

Russians in Polesie, 1919-1932: An “official” portrait of the community*

Introduction:

A report of Waclaw Kostek-Biernacki, the governor (*wojewoda*) of Polesie, one of the regions of the so-called *Kresy* (Polish borderlands), dated on April 27, 1933 is entitled “The Russian influence in Polesie: demography and a general character of the community”.¹ This document is located in the State Archive in Lublin in a collection of Voivodship Office, 1919-1939 (*Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie, Urząd Wojewódzki Lubelski*).

The aforementioned report, with a label – “secret document” – is not an objective source of information and is not free of some Russo-phobia. The attitudes of Kostek-Biernacki and the voivodship’s authority towards Russians are strongly reflected in the report. Nevertheless, despite biased evaluations of some events, facts and persons, the report provides us with vital and detailed information on the life of Russians in Polesie. Kostek-Biernacki writes about the Polish policy towards Russians in Poland in general and Russians in Polesie in particular. He mentions the problem of multiethnic relations in the voivodship, comments on the economic position of the Russian community, its political and cultural activity and signalizes relationships between Russians and the Orthodox Church. Many words are devoted to the attitudes of Russians towards the Polish State.

In this paper I try to analyze and evaluate this report. I also briefly describe the literature on the subject in the Polish and western historiography and the resource base for research on the Russian minority in inter-war Poland. I put some methodological questions, and point out some characteristics of and problems shared by this community.

* The article is based on a paper delivered at the conference „Population Displacement, State Building and Social Identity in the Lands of the Former Russian Empire, 1918-1930” in December 2001 at the University of Manchester, UK.

¹ W. Kostek-Biernacki, „Wpływy rosyjskie na Polesiu – liczebność, rozmieszczenie i charakterystyka ogólna – referat wojewody poleskiego, 1933 r.” (hereafter Kostek-Biernacki), *Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie* (hereafter APL) *Urząd Wojewódzki Lubelski, Wydział Społeczno-Polityczny 1919-1939* (hereafter UWL), 414 p. 1-45. See also: A. Garlicki, *Przewrót majowy*, Warszawa 1987, p. 101.

Historiography and primary sources:

Not much research has been done on the Russian minority in Poland. Paradoxically, the Czechs or Karaites, the minorities much less numerous than Russians, have been studied more extensively. In the majority of works on the so called Second Republic (*II Rzeczypospolita*) and its inhabitants, Russians are often either omitted, or treated as a homogenous community. However, we must emphasize the distinction between Russian emigrants and people who lived in Poland or rather in the Polish lands before 1914.² After the war, the majority of them were able to obtain Polish citizenship without serious obstacles. In this article I call them “local Russians” or “Russian minority”; though I am aware of the fact that these terms are not the best in some cases.³ For example, how should we call the people who had been living in Poland for generations, left the country during the evacuation of the Russian troops in 1915 and then returned after the war? Did they belong to the original minority group or rather to the new group of emigrants? Also some emigrants in the course of time obtained Polish citizenship and started to recognize themselves as a part of the Russian minority in Poland rather than as members of the emigrant community.⁴

In the Polish historiography – if we want to mention the only few more important or wider known works by Józef Buszko, Wojciech Roszkowski, Henryk Zieliński, and Władysław Pobóg-Malinowski, we find the only few sentences, sometimes – pages devoted to Russians, without distinction between emigrants and Polish citizens of Russian origin.⁵ It is characteristic that Jerzy Tomaszewski in his work on the national and religious minorities in inter-war Poland devoted a chapter entitled *The forgotten minorities* to Russians, among other minorities.⁶ We can say the same about thematic works on cultural life, press, education and political life of the Second Republic.⁷ These works, at least which where Russians are mentioned, are incomplete. We have many works on the Polish-Bolshevik conflict and on all events

² W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska w II Rzeczypospolitej. Próba charakterystyki społeczności*, „Sprawy Narodowościowe – Seria Nowa” 1996, vol. 5 part 2, p. 24.

³ See abstract of the doctoral dissertation of Valentina Szwałko, *Diejatielnost russkich organizacji w Polsce po sochranieniju russoj kultury w 1921-1939 gg.*, „Biuletyn Historii Pogranicza” 2005, No. 6, p. 49-59.

⁴ K. Zieliński, *Kwestia obywatelstwa polskiego dla repatriantów, reemigrantów i uchodźców z Rosji w latach 1918-1922. Regulacje prawne a praktyka urzędnicza*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 1983, vol. 15, No. 1-2, p. 33-34.

⁵ J. Buszko, *Historia Polski 1864-1948*, Warszawa 1978; W. Roszkowski, *Historia Polski 1914-1991*, Warszawa 1992; W. Pobóg-Malinowski, *Najnowsza historia polityczna Polski*, t. II, London 1967; H. Zieliński, *Historia Polski 1914-1939*, Wrocław 1983. See also: K. Zieliński, *Population Displacement and Citizenship in Poland, 1918-1924* in: *Homelands. War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia 1918-1924*, ed. N. Baron, P. Gatrell, London 2004, p. 98-118.

⁶ J. Tomaszewski, *Rzeczypospolita wielu narodów*, Warszawa 1985. See also: Stanisławski, p. 24-25.

⁷ A. Paczkowski, *Historia prasy polskiej w II RP*, Warszawa 1972.

related to the War of 1920, including attempts at creating anti-Bolshevik forces in Poland and the problem of Russian prisoners of war. Here we should mention works by Adolf Juzwenko, Zbigniew Karpus, Wojciech Materski and a book by Janusz Szczepański on the attitudes of the Polish society towards the War of 1920.⁸ In one of the textbooks on the national minorities in Poland, the subject of the Russian minority is addressed, but this textbook ending in the 1990s and treats only the highpoints.⁹ There are just a few articles on the cultural activity of Russians in Warsaw and few comments on poems and prose written by Russian emigrants in the inter-war Poland. What is interesting, Wojciech Stanisławski, one of the very few researchers of Russian minority writes that even in the post-war Polish novel, so interested in Kresy, a Russian is a very rare phenomenon among the inhabitants of this "mythical" region.¹⁰

Following Stanisławski, we automatically ask ourselves why is so little research devoted to this minority? Of course, if we are talking about the communist period, we have to take into consideration the censorship – dealing with the "White Russians" was not "politically correct". In addition, the lack of archival material was a significant obstacle in the research on the subject. Nevertheless, did it justify the situation? Perhaps there is an a priori assumption that the Russian population is not an interesting or valuable subject to be researched?¹¹

There are plenty of books and articles on Russian emigration after the October Revolution in the western historiography, for example works by Marc Raeff, R. C. Williams and G. Struve (the latter book is in Russian). However, these authors only mentioned a Polish part of this world community.¹² Of course, before the collapse of the Soviet Empire there had been no significant works on the subject in historiography and this gap has not yet been filled. It is worth mentioning that Valentina Szwa-jko is an author of the doctoral dissertation on the cultural activity of the Russian

⁸ A. Juzwenko, *Polska a „biała” Rosja*, Wrocław 1973; Z. Karpus, *Armia rosyjska gen. Bredowa w Polsce*, „Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici” 1986, No. 167; Z. Karpus, *Jeńcy i internowani rosyjscy i ukraińscy w Polsce*, Toruń 1991; W. Materski, *Pobocza dyplomacji. Wymiana więźniów politycznych pomiędzy II Rzeczpospolitą a Sowietami w okresie międzywojennym*, Warszawa 2002; idem, *Na widencie. II Rzeczpospolita wobec Sowietów 1918-1943*, Warszawa 2005; J. Szczepański, *Spółczesność polskie w walce z najazdem bolszewickim 1920 roku*, Warszawa-Pułtusk 2000. This last book is reviewed by K. Zieliński in: „Ab Imperio. Theory and History of Nationalities and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Realm” 2000, No. 2, p. 313-317. See also conference proceedings: *Polska i Ukraina. Sojusz 1920 roku i jego następstwa*, ed. by Z. Karpus, W. Rezmer, E. Wiszka, Toruń 1997.

⁹ H. Chałupczak, T. Browarek, *Mniejszości narodowe w Polsce 1918-1995*, Lublin 1998.

¹⁰ W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska*, p. 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹² Stanisławski mentioned some of these works: M. Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, New York 1983; R. C. Williams, *Culture in exile. Russian Emigrés in Germany, 1881-1941*, New Haven 1986; G. Struve, *Russkaja literatura w izgnanii*, New York 1956. See also: A. G. Mazour, *Modern Russian Historiography*, Princeton – New York – London – Toronto 1958. and interesting article by Theodore Weeks on the situation in the western provinces of the Russian empire before the First World War: T. R. Weeks, *Defining Us and Them: Poles and Russians in the „Western Provinces”, 1863-1914*, „Slavic Review” 1994, vol. 53, No. 1.

organizations in Poland in 1921-1939, but she focused on the Russian clusters in the main cities, including Brest Litovsk (Brześć Litewski).¹³

The database on the subject of the Russians emigrants in Poland is not large. We can find some material in the Archive of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych) in Warsaw; among others the records of the Russian Committee in Poland (records were microfilmed during the communist period and now we can find it in the Russian archives, too). Some materials on the Orthodox Church and the education system in Poland can be found in the records of the Ministry of Religions and Education. There are some other information in a collection of the Ministry of Social Welfare. Some documents on the Russian minority in Poland, its political activity in particular and Russian emigration can be found in records of the Ministry of Interior Affairs and the Foreign Ministry and in records of the Polish embassies and consulates in the West. Information on the War of 1920, Russian troops organized by the Polish military authorities and Russian POWs can be found also in the Central Military Archive in Warsaw (*Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe*) and some Polish archives abroad, e.g. the Piłsudski Institute in New York. However, the mentioned records give only fragmentary information and are not sufficient to draw a historical or sociological portrait of the Russian population in the inter-war Poland. The archival base can be supplemented by as many as 200 titles of newspapers and brochures published by Russians, but such materials are scattered and of uncertain value. Apart from the provincial Polish archives, like the State Archive in Lublin, the Russian, Belarussian and maybe Ukrainian archives may contain some materials on the subject.

Because of the fragmentary nature and lack of cohesion within local archival material, in some cases, I sought information concerning the Russian minority in other parts of the country. I also used contemporary press to verify or supplement the report. Here I should mention a book by J. Tomaszewski on Polesie during the inter-war period, published in the 1960s, but the author deals mainly with the economic situation of this province and material condition of its inhabitants.¹⁴

Why Polesie? It seems to that all events and emotions shared by the Russian community in Poland were reflected in the situation of Russians in this province. The chronological scope I apply is driven not only by the fact that Kostek-Biernacki ended his report on the first months of 1933, but also by the fact that political and social activity of Russians in Polesie after the period of 1930-1932 significantly decreased.

¹³ V. Sz wajko, *Diejatalonost russkich organizacii*, p. 49-59.

¹⁴ J. Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia 1921-1939. Zarys stosunków społeczno-ekonomicznych*, Warszawa 1963.

Russian minority and emigrants:

As I have mentioned above, there are generally no distinctions between minority and emigrants in the Polish historiography. Hence, before we begin our discussion about Russians in Polesie, let us consider what both groups had in common and what distinctions there were between them (apart from the obvious one that, in general, the minority lived in the Polish lands of the tsarist empire before the war, while emigrants came to Poland during the Bolshevik regime).

Surely, such things as language, traditional culture, often religion, and – usually – the attitudes towards the Bolshevik regime were more or less the same. The emigrant press co-operated with minority newspapers, and the minority press dealt with issues of the emigrants as well. Sometimes the same people wrote for both an emigrant journal and for a minority newspaper. Representatives of both groups met each other at church, school and at the famous Russian balls, sometimes in town councils, business, political or charity organizations. The tsarist policy towards Poles before the war and “triumphant behavior” of the latter caused problems for both Russian-speaking groups.¹⁵ But there were differences: the most visible were a place of residence (newcomers usually settled in cities and bigger towns) and the legal status. The “minority” Russians had Polish citizenship, but some emigrants obtained the right for permanent residence in Poland, even citizenship. Some of them, for example Boris Savinkov, a leader of the Russian emigration in Poland, wanted to bring both nations closer to each other.¹⁶ On the other hand, many Polish citizens of Russian nationality, those “minority” Russians considered themselves citizens of Poland only officially.

There were differences in political sympathies and attitudes towards the Church etc. However, the key difference between both groups is mirrored in a Russian sentence: *Ja iz radnoj ziemi nie ujeżdzał, eto ona ot mienja ujechala*.¹⁷ The majority of the Russians in Polesie was the population that had not gone to Poland. They stayed where they were (apart from temporary resettlements during the war years) but found that the border moved instead. Nevertheless, a few Russian emigrants and refugees with a significant element of intelligentsia were very active. How did the Polish authorities see the Russians from Polesie? This article is an attempt to answer the question.

¹⁵ W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska*, p. 28.

¹⁶ See for example: A. S. Kowalczyk, *Sawinkow*, Warszawa 1990. Material on Boris Savinkov work in Poland see e.g.: Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie (hereafter AAN) Komitet Rosyjski w Polsce (1919-1939) 9 nnp.; AAN Tymczasowa Rada Stanu (1916-1918) 68 p. 2-3; J. Korbel, *Poland between East and West. Soviet and German Diplomacy toward Poland, 1919-1933*, Princeton 1963, p. 106.

¹⁷ W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska*, p. 27.

Statistics:

In 1931, the total Polesie population was 1 131 939. The mother tongue was used as a criterion of the national identity in the census from that year. The statistics showed the following: Polish language claimed 14.5%, Ukrainian 4.8%, Belarussian 6.7%, Yiddish (Jewish) and Hebrew 10.0%, a “local” language – 62.4% and Russian 1.4%. The remaining population declared to speak German, Czech and other languages.¹⁸ The statistics made no distinction between Russian emigrants and Russian minority. J. H. Simpson, in his *Report of a Survey* from 1939, submitted some data but it seemed to be impossible to establish the exact numbers of both groups.¹⁹ Russians in Poland lived mainly in the eastern voivodships: Vilna (3,4%), Białystok (2,1%), Polesie (1,4%) and Wołyńia (1,1%).

In the case of Polesie, the percentage of Russians increased since 1921: from 0.5% (5536) to 1.0% (11 838) in 1928 and to 1.4% in 1931 (13 713). When the total number of inhabitants of Polesie during 1921-1928 increased by about 10% (from 1 070 929 to 1 179 310), the number of Russians doubled. During the period of 1921-1931 this number increased three fold, and the fact alarmed the governor of Polesie.²⁰ The birth rate was not the only reason behind this increase. I also did not find any information about some large group of Russian emigrants or refugees settling in this province. In addition, the Polish authority forced Russians to settle in the western voivodships, in order to keep them dispersed. So, what was the reason for this increase? In 1921, many inhabitants of Polesie (Ukrainians and Belorussians, but also Russians) did not want to reveal their nationality because of the fear of deportation. They just declared themselves to be Polish. Many were not able to define their nationality and the Polish officials registered them as Poles, wanting to emphasize allegedly ethnically Polish character of the province and the whole *Kresy*. A large number of people defined themselves as being Orthodox Poles, while ethnically they were Russians or Ruthenians (Ukrainians and Belorussians). The same concerned Jews and the German settlers, defining themselves to be Poles of Jewish or German origin. Thus, according to the census of 1931 data on the national structure is questioned.²¹ Because nationality was applied as a criterion in 1921 and the mother tongue in 1931, it is

¹⁸ J. Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia...*, p. 24. The results of the Census of 1921 in the whole territory of Poland, see: *Pierwszy powszechny spis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dn. 30 września 1921 roku*, vol. 22, 23, Warszawa 1924.

¹⁹ J. H. Simpson, *The Refugee Problem. Report of a Survey*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1939, p. 63-116, 269-281. See also: N. Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War 1919-1920*, London 1972, p. 32; E. M. Kulischer, *Europe on the Move: War and Population Changes, 1917-1947*, New York 1948, p. 130-131.

²⁰ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 2-3.

²¹ W. Mędrzecki, *Liczebność i rozmieszczenie grup narodowościowych w II Rzeczypospolitej w świetle wyników II Spisu Powszechnego (1931 r.)*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 1983, vol. 15, No. 1-2, p. 233-237.

impossible to compare the results of both censuses. However, in 1931 in the case of Russians, a population with well-grounded national consciousness, this "fear factor" was insignificant. In general, they were not afraid of deportation or repression, and we can treat the results of the census of 1931 as relatively reliable and close to reality in reference to this group. The real declaration, after the birth rate, was the second factor in the increase of the number of Russians in Polesie.

To give a more precise data: Russians in Polesie lived mainly in the areas of Kobryń, Pińsk and Stolin (from 2.0% to 3.0%), and in the major towns of the voivodship, like Kobryń, Pińsk, Brest Litovsk and Dawidgródek (6.0%; 9.1%; 5.6% and 10.4% respectively).²² I would like to add that the group of inhabitants defined themselves as *Poleszuki* or *tutejsi*, which simply meant – "locals" or "people from here", lived in Polesie. Ethnically, this population was the closest to Belarusian people. These people, usually but not always poor and backward peasants were not able to define their nationality or their mother tongue, at least in the categories recognized by the Polish authorities. We can see some similarities in the case of Ruthenians in Galicia: "They belong so much to the land of Galicia and the land to them, that, in ordinary parlance, they are often simply called *Galicjanie* (Galicians), a term which would never be applied without qualification to the Poles or Jews of that country".²³ The language of *tutejsi* was a mixture of Belarusian and Ukrainian with an addition of Polish and Russian components.²⁴ For example, many people regarded themselves as *tutejsi*, half-peasants, half-artisans, lived in Dawidgródek. Kostek-Biernacki stated that, in reality, the number of Russians was much higher, because *gorodczuk* from Dawidgródek, as he called him, should be considered a Russian.²⁵ However, we cannot agree with the governor. That group was an object of indoctrination by Russians and Poles alike. During the first 10-12 years after the Great War, Poles, Russians and Ukrainians attracted and assimilated some part of this population. But in 1931 this group did not consider themselves Russians, although the Russian influences among them were relatively strong.²⁶

Professional and social character:

The majority of Russians in Polesie lived in towns. Coming from intelligentsia and landowners, many worked as doctors, veterinaries, engineers and lawyers. Some had real estates in bigger towns. About 9.5% of all manors in Polesie belonged to

²² Kostek-Biernacki, p. 3.

²³ See: J. Pollock, *Thoughts on the Polish Question*, „The New Europe” 1916, vol. 1, No. 7, p. 243.

²⁴ O. Kolberg, *Dzieła wszystkie: Białoruś – Polesie*, vol. 52, Wrocław – Poznań 1968, p. 61, 63; J. Obrebski, *Dzisiejsi ludzie Polesia*, „Przegląd Socjologiczny” 1936, vol. 4, No. 3-4, p. 416-417; J. Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia...*, p.150.

²⁵ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 3-5.

²⁶ V. Sz wajko, *Diejatalonost russkich organizacji*, p. 52.

Russians.²⁷ There were relatively many members of the Orthodox clergy, military, officials and teachers. However, the officials and teachers often did not work in their profession. We have an example from the other voivodship: in Biała, a town situated about 80 kilometers from Lublin, of 22 teachers of Russian and Ukrainian origin from the former Russian schools, in 1926 only 2 worked in education. The former teachers, when asked why they were not working in their profession, most often answered that the local authorities did not allow them.²⁸ The policy of Polesie authorities was similar; however, because there were few Polish teachers in the *Kresy* voivodships, the Russian teachers and officials could more easily find employment.

There were relatively many Russian officials in Polesie. Some of them had settled in Poland during the tsarist rule. Others escaped from Russia after 1917. The government was forced to employ Russians, even in the state administration because lack of Poles willing to move and work in *Kresy*. The new state lacked experienced officials and professionals. Despite an official political line, during the years 1921-1922 the number of Russians in Polesie administration, railway directory, judicature, department of taxation, and such institution as insurance companies or veterinary service, was higher than of Poles. However, the number of Russians was reduced in the following years.²⁹ The authorities estimated that the Russian intelligentsia concentrated itself in groups of 40 up to 1000 people in bigger towns, living on their own, and kept themselves apart from Poles, Belorussians and Ukrainians, both politically and socially.³⁰

There were not many Russian artisans, fishermen, retail merchants and farmers in Polesie, but, as we already know, Kostek-Biernacki included many inhabitants of Dawidgródek in the Russian minority. He admitted that ethnically they are no “one hundred percent” or “pure-blood” Russians, but due to religion (there were very few non-Orthodox Russians) and the long tsarist rule, they were partially assimilated. He added that during the election of 1928, many “local people” from the voting center Pińsk – Łuniniec – Stolin – Sarny, voted for the Russian list. Governor Kostek-Biernacki even in the economic expansion of Dawidgródek *gorodczuki* (according to non-official statistics counting on 5780), buying up the lands around the town and neighboring villages, noticed the “Russian expansion” and a danger for the Polish “state of possession”.³¹

On the other hand, the cultural influence of Russians on the local population was seen not only among Slavs. Also the Jewish intelligentsia, despite using Polish in everyday life, willingly attended concerts and theatrical performances organized

²⁷ J. Tomaszewski, *Z dziejów Polesia...*, p. 34.

²⁸ APL UWL WSP 434 pp.10-63, „Nauczycielstwo narodowości rosyjskiej. Informacje i opinie, 1926 r.” Similar situation had taken place in Kielce voievodship. See e.g. Archiwum Państwowe w Kielcach, Komenda Powiatowa Policji Państwowej w Kielcach, 25, p. 9.

²⁹ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 8-9.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 6-7.

³¹ Ibid., p. 3-4.

by Russians.³² However, many Jews in Polesie were the so-called Litvaks, which Kostek-Biernacki did not mention, and it was expected that the Russian culture would be more popular among them.³³

In general, taking into consideration the whole territory of this one of the poorest voivodships in the inter-war Poland, the situation of Russians in Polesie was good. It concerned not only the intelligentsia milieu, but also people from the lower middle class and farmers. With the exception of Poles who in Polesie were higher officials, landlords and military settlers, this not-numerous minority differed from other ethnic and national groups by their status, possessions, education and, as we will see, social and cultural activity.

Political topography:

Russians in Polesie had a few more important organizations; however, they had never established a strictly political party and created rather occasional groups of supporters and sympathizers.

The most conservative group was the Orthodox clergy. To quote Kostek-Biernacki, they were people "who had not forgotten anything, and have learned nothing". The cult of tsar was deeply ingrained in the clergy and they believed in the "triumphal return of the Romanov family". In the late 1920s, some priests prayed for the tsarist family and restoration of the "Holy Russia". According to the governor, the intellectual level of the clergy was not too high, but they identify the term "Orthodox" with the "Russian" and it could be dangerous for the state and its interests.³⁴

Despite the conservatism of the clergy, the officials were the most dangerous group. In the past, the Russian official – *czynownik* was one of the most important and effective pillars of the tsarist regime. What is more, many Russians worked in the Polish administration and public service. This situation was systematically changed, but even in the late 1930s, some Russians still worked in the Polesie administration. The Russian presence there was particularly dangerous because some officials used Russian in contacts with the local non-Polish population. It could attract the locals to the Russian nationality.³⁵ In fact, there were very few cases of some anti-Polish activity of the Russian officials in Polesie. Nobody wanted to lose a good job especially that the new Poland embarked on the systematic "nationalization" of the state, its apparatus, public services and military forces³⁶.

³² Ibid., p. 10.

³³ See for example: F. Guesnet, „Litwacy” i „Ostjuden” (*Żydzi ze Wschodu*). *Migracja i stereotypy* in: *Tematy żydowskie*, ed. E. Traba, R. Traba, Olsztyn 1999, p. 73-80; Haumann H., *Geschichte der Ostjuden*, München 1998, p. 132-134, 226-228.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁶ R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge 1997, p. 84-103.

There were a few groups of monarchists, consisting mainly of former military emigrants and supported by the local Russian community. The Polish authorities did not interfere with them, although these groups were illegal. Monarchists in Polesie, like in other parts of the country, co-operated with similar groups in France and SHS (Yugoslavia), organizing a special jubilee and meetings from time to time. The movement was relatively popular among the high school youth, but the authority did not treat it seriously. Shortly after the Russian National Union appeared in this province, monarchists ceased their activity and some of them joined a new organization. What caused an alarm among Poles was anti-Bolshevik agitation and brochures, which appeared in the late 1920's. The authors of these brochures were members of a secret paramilitary organization. The police took a preventive action; the Polish authorities did not want to worsen the tense Polish-Soviet relationships and were afraid of a Bolshevik provocation.³⁷

There is an interesting story about the so-called Free Cossacks' Union established in Pińsk in 1932. A year before a man named Bek-Babiejew had appeared in Pińsk and introduced himself as an ataman of the Kuban Cossacks. He managed to recruit a few people among the emigrants in Pińsk and won the confidence of the local Russian community. The union obtained 2500 Swiss francs from Gallati, the Commissar of the League of Nations for the Russian Emigrants in Poland. The life of this organization was short – the self-appointed ataman and a few members of the board embezzled the money: Bek-Babiejew managed to escape from Polesie and found some defenders in Warsaw, and the Cossacks' *stanica* (watchtower) in Pińsk was resolved. After this affair Kostek-Biernacki stated that the "fate of *stanica* showed clearly that the Russian community in Polesie joined and supported very willingly, and sometimes even naively, every nationalist movement."³⁸

The Russian National Union was legalized in Poland in March 1926. The first local branch of the organization was established in Brest Litovsk in April in the same year under the direction of Dr. Paweł Korol. A new organization, which quickly became the center of social and cultural life of Russian intelligentsia in Brest and its vicinity, found financial and organizational support in the Russian Charity Society. In a short time, the Union recruited about 5000 members and sympathizers. This recruitment action was the first step in the election campaign of 1928. Then they founded Russian libraries in other towns and villages.³⁹ In 1927, the union started the election campaign. In this campaign, the Russian National Union raised the questions of agrarian reform and taxation and also demanded Russian schools and the introduction of Russian language in all public schools in *Kresy* and state protection of the Orthodox Church. They added the last demand because the Orthodox Church's

³⁷ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 11-13. In his newest book on the Russian Civil War Oleg Budnitsky mentioned colonel M. W. Bek serving in the Denikin army. O. W. Budnitsky, *Rosyjskije Jewrei miezdu krasnymi i bielymi*, Moskwa 2006, p. 333, 335.

³⁸ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 2-3.

³⁹ W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska*, p. 38-39.

buildings had been retaken by the Roman and Greek Catholics. In fact, the tsarist regime had confiscated many of these buildings and given them to the Orthodox Church in the late 19th century.⁴⁰

The Orthodox Church supported this campaign, but it turned out that the National Union attracted the lower middle class rather than the peasants. The later were under the influence of communists, socialists and the peasants' parties and organizations. There were some clashes between Russian candidates to the Polish Parliament, but Russians managed to obtain one mandate in the voting center No. 59 (Brest and Kobryń) and the majority of votes in the voting center No. 60 (Pińsk and Łuniniec). Considering the relatively small number of Russians in Polesie, it was a success.⁴¹ This success was commented on in the Polish and Russian press. Because of the election results, all Russian minority organizations in Poland organized their first meeting in Brest. One of the most influential Russians in Poland, Baron Steingel, on a wave of general excitement stated that the number of Russians in Poland should be estimated at one million people. The election ordinance in 1931 favored the governmental candidates, and some Russians were represented in the pro-governmental BBWR block (Non-Party Block for Co-operation with the Government).⁴²

On the other hand, after the election there appeared differences between the Russian National Union and the Union of the Russian Minority in Poland (this second organization was popular in Warsaw and big cities). The Russian National Union stated that both Ukrainians and Belorussians should be considered as the components of a single Russian nation, while the Union of the Russian Minority stated that Russian nation consists of people who consciously declared themselves to be ethnically Russians. The Orthodox Church was deeply involved in this discussion.⁴³ The *trojdiinstwo* idea (assuming that the Russians, Belarussians and Ukrainians stated the one Russian nation) had very many supporters among the local Russian minority. There was another incident in 1929-1930. The members of the Russian National Union tried to establish a special fund for the protection of the Orthodox Church.⁴⁴ However, they had little success. Polesie was a very poor region and some Russians did not want to act against the Polish Catholics. Also many of them did not recognize the autonomy of the Orthodox Church in Poland. In 1922, under the pressure of the Polish authorities, the Orthodox Church broke away from Russia, but many Russians recognized the Moscow Metropolitan as the head of the entire Orthodox Church.

⁴⁰ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 14-16. See also J. Lewandowski, *Na pograniczu. Polityka władz państwowych wobec unitów Podlasia i Chełmszczyzny 1772-1875*, Lublin 1996, p. 113-115.

⁴¹ Kostek-Biernacki, p.18; W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska*, p. 37.

⁴² Kostek-Biernacki, p. 18.

⁴³ „Nowoje Wriemja” 1932, No. 257. See also: M. Kowalewskyj, *Spór narodowościowy w Cerkwi Prawosławnej w Polsce*, „Sprawy Narodowościowe” 1928, vol. 2, No. 3, p. 259-269.

⁴⁴ See e. g.: J. Hrycak, *Historia Ukrainy 1772-1999. Narodziny nowoczesnego narodu*, Lublin 2000, p. 190-191; W. Mich, *Obcy w polskim domu. Nacjonalistyczne koncepcje rozwiązania problemu mniejszości narodowych 1918-1939*, Lublin 1994, p. 100-101.

After the elections of 1928 and 1931, the activity of Russians decreased. An economic crisis, which peaked in Poland during the period of 1930-1935, forced people to deal with material conditions rather than religious and political matters. The political regime in Poland in the 1930s did not favor any political activity. In addition, in comparison with the rest of the population, the Russian community in Polesie was relatively wealthy and conservative, and there was little chance for successful left-wing agitation among the Russians. It seems to me that at least in the case of Polesie, not many Russian emigrants supporting the idea of the restoration of the "Great Russia" and counting on an anti-Bolshevik uprising in the USSR stopped believing in realization of their dreams. The people, who did not accept the Polish presence in Polesie, had just managed to adapt to the new social and political reality. Willy-nilly, they reconciled to the fact that their *radnaja ziemia*, their homeland, is now within the Polish borders.

Press:

Apart from some occasional publications, the Russians in Polesie, had only a few periodicals during the inter-war period. However, Russian newspapers such as "Nasza Żizn" and "Nowoje Wriemja", which were published in Warsaw and Vilna,, had many readers in Polesie.⁴⁵

One of the most popular local periodicals, a weekly "Pod Niebom Polesja", was edited in Pińsk and printed in Vilna. Its initiator and chief editor was Paweł Chimiuk. Although they declared loyalty to the Polish State, the editors supported the idea of Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian *trojedinstwo*. The weekly was popular among the monarchists; the favorite topic was the retaking of the Orthodox Church buildings by the Catholics. They co-operated with the Russian press in Warsaw. However, the financial situation of this newspaper was bad. In January 1932, the editors changed it into a monthly, but after two months "Pod Niebom Polesja" was suspended.

"Pinskij Gołos", founded in 1932, was a semi-official organ of the Orthodox clergy in Polesie. The political line of this weekly was clear. After a few strongly anti-Catholic articles were published, all issues were confiscated and the voivodship authorities suspended the weekly. After ministerial intervention from Warsaw, a new "Pinskij Gołos" appeared, but after a few months the newspaper collapsed. Among its editors were Chemicz, Korotoszewski and Bereznicki.

The Evangelical Christians and Baptist Union issued the non-political journal "Christianskij Sojuz". Strictly religious in character, the journal showed no remarks towards politics or national questions. The chief editor was Konstanty Jakowliuk Jaroszewicz. The economic-oriented "Koooperativnyj Žurnal" was published in Brest Litovsk in 1927.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ V. Szwajko, *Diejatalonost russkich organizacji*, p. 55.

⁴⁶ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 23-25, 47; W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska*, p. 47.

The Polish parties and organizations attempted to attract some part of the Polesie population through distribution of their own press in Russian. During the years 1921-1922, Adolf Bon, a delegate to the Polish Parliament from the leftist Polish Peasant Party – Liberation (PSL "Wyzwolenie"), published a weekly "Dolia" in Brest. In 1927, he published a Russian bi-weekly entitled "Zoria" (his party was liquidated in the same year). The Polish Socialist Party member Stanisław Wolicki, also a delegate to the Polish Parliament, published a weekly "Krasnaja Znamia".⁴⁷ The Borderland Watch (*Straż Kresowa*), which was one of the first Polish organizations established in protest against the Brest Treaty, and then operating in *Kresy* in order to attract the non-Polish population to the Polish State, also published propaganda periodicals in Russian and other languages in the 1920s.⁴⁸ Apart from these, the Polish authorities published and distributed free political and ideological brochures among the peasants. The results of such actions were very poor. At the beginning the Russian press accused Poles of applying the "cheating propaganda methods", but then they did not oppose them. The influence of these titles on the population was nil. Russians were correct in saying that the only effect of this action was a free promotion of the Russian language: an average inhabitant of distant Polesie, often an illiterate peasant, saw that "even Poles and the authority used the Russian language".⁴⁹

Charity, culture and education:

Many cultural and educational initiatives were closely associated with charity and welfare organizations. The most important of them was the Russian Charity Society, established by Paweł Korol in Brest in 1921. The so-called Parents' Committee had functioned there before, and its members had managed to found elementary schools and high schools. It turned out soon that the financial situation of these schools was bad, and, in order to help them, Korol and others established the above-mentioned society. Thanks to the agitation among the local Russians, some of them joined the society and many agreed to cover some part of the school expenses. Additional sources of income were public lectures, courses, concerts and theatrical performances organized by the Charity Society. Its popularity grew quickly. The new branches appeared after 1924. The most numerous were the branches in Pińsk, Kamień Koszyrski and Łuniniec where, as in Brest, the Society tried to found Russian schools.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 22. See also: E. Jeliński, *Polityka Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej wobec mniejszości narodowych w latach 1918-1939*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 1983, vol. 15, No. 1-2, p. 83-87.

⁴⁸ N. Zielińska, *Towarzystwo Straży Kresowej (1918-1927). Rekonesans badawczy*, „Almanach Historyczny” 2000, No. 2, p. 155-156. More about the Straż Kresowa in Zielińska's book: *Towarzystwo Straży Kresowej*, Lublin 2006.

⁴⁹ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; See also: V. Sz wajko, *Diejatalonost russkich organizacij*, p. 52.

The high school (gymnasium) in Brest was co-educational. Soon after a few repatriates from Russia joined the school in 1923/1924, the authorities found pro-communist brochures and anti-Polish pamphlets. The police quickly arrested some of the repatriates, but Russians went into panic. In order to prevent such situations in the future and calm Poles, Aleksey Fiediejew, a teacher with a good reputation with the Polish authorities, was employed as a new head of the school. A few teachers and students were dismissed, and within the next 3 years this school functioned successfully. Fiediejew managed to organize the second Russian library and opened it to the public. He did not tolerate any "nationalist behaviors", but he was soon fired. Andrei Vasiluk became the new headmaster and despite his previous anti-state speeches, the Polish authorities did not intercede. The society and the school together organized literature and drama circles, choirs, concerts, and sport associations, published a periodical (semi-annually) and offered financial support to poorer students. The level of education there was relatively high.⁵¹ In the 1930s, the Polish authorities aimed at liquidating the non-Polish educational organizations, especially primary schools. Although the authorities rarely intervened in case of the Russian schools, the ban on admitting non-Russian students influenced the material condition of these institutions. In addition, in the course of time, many parents decided to send their children to Polish high schools, and indeed, the percentage of Russian students frequenting the Polish high schools grew constantly.⁵² There were some clashes between the board of the Russian Charity Society and the school authorities, and sometimes the Russian delegates to the Parliament had to intervene. The economic crisis of the 1930s also affected this school. But in 1932 its graduates founded the Society of Friends of the Russian High School in Brest and supported this educational institution.⁵³ This was the only Russian high school in Polesie in 1939.

In 1925, a branch of the Russian Charity Society opened a high school in Pińsk. The monarchists had a relatively strong influence on the activity of this society and its school. Also, the Russian and Ukrainian students from Czechoslovakia, who visited their parents during holidays, participated in the activity of the local Russian community. However, probably in 1928 the Polish authorities closed down the school. The reason behind it was the behavior of some students during the school excursion to the neighboring villages. A few drunken students asked the peasants about their nationality and beaten up them when the peasants answered: Polish. After this incident, the activity of the local Russian community diminished, students moved to high schools in the other towns, and the library remained the only center of Russian cultural and social life. Profits from some cultural events organized by this library were sent to the Russian emigrants abroad or to the charity organizations in Brest Litovsk.⁵⁴ The activity of the Russian Youth Union (scouting) was reported only in Pińsk and Brest.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 26-34.

⁵² W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska*, p. 51-52.

⁵³ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 26-34; „Sprawy Narodowościowe” 1932, vol. 6, No. 2-3, p. 676.

⁵⁴ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 34-38.

⁵⁵ Stanisławski, p. 52.

In 1925 in Łuniniec monarchists founded a local branch of the Russian Charity Society in 1925, and managed to obtain a license for opening a high school. This institution did not succeed and was closed down in 1929. The main reason was not only its critical financial condition, but also communist agitation in school. After this affair, the majority of parents stopped sending their children there. After 1929, only some Orthodox priests taught Russian language in Łuniniec semi-secretly.⁵⁶ The Russian Charity Society opened another branch in Kamień Koszyrski in 1928. The Russian community there was small and did not try to establish any Russian educational institutions, but they did open a public library. The activity of this branch manifested itself mainly in the form of political meetings. Because of the anti-Polish agitation of some priests and members of the Russian Charity Society, the Polesie governor, pretending that there was a lack of charity work, closed the branch in October 1930. The leaders of the local Russian community appealed to the Ministry of Interior. Although the decision of the Polesie authorities was suspended, the branch remained closed. The library went out of existence in 1931.⁵⁷

Among the other cultural and social organizations of Russians in Polesie, we should mention the Society of Church Choirs in Brest, the Russian Drama Circle in Dawidgródek, and the Society of Christian Citizens of Pińsk (economical character) and a few private libraries and reading-rooms. According to the governor, these institutions did not involve themselves in politics. However, some of their members and supporters co-operated with political organizations and the Russian Charity Society.⁵⁸

Although not numerous, the Russians in Polesie managed to establish many cultural and educational institutions. In some cases, those institutions became the centers of the cultural and social life of the local non-Russian intelligentsia. Indeed, the Russian officials in Polesie coming from intelligentsia or gentry, belonged to the local elites. Many Poles did not want to work in *Kresy*; especially officials from western and central Poland considered working in the eastern voivodships degrading. As a result the worst Polish officials were sometimes sent to the eastern voivodships, their cultural refinement often leaving much to be desired. Of course, this opinion did not concern the all Polish officials and the native Poles in Polesie. However, there was a time when even among Poles speaking Russian or attending an annual Russian ball was a kind of fashion and prestige.

Conclusions:

In conclusion, we can say that the Russians in Polesie were a relatively wealthy, well-organized and solid group, despite some clashes among the representatives of

⁵⁶ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 38-40.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 40-42.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 42-48.

different political options. Charity and policy motivated many cultural and educational undertakings, and new elites and the leaders of the community rose from the initiators of charity or political organizations.⁵⁹ There is no doubt that emigrants and refugees from Russia played a very important role in the life and activities of the Russian community. In comparison to the newcomers, the “local” Russians activity was rather poor. They also rarely involved themselves in any nationalist undertakings. Stanisławski states that “emigration was more interested in co-operation with the Russian minority than *vice versa*”.⁶⁰

The governor appreciated in his report the solidarity and persistence of the Russian intelligentsia (the lower class was rather passive) and stated that the popularity and influence of the “Russian idea” among the population was significant. He said, what seems to be typical of the Russians in Poland, that “we must not measure their influence through the number of members of some official organizations, because this importance lies in the attitudes of each individual and their popularity among the local population”.⁶¹ According to the report, many Russians had never become reconciled to the Polish independence and Polish presence in the eastern borderlands. Russians looked for political changes in the USSR and wanted to see the region of Polesie within the borders of the “great, homogenous and indivisible Russia”. Some tried to strengthen or awaken the Russian national consciousness in the Orthodox population of Polesie. Well-known for his “iron hand” the governor of Polesie added, that “the Russian element attempting at decentralization is highly dangerous for the Polish State as it, consciously neutralizes its policy of assimilation of the national-passive population of Polesie”.⁶² In fact, there were times that Russians showed their nationalistic prejudices and desires. The question is whether these trends could have been dangerous for the Polish State. The Russian influence on the rest of the population is a matter for discussion. In fact, the Russian culture was popular in some milieus, also in the lower middle class (among inhabitants of Dawidgródek for example) but the peasants, not to mention a small group of Belarusian intelligentsia, preferred to work in their own organizations. The local peasants were more susceptible to socialist and communist agitation than the Russian intelligentsia.

The report is strongly exaggerated. Despite this document, the authority, Kostek-Biernacki himself, did not often intervene in the activity of the Russians in Polesie. I think that neither was the Russian community in Polesie a real danger for the Polish “state of possession”, nor the relationship between the Russians and the authorities as bad as it was presented in this report. From the Polish point of view, the most important thing was that the Russians as a whole did not pose any Bolshevik threat.⁶³ Usually the police knew about their secret organizations, but did not inter-

⁵⁹ V. Szwajko, *Diejatalonost russkich organizacji*, p. 55-59.

⁶⁰ W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska*, p. 41.

⁶¹ Kostek-Biernacki, p. 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶³ APL UWL WSP 1352 p. 81

vene. Almost everywhere (at least in comparison to Jews or Ukrainians), the Polish authorities granted, without much difficulty, licenses to open charity organizations and, in the 1920s, Russian-speaking schools. The Belorussians and Ukrainians could only dream about such liberalism.⁶⁴

It is worth mentioning that the Catholic Church hierarchy in Pińsk and a part of the Polish population felt indignant at the Polish officials and officers, they added – Catholics, attending the Orthodox services during the religious holiday Jordan.⁶⁵ There were times when a Russian and a Pole acted together. Poles came out in support of Bohdan Kowerda after the assassination of the Soviet delegate Wojkow in 1927. Unfortunately, the Russian students in Vilna supported, without exception, their Polish colleagues from the students' nationalist organization associated with the National Democracy in the anti-Semitic excesses at the Vilna University.⁶⁶ Others Russians joined the voices of indignation published in some Polish newspapers. The substantial part of the Polish society, including the officials, participated in the popular "disagreement days" (*dien nieprimitiernosti*) organized by the Russian emigrants. Some Poles appeared on the Days of the Russian Culture. In 1930, at the Pope's initiative, many Catholic churches organized prayers for the brothers and sisters being persecuted in the East.⁶⁷

Therefore, in this context the governor tried rather to justify a fiasco of the Polish policy in the province. Indeed, the Poles have never achieved their goals, i.e. acculturation and assimilation of the non-Polish population in *Kresy*, but even a complete lack of Russians would not change this situation. In the course of time, this relatively liberal policy moved from the programme of "state assimilation", i.e. attracting minorities to Poland to the programme of nationalization of all provinces of the country.⁶⁸ The so-called *endeks* (National Democracy members) strongly supported this second programme and this transformation of the Polish policy towards national and religious minorities became clearly visible after the death of Marshal Piłsudski. However, as we know, this new political line did not succeed.

In general, the Russian community in Polesie, including the emigrants, accepted reality of the new social and political situation, ceased its dream about anti-Bolshevik upheaval in Russia, and became loyal citizens of the Polish State.

⁶⁴ Almost every Jew or Ukrainian returning from Russia became perceived as a potential traitor, saboteur or partisan. See for example: J. Schatz, *The Generation. The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – Oxford 1991, p. 22, 31. See also: R. Pipes, *Jews and the Russian Revolution: A Note*, „Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry” 1996, vol. 9, p. 57.

⁶⁵ „Piński Głos Diecezjalny” 1927, No. 1.

⁶⁶ W. Stanisławski, *Emigracja i mniejszość rosyjska*, p. 45, 53.

⁶⁷ „Sprawy Narodowościowe” 1930, vol. 4, No. 1.

⁶⁸ A. Chojnowski, *Koncepcje polityki narodowościowej rządów polskich w latach 1921-1939*, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk 1979, p. 239. See also articles in: *Mniejszości narodowe w polskiej myśli politycznej XX wieku*, ed. J. Jachymek, Lublin 1992.