The collection of sources to be published as a separate volume will primarily contain records-based archival material. The underlying assumption is to edit previously unpublished documents relating to all the types of unrest concerned (as far as possible). Sources kept at institutions outside Poland will be largely represented. The volume will be structured according to chronology.

Scholarly articles and editions of individual documents are being produced as part of the project; so far, two such texts have been issued.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Петр Цихорацкий, 'Лидеры Коммунистической партии Польши о самых острых социальных выступлениях в Польше периода Великого кризиса (в свете советских публикаций)', *Российско-польский исторический альманах*, viii (2016), 80–5; Joanna Dufurat and Piotr Cichoracki, 'U progu społecznego buntu? Wypadki w powiecie kobryńskim latem 1933 r.', *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne*, xlvi (2017), 167–81.