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## Belarus in Polish eastern policy during the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1920)

### Introduction

The national consciousness of Byelorussians was not born in opposition to Poles and the traditions of the First Republic, as it was for Lithuanians (Żołądowski, 2003: 104-109). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Russian cultural circle, the terms Belarus, Byelorussians, and Byelorussian language were used to denote a geographic and cultural area (Buczyński, 2010: 11-22; Gordziejew, 2010: 69; Michaluk, 2010: 30-33; 45-48). The Russian administration considered the people in the Belorussian lands to be part of the Russian nation, which had become Lithuanianized or Polonized. Poles identified by the administration as Catholics were considered to be an immigrant population on these lands (Michaluk, 2010: 33-36; Mironowicz, 2007a: 11-12). Orthodox preachers of Belarusian national consciousness believed that together with the Ukrainian, the Belarusian population was part of the Russian nation. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Belarusian Catholics also distanced themselves from the Polish cultural and Lithuanian political circles (Błaszczak, 2017: 23; Michaluk, 2010: 40-45). The Belarusian national movement in the Catholic circle emphasized the national separateness of Belarusians from Poles and Russians and the ethnic separateness of Belarusian lands from Polish, Lithuanian and Russian lands. It demanded the sovereignty of Byelorussian lands in a federated, democratic Russia (Mironowicz, 2007a: 15-16).

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Belarusian political parties, national-cultural organizations and the press were established. A barrier to national development was the lack of Belarusian economic layer and widespread illiteracy (Radzik, 2012: 70; Michaluk, 2010: 104). The Russian government and Russian nationalists were hostile to the Belarusian national movement (Siemakowicz, 1997: 23-25). The autochthonous Poles regarded it as an anti-Polish inspiration of the Russian authorities to russify the local population. They perceived it as a threat to Polish land ownership (Mironowicz, 2007a: 22-23; Żołądowski, 2003: 109). During World War I, the Belarusian national movement developed its activities, especially from August 1915, when Germans entered Belarusian lands. On Russian lands under their occupation, national activity

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developed among Belarusians, Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tatars (Błaszczak, 2017: 40; Piskozub, 1997: 99-102; Darski, 1993: 12). Until the revolution in Russia, the Belarusian national movement was divided over the future of the Belarusian lands. Some were in favour of a sovereign Belarus within Russia (Mironowicz, 2007a: 34), while others were in favour of Lithuanian-Belarusian federation as a renewed Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) (Ponarski, 1999: 194-201; Ponarski, 1998: 56-66)<sup>1</sup> or a union of Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine (Michaluk, 2010: 140-142, 261)<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of this article is to present the position of Polish independence centres towards the national and state aspirations of the Belarusian population and Polish concepts of organizing the areas of the former First Republic during the struggle for the eastern borders of the Polish state.

### **Belarusian lands between Poland, Lithuania and Soviet Russia**

After the February Revolution in Russia in 1917, Belarusian political, social and cultural organizations resumed their activities. The Belarusian Socialist Gromada (BSH, founded in 1903) was in favour of transforming Russia into a federal state (Mironowicz, 2007a: 35). In April 1917, the Provisional Government in Petrograd recognized the Belarusian lands as an integral part of Russia and Belarusians as part of the Russian nation (Michaluk, 2010: 156-158; 164-167). After the October Revolution, the Bolshevik faction in the BSH saw Belarus as part of the Soviet state (Mironowicz, 2007a: 36-38). Established in October 1917, the Great Belarusian Council, the temporary authority of Belarus in Russia, proceeded to form Belarusian troops (Central Belarusian Military Council) (Michaluk, 2010: 173-180). The Minsk Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates, which had been in power since November 1917, dispersed the All-Belarusian Congress in December (Gierowska-Kałuża, 2010: 91). After the German occupation of

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<sup>1</sup> In 1915, in Vilnius, Belarusian politicians prepared a project for the confederation of Lithuania and Belarus to recreate the GDL (Lutskevich brothers). The Lithuanian side distanced itself from this project (Ponarski, 1998). In January 1916, Lithuanian politicians in Kaunas proposed the establishment of the GDL as a joint state of Lithuania and Latvia (autonomy). Belarusians were allowed to join it. According to Zenowiusz Ponarski, the Lithuanians did not intend to create a federative state on the historic lands of the GDL, but only a national Lithuanian state. This is important because the Byelorussians and Lithuanians believed that the Poles sought hegemony in the former lands of the First Commonwealth in their Union projects. In response to these projects, the Bolsheviks established in January 1919 Lithuanian-Belarusian Socialist Republic of Councils. In January 1915, the Polish Democratic and Independence Bloc in Lithuania and Byelorussia (Polish Socialist Party, Democratic Union, Group of Democratic Intelligentsia and Union of Independence Youth) issued a proclamation (by Aleksander Zasztowt and Jerzy Czeszejko-Sochacki), in which socialists and so-called nationalists announced the creation of Lithuanian-Belorussian state in union with Poland. In December 1916, socialists in Vilnius advocated a Lithuanian-Belarusian federation with autonomy rights for national minorities. It would form a legal-state union with Poland for economic and defense reasons (Ponarski, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> During World War I, Belarusian activists in Vilnius, brothers Anton and Ivan Lutskevich, wanted to recreate the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a federation of Lithuania and Belarus or a federation consisting of Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia and Ukraine (United States from the Baltic to the Black Sea) (Michaluk, 2010).

Minsk, the Executive Committee of the All-Belarusian Congress announced a declaration of Belarusian sovereignty and parliamentary elections in February 1918. The Committee established the People's Secretariat, which acted to Germans as the Belarusian government. After Lithuania declared independence in February, the Belarusian concept of federation with Lithuania, which had been put forward since the beginning of World War I, collapsed (Michaluk, 2010: 228-229). On March 3, 1918, in Brest-Litovsk, Germany concluded a peace treaty with Soviet Russia, dividing Belarusian lands between them. With the consent of Germans, the Executive Committee announced on March 9 a declaration on the establishment of the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR) with a definition of its system and borders (Michaluk, 2010: 232-234; 243-256; 260; 315)<sup>3</sup>. The Vilnius Belarusian Council submitted to its authority (Mironowicz, 2007a: 45; Darski, 1993: 16-17). The BPR Council proclaimed the independence of Belarus based on Germany on March 25, 1918. Its chairman served as president of the BPR. The minority in the Council was in favour of federation with Russia. Germany did not recognize the BPR's independence. Lithuania also did not recognize it, as it used the Belarusian issue in territorial disputes with Poland (Michaluk, 2010: 339-340; Wojskowe Biuro Historyczne – Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe w Warszawie [later WBH-CAW], Sztab Naczelnego Wodza, sign. II.52.168: 31). In October 1918, the pro-Russian left in the BPR forced pro-German Prime Minister Yazap Varonka to step down. The goal of the new government of Anton Lutskevich was to recognize the BPR at the Paris Peace Conference and confederate with the Baltic states and Ukraine (Michaluk, 2010: 337; Mironowicz, 2007a: 47). Until the end of World War I, the Belarusian national movement did not envision a joint state with Poland on the basis of federation or confederation (Radzik, 2000: 116-123). Polish plans for Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian federal state were supported by Belarusian parties that were financed by Poland. Until the outbreak of World War II, they did not have much political weight among Belarusians (Czarniakiewicz, 2008: 89-90; Gomółka, 1997: 63-73)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The BPR was to include: Mogilev region, Minsk region, Vitebsk region, Grodno region (Białystok, Sokółka), parts of Vilnius region (Vilnius, Trakai, Vileyka), Smolensk region and Chernihiv region, as well as Pskov (Velikiye Luki) and Tver gubernias (Toropets, Rzev, Ostashkov, present-day Russia), further the district of Iluksha from Semigallia and Dyneburg from Latgale (present-day Latvia). The BPR claimed Polesie, which the Treaty of Brest of February 1918 granted to Ukraine (Ukraine claimed Brest, Biała Podlaska, Kobryń, Pinsk, Mozyrz, Rzhechitsa, Gomel; to the Pripyat River compact Ukrainian settlements, above it mixed Belarusian-Ukrainian). The BPR border with Poland was as follows Włodawa on the Bug River, to the mouth of the Nurca River on the Bug, further on the Nurca River, Braniesk, Suraz, the Narew River to the mouth of the Biebrza River, the Augustów Canal (without Augustów), Druskininkai on the Niemen River, where the borders of Poland, Lithuania and Belarus converged (Michaluk, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Active since January 1919, Green Oak was in favour of the BPR's alliance with Poland. It formed partisan units to fight the Red Army alongside Poland. After 1921, cooperation with Poland was to give him support in building Belarusian state. He promoted the cooperation of the Belarusian minority with Poland in the 1922 parliamentary elections. After his electoral defeat, he ceased his activities. During the period of the existence of Central Lithuania (1920-1922), active since December 1920, Belarusian Borderland Union promoted the idea of unity of Poles, Belarusians and Lithuanians in the reconstituted GDL in union with Poland. In 1921, the party disbanded. In March 1922, the Union of Belarusian Nonpartisan Activists was

Poles in the Belarusian lands opposed the nationalization of land and agrarian reform envisioned by the BPR authorities and the tying of Belarus to Russia (Gierowska-Kałużur, 2010: 94-96; 119; Mironowicz, 2005: 34-35)<sup>5</sup>. They wanted participation in its authorities in proportion to their numbers and alliance with Poland (Michaluk, 2011: 114-115; Gierowska-Kałużur, 2009: 46). Nationalists were in favour of the restoration of the GDL and its division into Lithuanian, Polish and Belarusian cantons and union with Poland (Kirwiel, 2011; Michaluk, 2010: 94-100; 340-341; Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, *Papiery Kazimierza Sosnkowskiego* [later ZNIO], sign. 16543/II/t.1.: 78-80; *Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie* [later AAN], *Wileńska Koncentracja Demokratyczna*, sign. 211/16: 17)<sup>6</sup>.

In the former territories of the First Republic with a Polish majority, National Democracy intended to build a national Polish state, and to polonize the Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian populations (Mironowicz, 2010: 45-49; Mironowicz, 2007b). The Polish Socialist Party saw the territorial organization of the Second Republic as a peacefully constructed federation of equal nations on the territory of the former First Republic (Gursztyn, 2001: 55-56)<sup>7</sup>. Józef Piłsudski, on the other hand, did not rule out their military integration with Poland (Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian state in close alliance with Ukraine) (Nowak, 2015: 575-576, 581-585; Madera, 2004: 65; Nowak, 1999: 333-343; Boruta, 1995: 31-36; Juzwenko, 1994: 109-113; Miedziński, 1975: 4-46). He combined the Jagiellonian idea with Prometheism (detachment from Russia of all non-

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formed. It was in favour of granting national and cultural rights and improving the material existence of the Belarusian minority. It opposed Belarusian diversionary activity in Poland. It went to the 1922 elections with the slogan of Belarusian cultural autonomy, suffering defeat (Gomółka, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> The Polish Council of the Minsk Territory formally accepted the ideas of the Chief of State Józef Piłsudski, while in practice it was in favour of the National Democratic Party. The defeat of the federation idea during the existence of the Civil Administration of the Eastern Lands (ZCZW) was influenced by differences in the understanding of concepts. For Minsk Poles, society was Polish society. For Piłsudski, the ZCZW was "the authority in the Eastern Territories", while for the Poles and representatives of other nationalities from Minsk it was "the Polish authority". The paradox of history is that only the realization of the federation idea, which was not understood in Minsk, or was considered not without basis as a utopia, could save this Polish community from extinction (Gierowska-Kałużur, 2010). The majority of Poles east of the Bug River wanted to combine Piłsudski's plans for territorial acquisitions with the assimilation policy proposed by Roman Dmowski. In a memorial dated March 19, 1919 addressed to the Sejm and the Polish government, the United Councils of the Minsk, Mogilev, Vitebsk and Inflants territories demanded that these lands be incorporated into Poland. The national camp renounced them in its territorial programme (Mironowicz, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Michaluk (2010), "Krajowcy", Polish socio-political movement, were formed in the 1870s. They wanted to reconcile conflicting national, social and political interests in the historic lands of the GDL – a community of the GDL residents (Michaluk, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Leon Wasilewski was in favour of separating non-Russian nations from Finland to the Black Sea and the Caucasus from the Russian empire. He saw in this, like Piłsudski and his supporters, the security of Poland and Europe. The problem was the establishment of Poland's eastern border on the territory of the former First Republic. Wasilewski considered it unrealistic to return to the 1772 border. During World War I, the state aspirations of Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians became apparent. After its end, the self-determination of the nations gained prominence. Annexation of their lands threatened international isolation and Poland's internal problems. Because of the low awareness of the Belarusian population, Wasilewski believed that a Belarusian state would not be created. He was in favour of the federation of Belarusian lands with Poland, so that Soviet Russia would not take advantage of the Belarusian cause against it (Gursztyn, 2001).

Russian nations and their alliance with Poland) (Kornat, 2012: 41-43; Wandycz, 2003: 13-14; 22-23; Dziewanowski, 1969: 350-353 Instytut Józefa Piłsudskiego w Londynie [later IJPL], sign. 709/148/2 7-21). The differences in the implementation of the Jagiellonian idea were due to the different degree of development of national consciousness among Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians (Okulewicz, 2001: 20; Nowak, 1999: 331-332). Over time, the Polish federation was to attract Central European states located between Germany and Soviet Russia.

At the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920), the Polish National Committee demanded the following for Poland: the governorates of Vilnius, Grodno, Minsk (Minsk, Slutsk without the district of Vytausk, Polotsk). Piłsudski envisioned federation with Lithuania and autonomy of Belarusian lands within Poland (Michaluk, 2010: 344-345; Piskożub, 1997: 104-106)<sup>8</sup>.

The Bolsheviks had been taking over Belarusian lands from Germans since late November 1918. Considered by them as a German creation, the BPR authorities fled from Minsk to Vilnius because they had neither the Belarusian army nor popular support. The majority of the Belarusian population wanted to maintain ties with Russia and land reform (Radzik, 2012: 91; Michaluk, 2010: 330-332). The BPR authorities sought cooperation with Lithuania and the Ukrainian People's Republic (Czarniakiewicz, 2008: 28-29). In December 1918, preparing for the conquest of Europe, the Soviet authorities formed the Communist Party of Belarus and the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). It included the former Russian gubernias of Grodno, Minsk, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Gomel and Smolensk, while the Lithuanian SSR included Kaunas and Vilnius. In January 1919, Smolensk, Vitebsk and Mogilev gubernias were incorporated into Soviet Russia. Moscow's goal was a centralized Soviet state, not a Belarusian one. The Congress of the Councils of Belarus incorporated on February 16, 1919. The BSSR was incorporated into the Lithuanian-Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. It was to take part in the conquest of Europe and prevent the emergence of nation-states of Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians (Michaluk, 2011: 121-125).

The BPR government sent a memorandum in January 1919 to Paris Peace Conference President Georges Clemenceau on the establishment of Belarusian state. The deliberating powers regarded the Belarusian lands as part of anti-Bolshevik Russia. The BPR did not have state structures and an army in the Belarusian lands, which at the time were occupied by Poland and Soviet Russia (Czarniakiewicz, 2008: 29). Poland and Lithuania challenged the right of the BPR government to represent Belarusians (Michaluk, 2010: 411-412; 418-420). At the conference, Lithuania submitted memoranda questioning the existence of the Belarusian nation and the rights of Poland and Russia to Belarusian lands (Michaluk, 2010: 443-445; Czarniakiewicz, 2008: 58).

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<sup>8</sup> Eastern border: Kalusz-Bug (Krasne) - upper Styr, Lutsk (all of Polesie to Poland), Styr, Horyń to the mouth of the Pripyat, Berezina, Bobruisk, Slutsk, Dvina, Lepel district (Michaluk, 2010).

In April 1919, A. Lutskevich met with President Tomáš Masaryk. A BPR outpost was established in Prague, but Masaryk unofficially supported the BPR independence, the Czechoslovak-Belarusian alliance and the Lithuanian-Belarusian-Ukrainian federation. The Czechoslovak side pursued a two-pronged policy in the East and hostile to Poland. Pro-Russian Prime Minister Karel Kramář was for an undivided and democratic Russia. Foreign Minister Edward Beneš was said to have supported the BPR delegation at the Paris Conference against Poland (Michaluk, 2010: 437-438).

In the face of Soviet expansion in the former lands of the First Republic, Poland proved to be the only real power (Gierowska-Kałużur, 2016: 99). The occupation of Lithuanian and Belarusian lands by the Red Army led to a war with Poland. In April 1919, Polish troops drove the Bolsheviks out of Grodno and Vilnius, where Piłsudski issued a proclamation “To the population of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania”, announcing its peoples; self-determination in union with Poland (Błaszczak, 2017: 141-142; Darski, 1993: 20). However, the Polish administration – the Civil Administration of the Eastern Territories (ZCZW; Novogrudok, Grodno and Vilnius regions were to be part of Poland) – was established in the lands occupied by Polish troops in the East. In June 1919, Belarusian troops (Belarusian Military Organization) began to be formed alongside Polish troops (Czarniakiewicz, 2008: 55). In order to win over the Belarusian population, the Polish authorities allowed the Central Belarusian Council of Grodno and Vilnius (CBCGV) in June 1919 to convene in Vilnius as a representation of Belarusians headed by Bronisław Taraszkiewicz. Referring to Piłsudski’s April proclamation, the CBCGV supported the BPR government, which protested against the activities of the CBCGV in Belarusian lands (Michaluk, 2010: 389-390). After Polish troops entered Minsk in August 1919, Piłsudski spoke of the right to self-determination in a speech to the population in September. The Marshal believed that Minsk could become the centre of Belarusian life to the east (“Belarusian Piedmont”). Realistically, however, he envisioned autonomy for Byelorussian lands within Poland (Siemakowicz, 1997: 31-35).

Ignacy Paderewski’s government proposed to the BPR government an alliance against Soviet Russia, cooperation at the Paris Conference, a Polish-Belarusian union, and the incorporation of Grodno, Novogrudok and Vilnius regions into Poland. Otherwise, he was not going to recognize it (Gierowska-Kałużur, 2016: 106-108; Michaluk, 2010: 390-393; Gierowska-Kałużur, 2009: 24). In May 1919, Prime Minister Paderewski met with the BPR Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture Arkadz Smolicz, who proposed close cooperation with Poland for its assistance in the creation of Lithuanian-Belarusian or Belarusian state (administration and military). Paderewski was interested in resolving eastern affairs in agreement with the nations there. In the course of meetings with the BPR Prime Minister A. Lutkevich in Paris in mid-1919, the Polish Prime Minister agreed on a draft of a federation agreement between Poland and Belarus as independent states, but with a common foreign and military policy. However, in September 1919 in Warsaw, in a conversation with Piłsudski, A. Lutkevich heard that Poland

did not intend to recognize an independent Belarus without first resolving the Ukrainian problem. At the same time, Piłsudski ordered the ZCZW to dissolve the BPR Council in Minsk, as it opposed its orders and sought independence for Belarus. Moreover, there was a split in the BPR Council. Most of its members, who did not agree to federation with Poland, went to Kaunas and there formed a new anti-Polish BPR government. Faced with the Kiev expedition in March and April 1920, in Minsk, in talks with the pro-Polish Supreme Council of the BPR, the Polish side proposed cultural autonomy for Belarusian lands within Poland (Gomółka, 1995: 109-110).

The problem in Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian relations were the Vilnius and Grodno regions inhabited by Poles, Belarusians and Jews. The union with Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine was supposed to provide the BPR with economic development and security vis-à-vis Russia and Poland. Belarusians did not fear the less numerous Lithuanians in a common state. However, in the historic lands of the GDL, the Lithuanians wanted a nation-state. On them, they considered Poles and Belarusians to be a denationalized Lithuanian population (Błaszczak, 2017: 45; Michaluk, 2010: 350-358; Tarka, 1998: 41-42; AAN, Komenda Główna Armii Krajowej, Oddział Informacyjno-Wywiadowczy, sign. 203/III/37: 3-4; ZNIO, sign. 16543/II/t.1: 85; WBH-CAW, Sztab Naczelnego Wodza sign. II.52.168: 4-6; 11)<sup>9</sup>. Unlike the Lithuanians and Poles, the Belarusian national movement was unable to organize an administration and army in the Belarusian lands without outside help (Michaluk, 2007: 36-38; Łatyszonek, 1996: 113-117; Łatyszonek, 1995). Preparing for mutual confrontation, Poland, Lithuania and Soviet Russia did not support Belarusian state and territorial aspirations.

In the Byelorussian lands occupied by the Polish army in 1919, Soviet Russia organized communist partisan units. It promised Belarusians the creation of a Soviet Belarusian state (Grzybowski, 2006: 40; Mironowicz, 1994: 23-24). The Byelorussian population perceived the stay of the Polish and Bolshevik armies as an occupation because of the requisitions made by force and the creation of an administration (Mironowicz, 2005: 34-36). Until the end of the war with Soviet Russia, Poland did not intend to recognize the BPR government, which had no real power in the Belarusian lands (Michaluk, 2010: 451-454; 562-465). After the failure of talks with Lithuania, Czechoslovakia and Poland and the failure to recognize the BPR government at the Paris Conference, Prime Minister A. Lutskevich was replaced in December by the anti-Polish Waclaw Lastowski (Gierowska-Kałuża, 2016: 109-110; Michaluk, 2010: 484-486; Mironowicz,

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<sup>9</sup> Lithuanians did not recognize the Belarusian nation. They considered the Byelorussian language to be Old Church. They strove to rebuild the GDL (Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus) in connection with Ukraine, which they intended to dominate (Błaszczak, 2017). During World War II, the clandestine nationalist "Nepriklausoma Lietuva", in an article titled *There are Lithuanians who cannot speak Lithuanian*, wrote that in the historic Lithuanian lands, all Germanized, Polonized, Ruthenized Lithuanians had to return to the Lithuanian people (AAN, Komenda Główna Armii Krajowej, Oddział Informacyjno-Wywiadowczy, sign. 203/III/37).

1998: 52-53; Darski, 1993: 20)<sup>10</sup>. He recognized the Curzon Line of December 8, 1919 as Belarus' border with Poland. In 1920, he moved his government to Kaunas, where he received the means to carry out underground activities under Polish administration (Błaszczak, 2017: 188; Michaluk, 2010: 492; 514-515). Lithuania established a Ministry of Belarusian Affairs under its government and allowed Belarusian representation in parliament (Taryba). Internationally, it used this to obtain permission to incorporate lands inhabited by Belarusian Catholics, primarily Grodno and Vilnius, into the Lithuanian state. The BPR government, on the other hand, expected Lithuania to recognize the autonomy of ethnic Belarusian lands equal to Lithuanian autonomy within the framework of a common state (Michaluk, 2010: 472-473; Michaluk, 2007: 39-43). Therefore, Prague became the second foreign centre of the BPR authorities (Błaszczak, 2017: 199; Michaluk, 2010: 495).

Soviet Russia concluded a deal in July 1920 to hand over Vilnius and Grodno regions and Suwałki region to Lithuania with about one million Belarusian population after victory with Poland. Again, in July, Moscow announced the creation of the BSSR with the intention of annexing Lithuania to it. In the war against Soviet Russia, General Stanisław Bulak-Balakhovich's troops fought alongside Poland (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army of the Polish Army of General Edward Rydz-Smigły). In October 1920, he concluded an agreement with the Warsaw-based Belarusian Political Committee to take over civilian authority in Minsk to rebuild the Belarusian People's Republic. In November, Gen. Bulak-Balakhovich's army, numbering some 20,000 soldiers, took up arms in Belarus against the Red Army (Belarusian troops occupied Gomel, Mozyrz, and Rzhechytsya) (Gierowska-Kałuża, 2017: 146-150; Michaluk, 2010: 496). This undertaking, carried out in consultation with the Supreme Command of the Polish Army, was coordinated with Gen. Lucjan Żeligowski's military operation on so-called Central Lithuania (Januszewska-Jurkiewicz, 2001: 197-203)<sup>11</sup>. Their goal was to establish a Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian federal state.

In early November 1920, the Belarusian National Committee took over civilian authority in Slutsk and the district from the Polish army, the 4<sup>th</sup> Army of General Leopold Skierski. In mid-November, the Byelorussian Congress of Slutsk (at which the options of building Belarus on the basis of Poland – the supporters of Gen. Bulak-Balakhovich – or Lithuania – the Byelorussian Eserists – clashed) elected the Supreme Byelorussian Council as the authority. In its November declaration, it called on Byelorussians to fight

<sup>10</sup> In 1919, there was a split in the BPR Council. It emerged from the Supreme Council, which advocated federation with Poland - Vatlav Ivanovsky, Paval Aleksyuk, Ivan Sereda, Shimon Rak-Mikhailovsky, Bronislav Tarashkevich, Kuzma Tereshchenko, Anton Lutskevich, Father Adam Stankevich. They regarded the 1921 Treaty of Riga as the partition of the Belarusian lands. In 1920-1922, they entered the authorities of Central Lithuania. From Poland, they expected the right to national development of the Belarusian minority. They considered the USSR an enemy of Poland and Belarus. The BPR Council and the BPR government recognized Poland and the USSR as occupiers of Poland and called on Belarusians to fight for independence (Mironowicz, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> The Central Lithuania project involved pro-Polish Belarusian circles (Januszewska-Jurkiewicz, 2001).

for an independent Belarus within ethnographic boundaries. The Polish military supported the development of the Belarusian army (1<sup>st</sup> Slutsk Rifle Brigade of the Army of the Belarusian People's Republic – 4,000 soldiers). According to the October 1920 peace preliminaries with Soviet Russia, the Polish army was to leave the Slutsk region. A separate local Polish-Soviet agreement set the Polish evacuation for the third decade of November. A 15-kilometer neutral strip was created between Polish and Soviet troops, from which Belarusian troops attacked the Red Army. After they were broken up, they proceeded to partisan fighting. By the end of December 1920, the Red Army broke the resistance of the Belarusian troops in the Mozyr and Slutsk areas (Karpus, Rezmer, 1996: 75-81; Darski 1993: 21). After the defeat against the Red Army, Gen. Bulak-Balakhovich's troops were interned in Poland. The Polish army moved Belarusian diversionary groups into Soviet Belarus before the signing of the peace treaty in March 1921 in Riga. At the end of April 1921, Poland banned Belarusian military units and independence organizations on its territory. Deprived of its support, the Belarusian partisans were broken up by the end of July 1921 (Karpus, Rezmer, 1996: 75-81) by the Red Army.

Between 1918 and 1920, Lithuania, Poland and Soviet Russia exploited the Belarusian cause for their own interests (Michaluk, 2010: 497; WBH-CAW, Sztab Naczelnego Wodza, sign. II.52.168: 11). Latvia, Estonia, the Ukrainian People's Republic and Finland supported the BPR authorities (Michaluk, 2010: 466-470)<sup>12</sup>. No country recognized the Belarusian People's Republic and its government.

### **Belarusian lands after the Polish-Soviet war (1919-1920)**

In 1921, the 'independent' Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic covered 59.6 thousand square kilometers and 1.6 million people. Between 1924 and 1926, it was expanded to 126.3 thousand square kilometers, and the population grew to almost 5 million (Belarusians – 80.6%, Jews – 8.2%, Russians – 7.7%, Poles – 2%) (Mironowicz, 2007a: 75; WBH-CAW, Sztab Naczelnego Wodza, sign. II.52.168: 11). The republican languages of 1924-1938 were Belarusian, Russian, Yiddish and Polish (Gordziejew, 2010: 65-66; Mironowicz, 2004: 42-48). In 1923, the Soviet government announced an amnesty for Belarusian national activists fighting for an independent Belarus in 1917-1921 (Gordziejew, 2010: 68). The Soviet press called on Belarusian politicians from abroad, mainly from Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Germany, to join the development of Soviet Belarus. They were offered positions in republican institutions. They were to become preachers of the idea of uniting all lands with the Belarusian population within the BSSR (Mironowicz, 2007a: 78-80). For the Soviet authorities, the Byelorussian national and cultural development was a political instrument, especially against Poland. It was presented as an enemy of the Soviet state, oppressing the Belarusian minor-

<sup>12</sup> Dorota Michaluk believes that the BPR was recognized by Latvia and Finland.

ity. They heralded its liberation and unification with the Belarusian people in the BSSR (Gordziejew, 2010: 69; Romanek, 2009: 118). In 1927, the Soviet authorities ended “national democratism” and announced a return to “Bolshevik nationality policy”. Supporters of the Belarusian cultural face of the BSSR (bourgeois nationalism) were considered chauvinists and counter-revolutionaries. Those who were not murdered were relocated deep into the USSR (Gordziejew, 2010: 66-68; Darski, 1993: 23). During the Soviet period, the theory of the separateness of Belarusians from the Russian people and Russia was fought against in Belarus (Gordziejew, 2010: 69-70).

The Treaty of Riga (1921) derailed the creation of an independent Belarusian state. Apart from Chief of State Piłsudski and his supporters and the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), no one in Poland at the time supported an independent Ukraine and Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian federation. In the Polish delegation to the peace negotiations with Soviet Russia in Minsk and Riga in 1920-1921, supporters of the incorporation concept of Polish state, i.e., the direct incorporation into Poland of the eastern lands of the mixed nationalities of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, had the advantage. The Sejm negotiators representing the national democracy and the people’s movement outvoted the members of the delegation appointed by the Head of State, rejecting the Soviet proposal to hand over all of Minsk Land with Minsk to Poland (most of the lands with Belarusian population would have been in Poland) (Wyszczelski, 2013: 449-453; Borzęcki, 2012; Gursztyn, 2001: 56)<sup>13</sup>. This proved to be a strategic mistake for Poland’s security from the USSR (Jurkowski, 2010: 163-166; Mironowicz, 2007a: 62-63; Podlaski, 1990: 35)<sup>14</sup>. In Minsk, the Soviet authorities established a base to support militant diversionary groups into Polish lands inhabited by the Belarusian minority (Śleszyński, 2008: 188; WBH-CAW, Kolekcja Prasy Konspiracyjnej, sign. II.46.38: 6-8; WBH-CAW, Sztab Naczelnego Wodza, sign. II.52.168: 13)<sup>15</sup>.

The Polish lands with Byelorussian population were not Byelorussian Piedmont vis-à-vis the BSSR (Mironowicz, 2005: 40-43; Gursztyn, 2001: 57, 60-61)<sup>16</sup>. The Polish

<sup>13</sup> During the Riga peace negotiations, Leon Wasilewski was in favour of annexing Minsk to Poland, as were Norbert Barlicki and Witold Kamieniecki. This was opposed by Stanisław Grabski. Minsk became the capital of the BSSR and the main centre of the Soviet authorities’ diversionary activities against the Polish northeastern lands (Gursztyn, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> This ruled out the possibility of the creation of a Belarusian state by the Piłsudski’s followers within the framework of Poland on a federal basis (Mironowicz, 2007). He believed that the surrender of Minsk in 1921 to the USSR’s Riga was a mistake by Poland (Podlaski, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> The entire Soviet diversion against the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic was directed by the Foreign Department of the GPU in Moscow through the Secret Operations Department at the GPU in Minsk (northeastern lands of the Second Polish Republic) and the GPU in Kharkov (southeastern lands of the Second Polish Republic) (Śleszyński, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> According to Piotr Gursztyn, for the Soviet authorities, the BSSR became a Belarusian Piedmont, albeit a facade one, vis-à-vis the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic inhabited by the Belarusian minority. Wasilewski believed that Poland should, by developing culture and education among Polish Belarusians, draw them away from the influence of Russian culture and Soviet communist propaganda. He opposed the National Democracy’s policy of forced Polonization of eastern lands. He claimed that without economic support from the Polish government and drawing Belarusians into self-government, they would not be loyal

authorities considered its Belarusianness to be an ethnographic phenomenon. After being cut off from Russian influence, Byelorussians in Poland were to undergo rapid Polonization (Jaguś, 2010: 49-59; Mironowicz, 2010: 50-51; Żołędowski, 2003: 110; Gomółka, 1995: 110-113; Podlaski, 1990: 36-37). In the interwar period, Poland pursued a policy of forced national assimilation that aroused the hostility of the Belarussian minority, as did the Ukrainian and Lithuanian minorities. Polish military settlers were brought to the eastern provinces and land reform (1925) was not implemented so as not to deplete Polish property (Czarniakiewicz, 2007: 224-225; Mironowicz, 2010: 51; Podlaski, 1990: 30-31, 36-37). The main motivations for the armed activities of the Belarussian population in Poland were economic issues and the ongoing difficulties arising from contacts with Polish offices and state security organs (Śleszyński, 2008: 185).

The Belarussian national movement had not come to terms with the geopolitical reality after the Polish-Soviet War. The BPR's émigré authorities in Kaunas and Prague intended to use the revisionist policies of Lithuania and the USSR towards the Polish northeastern lands to wage an armed struggle against Poland for an independent Belarussian state (Błaszczak, 2017: 221-226; Mironowicz, 2005: 42). They regarded the Treaty of Riga as the partition of Belarussian lands by Poland and the USSR. They drew the border with Poland on the Narew and Bug rivers (Mironowicz, 1994: 25; WBH-CAW, Sztab Naczelnego Wodza, sign. II.52.168: 20; 32). Internationally, Belarussian plans were supported by Czechoslovakia (Czarniakiewicz, 2007: 236-237; 240).

The Lithuanian authorities organized and trained Belarussian troops, which were subordinated to the Lithuanian military command (Śleszyński, 2008: 184-185). Lithuanian-Belarussian cooperation was patronized by Germans (Błaszczak, 2017: 221-226; Czechowski, 2008: 60-64; Czarniakiewicz, 2007: 240; 250-251). During the interwar period, they were interested in separatist activities in Poland and were interested in the revisionist policies of its neighbours to realize their claims to Pomerania, Upper Silesia and Greater Poland. In the international arena, Lithuania acted as a defender of the Belarussian people oppressed by Poland. From Lithuania, the Belarussian government sent emissaries and armaments to Poland to organize Belarussian insurgent units (Śleszyński, 2008: 185). The goal of the Lithuanian authorities was to provoke an uprising and take back Vilnius with the Vilnius region from Poland, but they only envisioned autonomy for the Belarussian population (Błaszczak, 2017: 230-245; Czarniakiewicz, 2007: 230-235).

After the recognition of the Riga border in March 1923 by the Council of Ambassadors of the League of Nations, Lithuania stopped supporting the armed activities of Belarussian saboteurs in Poland. From then on, the Belarussian national movement tied its insurgent plans to the USSR. It combined communist propaganda and diversionary action with Belarussian national slogans. However, it was the Byelorussian communists who took control of the Byelorussian sabotage units in Poland (Śleszyński, 2008:

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to Poland. He believed that the Byelorussian nation-building process would proceed and that it was better for Poland to use it in its own interest than to fight it by force.

186-187; Mironowicz, 1998: 54). The goal of the Communists in Poland was to detach the Polish eastern lands and annex them to the BSSR and the USSR (Krzak, 2010: 64-65). The Communist Workers' Party of Poland (from 1925, KPP) had an autonomous Communist Party of Western Belarus since 1923, which was to unite all Belarusian organizations in Poland (Czarniakiewicz, 2007: 252-253). The Polish police and army fought against Belarusian separatism. To this end, the Polish authorities also created the Border Protection Corps in 1925 (Darski, 1993: 25; Podlaski, 1990: 39; WBH-CAW, Sztab Naczelnego Wodza, sign. II.52.168: 19-20).

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**Abstract:** The late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a national awakening of the Belarusian people. During World War I, under German occupation, the Catholic Belarusian national movement intended to create a sovereign Belarusian state (the Belarusian People's Republic) or in union with Lithuania (a revived Grand Duchy of Lithuania). After the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia, Orthodox national activists wanted a sovereign Belarus within a federal and democratic Russia. The Belarusian People's Republic, established in March 1918, was not recognized by any state. Poland, Lithuania and Soviet Russia intended to incorporate the Belarusian lands on an autonomous basis. As a result of the Riga Peace Treaty (1921), the Belarusian lands were divided between Poland and Soviet Russia.

**Keywords:** Belarusian minority, Polish eastern policy, the Polish-Soviet war, Poland, Soviet Russia