

Landscape Interventions? The Draining of Wetlands and Other Modernization Initiatives in West Polesia from 1921 to 1939

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SUMMARY

Polesia was still Europe's largest swampland area in the first half of the twentieth century. The western part formed the voivodeship of Polesia, which belonged to Poland and was inhabited mainly by Eastern Slavs (in rural areas) and Jews (in the cities and shtetls). Considered a terra non grata until the nineteenth century, political and state actors and others closely associated with the government now began to conceive, prepare and carry out modernization measures in order to develop the region's agricultural constitution, structure and production. Some of their arguments were explicitly "apolitical." Until 1939, land consolidation measures and, in part, the dissolution of easements were successfully carried out. On the other hand, the planned settlement of ex-military personnel, the partial expropriation and parcelling out of land and the melioration of swamps were only achieved on a relatively small scale.

Over one million hectares of wetlands were to be meliorated in a single large-scale project. However, this only succeeded to a limited extent. Such a mammoth interventionist undertaking first faced technical and organizational difficulties; secondly, there was a lack of funds; thirdly, there were a number of interventionist projects in Central Poland and on the Baltic Sea that were considered more important; and fourthly, the local farmer-fishermen were not enthused by the prospect of melioration, as the areas of "improved" land were to benefit non-locals and the transition to grain production would reduce wildlife and fishing areas. There was local resistance to wide-spread melioration for rational reasons, however the modernizers saw it merely as the stubborn conservatism of an isolated population of maverick dissenters. The modernization measures were presented as an assimilation program for the consolidation of the Polish nation, which was intended to turn primitive people who lacked national consciousness (*tutejsi, poleszucy*) into de facto Poles. As a result, Polesia remained a neglected region within Poland. However, as a result of these landscape interventions and demographic developments, the question of ownership and commons structures increasingly came to the fore.

KEYWORDS: Polesia, wetland, melioration, fishing, Republic of Poland (1918-1939), agriculture, agriculture reform, land consolidation



1 Central Question, Research Status, Sources

In this text I specifically deal with intervention projects that involve altering the landscape, i.e. landscape interventions. I will examine the extent to which politics and the state administration in the Republic of Poland regarded the Polesia voivodeship, almost a third of which was marshland¹, as a target area for landscape interventions, and I will look at how successfully the concepts developed for this purpose were put into practice. Were there any modern strategies behind this penetration of the land by the state?²

Since Polesia, like the eastern territories (*ziemie wschodnie*) of the Republic of Poland in general, was predominantly inhabited by non-Poles, these questions were closely interwoven, not only with social, but also with national disputes and debates. After the Peace Treaty of Riga had been signed in March 1921, the Republic of Poland, like Romania, Czechoslovakia and Latvia, was faced with the task of building a state with a substantial 30 per cent share of ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities.³ All political actors at this time regarded the large numbers of these groups as a challenge. However, in West Polesia, defined here as the voivodeship of Polesia with an area of 42,280 square kilometers⁴, most politicians and publicists saw the general economic and societal backwardness of the region as a problem rather than the fact that the local East Slavic Orthodox and Jewish population belonged to “foreign” nationalities. Since the Polesian population generally did not air their concerns in public discourse, most politicians had little fear of nationalism or irredentism, even though Polesia was the Republic’s least Polish and the least Catholic voivodeship.⁵

¹ WIKTOR MONDALSKI: Polesie [Polesia], Kraków 1927, p. 83

² This study presents some of the results of my recently published monograph. See DIANA SIEBERT: Herrschaftstechniken im Sumpf und ihre Reichweiten: Landschaftsinterventionen und Social Engineering in Polesien von 1914 bis 1941, Wiesbaden 2019.

³ On Polesia’s borders and related terms (Pripiat swamps, *kresy wschodnie* and *ziemie wschodnie*), cf. the introductory essay of this issue. More information can be found there relating to the terms “Polesia.”

⁴ After a territorial reform in December 1930, it was still 36,665 km²; cf. *Drugi powszechny spis ludności z dn. 9 XII 1931 r. Województwo poleskie* [Second General Census on 9.12.1931, Polesian Voivodeship], Warszawa 1938, p. 2.

⁵ According to a 1931 census, 164,106 of 1,131,939, i.e. 14,5% of the total population of Poland and 124,951, i.e. 11%, of Roman Catholics: *Drugi powszechny spis* (as in footnote 4), p. 20.

KALENDARZ ZIEM WSCHODNICH

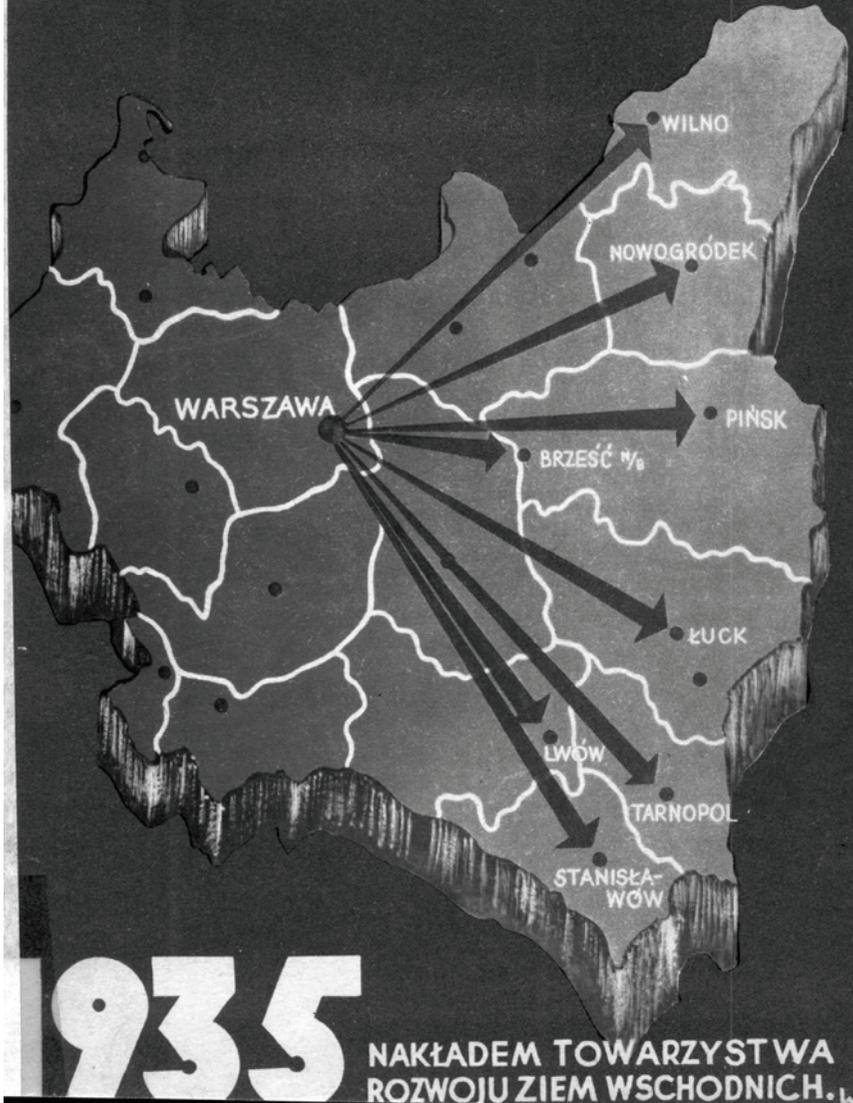


Fig. 1: Kalendarz Ziemi Wschodnich na rok 1935, front cover. The arrows very clearly show the direction of impact of a number of potential interventions. The connections between the eastern regions themselves, on the other hand, were ignored. Among the affected voivodeships, Polesia stands out by the fact that two cities are marked there: Brest and Pinsk

However, questions of social, national and denominational asymmetry between the “(ethnic) Poles” and the non-Poles also arose in Polesia. Would the political decision-makers in Warsaw use quasi-colonial concepts to make the population of Polesia into foreigners in their *own* country, i.e. defining them as *others*⁶, or would they aim to integrate at least the East Slavic rural population, and to recognize and treat these people as their own? Would such measures be able to Polishize the rural population of Polesia or would they contribute to further mutual alienation or even antagonism? In what way would a modern “conquest of nature” in Polesia take this complicated constellation into account?

In the following pages, I will analyze these questions using several examples: the settlement of ex-soldiers, the parceling out of land for the benefit of farming families, the dissolution of easements, land consolidation and, above all, the melioration projects, which tend to have been overlooked by the historiography of German-speaking countries. In particular, an extensive swamp-land drainage scheme could have been regarded as a modern project with a particularly strong impact on the landscape. In historiography, western Polesia was for a long time treated merely as a part of the *ziemie wschodnie*, for the period 1921-1939, but, in fact, it was officially a separate voivodeship during the interwar period and, as such, functioned as an administrative and political entity. Before and after this time, Polesia was not considered a significant political or administrative entity, but rather a geographical and ethnographic or cultural category (of research), i.e. as a historical or natural *landscape*. This categorization also had a decisive influence on research perspectives. The reason that Polesia for a long time received little attention in historiography was also due to the fact that history hardly seemed to take place there, and that, up until 1939, even contemporaries regarded Polesia not as a historical space, but “only” as a geographical and ethnographical space—as a landscape in which little had been done. This almost inevitably encouraged tendencies towards culturalism, biologism and geographism. For a long time, the major narrative about Polesia was that of an antiquated, underdeveloped natural and cultural region.

In the 1990s, the Polesian question was presented primarily as a question of nationalities with less focus on landscape.⁷ Belarusian and Ukrainian political, economic and social historiographers included Polesia in their respective historiographical discourses, while Soviet and present-day institutional Belarusian historiography encompasses the region within the historiography of western Belarus. There has been a particular eagerness within

⁶ “Othering” refers to the practice whereby people in one milieu set themselves apart from other milieus by constructing an idea of “us” and “others,” thus rendering their own group as separate and distinct.

⁷ Zaharoddze—3: Materyialy navukova-kraiaznauchai kanferentsyi “Palesse u XX stahoddzi” 1-4 chervenia 2000 h. Belastok [Zaharoddze. Vol. 3: Materials of the Scientific-Patrimonial Conference “Polesia in the Twentieth Century”, 1-4 June 2000 Białystok], Minsk 2001.

institutional Belarusian historiography to nationalize (belaruthenize)⁸, or at least to culturalize, the local and regional identities that existed on Belarusian national/state territory.

This also initially applied to non-institutional historiography, but from the beginning of the twenty-first century, these historians did not worry about including critical descriptions and analysis of the diversity of the regions of Belarus and particularly western Polesia.⁹

The books published in the *Pamjac* series, which dealt with individual cities and districts, including those of Belarusian Polesia, remained mosaic-like, but a much broader field was covered and worked over than in Soviet historiography¹⁰—though mostly without a distinct reference to Polesia. The last twenty years have seen an increasing focus on historiography relating explicitly to Polesia.¹¹ At the universities in Brest and Homel, texts on local and regional politics, economics and culture as well as the history of religion have also been appearing more frequently.¹² Nevertheless, descriptions of Polesia have been, and are still being, determined by national borders and narratives. Belarusian and Ukrainian Polesia are seldom reflected upon together and barely ever as single entity. Today's state borders are also, of course, reflected in the research infrastructure relating to the history of the interwar period.

Historiographical material on this period, written in Polish and centering on Polesia, does exist—based on the pioneering study by Jerzy Tomaszewski in 1963¹³—with the majority having been produced since the 1990s. However, Tomaszewski's Marxism-oriented economic and socio-historical approach was not taken up by subsequent scholars, so the topics dealt with in this essay have remained under-developed since then. In addition to memoir literature, a number of political, ethno- and socio-historical research papers on Polesia have been published. Since around 2005, there has been a Polesia boom, recognizable in the numerous publications by Wojciech Śleszyński at the University of Białystok and by Piotr Cichoracki at the University of

⁸ The helpful anthology and document volume *Rizhskii mir v sud'be belorusskoho naroda, kniha 1* [The Riga Peace Treaty in the Fate of the Belarusian People], Minsk 2014, pp. 252-255, also assigns Polesia to Western Belarus. It briefly describes the agricultural policy measures but not the land melioration (initiative).

⁹ Cf. the instructive essays by IRYNA CHARNIAKEVYCH: *U poshukach Palessia* [Searching for Polesia], in: ARCHE (2011), 3, pp. 7-12; sowie EADEM (ed.): *Belarus' u tsiiani Palessia* [Belarus in the Shadow of Polesia], in: ARCHE (2013), 4, pp. 1-639.

¹⁰ E.g. *Pamiats'* [Memory], Pinsk—Minsk 1998, and many more.

¹¹ An early anthology was *Zaharoddze—3* (as in footnote 7).

¹² The National Academy of Sciences of Belarus brought out an extensive interdisciplinary volume, which, however, does not relate to West Polesia: *Prypiatskae Palesse* [Prypiat Polesia], Minsk 2016.

¹³ JERZY TOMASZEWSKI: *Z dziejów Polesia. 1921-1939: Zarys stosunków społeczno-ekonomicznych* [From the History of Polesia. 1921-1939: Outline of Socio-economic Relations], Warszawa 1963.

Wrocław.¹⁴ Of the topics dealt with in the following, the one that has been researched the most is the settlement of military personnel in the *ziemie wschodnie*¹⁵, but there has been no specific focus on agricultural history and none at all on the land melioration scheme. In German-language historiography, the works of Werner Benecke on the eastern territories remain authoritative.¹⁶

Since the majority of Polesia's population could still not read or write in the 1920s, it is not surprising that the textual sources housed in the Polish and Belarusian state archives come from the state and, in particular, the voivodeship administration and the political sphere, but not from the perspective of those "down below." For this paper I have mainly used materials from the voivodeship administration in Polesia and from the ministries of agriculture and internal affairs of the Republic of Poland.

2 Polesia within and outside of Discourses

In the interwar years, the main political currents in Poland did not give priority to solving the problems related to Polesia. During the First World War, the civil wars with their pogroms and the protracted peace negotiations that lasted until 1921, it was not even clear whether western Polesia would belong to the Republic of Poland at all. Even after that time, Polesia did not serve as a projection surface for current ideas on social and economic policy. The sparsely populated region (by Polish standards) was chosen, as were neighboring voivodeships to the north and south, as a settlement area for dismissed military personnel, however, as we will see, this group preferred drier areas. Ad-

¹⁴ Summarized in PIOTR CICHORACKI: *Województwo poleskie 1921-1939: Z dziejów politycznych* [The Polesian Voivodeship 1921-1939: From the Political History], Łomianki 2014; WOJCIECH ŚLESZYŃSKI: *Województwo poleskie* [The Polesian Voivodeship], Kraków 2014; last published: IDEM: *Kontrolować czy likwidować—Komunistyczna Partia Zachodniej Białorusi* [To Control or to Abolish—The Communist Party of Western Belarus], Kraków 2015; PIOTR CICHORACKI: *Komuniści na Polesiu w latach 1921-1939* [Communists in Polesia, 1921-1939], Łomianki 2016.

¹⁵ MICHAŁ KACPRZAK: *Ziemia dla żołnierzy: Problem pozyskania i rozdysponowania gruntów na cele osadnictwa wojskowego na Kresach Wschodnich 1920-1939* [Land for Soldiers: The Problem of Obtaining and Distributing Land for the Purposes of Military Settlement in the Kresy 1920-1939], Łódź 2009; CHRISTHARDT HENSCHEL: *Front-line Soldiers into Farmers: Military Colonization in Poland after the First and Second World Wars*, in: HANNES SIEGRIST, DIETMAR MÜLLER (eds.): *Property in East Central Europe: Notions, Institutions and Practices of Landownership in the Twentieth Century*, New York—Oxford 2015, pp. 144-162.

¹⁶ WERNER BENECKE: *Die Ostgebiete der Zweiten Polnischen Republik: Staatsmacht und öffentliche Ordnung in einer Minderheitenregion, 1918-1939*, Köln et al. 1999; IDEM: *Die Quäker in den Kresy Wschodnie der Zweiten Polnischen Republik: Aufzeichnungen britischer und amerikanischer Mitglieder der "Society of Friends" über ihre Tätigkeit in den Ostgebieten Polens nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 42 (1994), pp. 510-520.

herents and advocates of Belarusian, Ukrainian and Jewish political currents and movements, on the other hand, felt at home in Polesia; however, also Belarusians and Ukrainians regarded it as a peripheral area of their irredentist territorial ideas and so they had no *special* connection to Polesia. The success at the elections in November 1922 of the “Block of National Minorities” (*Blok Mniejszości Narodowych*), which covered this political spectrum, and the assassination of President Gabriel Narutowicz, who was elected with the help of its deputies only a few days after his election in December 1922, further exacerbated the political situation in the eastern regions of the Republic, but neither of these developments specifically affected Polesia. The policies of the minorities mentioned above (who made up the majority in Polesia) were now on the defensive. So, at the beginning of the 1920s, there was no “Polesia project,” no policy towards Polesia as a landscape—either on the part of the government or the political opposition.

The Polesian rural population, on the other hand, was specifically referred to as “locals” (*tutejsi*) in the censuses of 1921 and especially 1931, a category defined by “language.” This political measure could be carried out by the authorities, because the Polesian rural population did not seem to be ethnically and linguistically defined. And in fact, in the 1931 census, 62.4 per cent of the population of Polesia was officially registered as “locals.”¹⁷ It was certainly true that the census takers took advantage of the local inhabitants’ ignorance and fear of making unfavorable assertions; but this label or attribution could certainly also have relied upon the fact that both the Belarusian and Ukrainian national movements were relatively weak in *their* imagined border region of Polesia. Moreover, in Polesia the various national ideologies did not collide as violently as was often the case in border and transitional regions. It was not only in Warsaw that the low level of national consciousness of Polesia’s rural population, which accounted for 87 per cent¹⁸ of the total population in the predominantly non-urbanized Polesia, was perceived as a deficiency.

Though the Polish representatives of the local public institutions were not quite as irritated about Polesia as the Germans were during the First World War about the territories in Ober Ost¹⁹, most Poles nevertheless felt a barely concealable sense of superiority towards Polesia’s rural population, which led again and again to mostly unwanted instances of “othering” and to mutual alienation. Polesia continued to be seen as a, perhaps romantic, but also unruly region, and its population was not yet considered part of the Polish nation or the Polish people. The underlying idea that one had to belong to a nation, which had elsewhere become widespread and modern, remained an unfamiliar concept to many Polish and particularly to the vast majority of the

¹⁷ CICHORACKI, *Województwo* (as in footnote 14), p. 23.

¹⁸ *Drugi powszechny spis* (as in footnote 4), p. 2: 983,130 from 1,131,939 inhabitants on the 1931-12-09.

¹⁹ VEJAS G. LIULEVICIUS: *Kriegsland im Osten: Eroberung, Kolonisierung und Militärrherrschaft im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914-1918*, Hamburg 2002, pp. 11, 17, 40-44.

Polesian people.²⁰ However, it was precisely the economic and “national” backwardness of this land of swamps that led Polish politicians to believe that the mission of Polonizing and modernizing Polesia—for many, these processes were seen as one and the same—could be achieved successfully and quickly. Polesia was instinctively avoided but was nevertheless considered important.

Politicians of almost every persuasion wanted to modernize Poland. There was a general consensus that the Republic should be industrialized, that the transport, telephone and electrical infrastructure had to be developed and expanded, and that the class and former partitional boundaries be legally overruled to make way for a unified economic, social and political space. In principle, this should also have applied to Polesia. However, the modernization initiatives lost momentum due to the fact that, in the politics and journalism of the Republic of Poland, emphasis was placed on representing the nation as historic and rich in tradition, which inevitably led to a retrospective view. This was the case with the (mostly aristocratic) conservatives (the third Polish force alongside the two “modern” camps led by Józef Piłsudski and Roman Dmowski), who had little to bring to the debate on modernism, at least in the *kresy*.

3 Modernization through Intervention

The Polesia voivodeship was the least developed region in the Republic of Poland in terms of economy, literacy and urbanization. There were no paved roads linking the two largest cities of Brest and Pinsk. To invert an expression by Kate Brown, Polesia, during the time of the Republic of Poland, went from a Russian and Slavic primordial heartland²¹ to a Polish borderland²². Previously in the Russian empire, there had been numerous landscapes and regions that were economically underdeveloped like Polesia, and that had been traditionally undevelopable using traditional measures, and there were also many regional, religious and tribal identities that had intertwined with each other, but not necessarily formed “Russian” identities. In the Republic of Poland, however, the backwardness of the swampy Polesian voivodeship, which covered 10 per cent of the total area of the state territory, stood out as unique.

In wars, modernizations, especially technical innovations, served the concrete goal of military intervention. During the twentieth century, in times of at least relative peace, when the monopoly on the use of force mostly lay with the state, the situation was the other way around: modernization was the goal

²⁰ “The [Russian] multi-ethnic empire was nationalized by the war.” JÖRG BABEROWSKI: *Der Anfang vom Ende*, in: *Osteuropa* 64 (2014), pp. 7-20, here p. 19.

²¹ MAX VASMER: *Die Urheimat der Slawen*, in: WILHELM VOLZ (ed.): *Der ostdeutsche Volksboden: Aufsätze zu den Fragen des Ostens*, Breslau 1926, pp. 118-143.

²² KATE BROWN: *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*, London 2003.

and non-military interventions and permanent reforms were the means. By focusing on cities and industrialization, these modernization efforts tended to neglect innovations in agricultural technology and initiatives to improve the social situation of the rural population. Nevertheless, in an agrarian state like Poland, the focus inevitably shifted to village conditions and rural areas. In this respect, Poland was not a special case in Europe. In other regions across the continent there were model projects in specialization, mechanization, agrarian structural reforms and land melioration, the latter both in the broader sense (for example, the use of natural and artificial fertilizers) and in the narrower sense (the draining or irrigation of soils). These could all be regarded as modernization initiatives.

But still, the question was frequently asked at that time: how should modernization proceed? How should non-military interventions be carried out in Polesian society, which was regarded as different and particularly stuck in the past? Was there to be a mass civil invasion of Polesia by the “Polish element”? Wouldn’t this lead to inevitable clashes and resistance? Shouldn’t the situation of the native population be improved economically and socially through agrarian reform and the development and opening up of new land?

There were also voices that were expressly against the modernization of Polesia. The sociologist and war veteran Zygmunt Czarnowski proposed that as wide a corridor of land as possible along Poland’s eastern border be left in its wild state and be neither populated nor industrialized so that the (Soviet) enemy would be offered no easy prey if they attacked.²³ Conservationists made a similar proposal, namely, to completely meliorate the swamplands in western Polesia but to leave a 160,000 hectare area owned by the Radziwiłł family near Davyd-Haradok and to establish a nature park there.²⁴ But such ideas ultimately went unnoticed.

²³ STEFAN ZYGMUNT CZARNOWSKI: W sprawie określenia granic strategicznych państwa polskiego: Studium wojskowo-geograficzne [On (the matter of) Defining the Strategic Boundaries of the Polish State: Military-geographic Study], Warszawa 1921, pp. 3-4, 35.

²⁴ STANISŁAW KULCZYŃSKI: Park natury na Polesiu i jego stosunek do planu meljoracji: Odczyt wygłoszony na 12-stym Zjeździe dorocznym Państwowej Rady Ochrony Przyrody w Warszawie w dn. 11 stycznia 1930 r. [The Nature Park in Polesia and Its Relation to the Melioration Plan: Address at the 12th Annual Congress of the State Council for Nature Conservation in Warsaw on 11 January 1930], in: Ochrona Przyrody 10 (1930) [1931], p. 6. See also Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN) [Archive of New Files], Warsaw, holding 2678, sign. 2, f[olio] 264, which speaks of a “national park” (*park narodowy*). From 1929 onwards, the *Białowieża puszczę*, which was not described as a swampland area but as a lowland forest (*puszcza, pušča*), became home to a protected area where bison were released into the wild. Later, a national park was established here, cf. THOMAS M. BOHN, ALIAKSANDR DALHOUSKI, MARKUS KRZOSKA: Wisent-Wildnis und Welterbe: Geschichte des polnisch-weißrussischen Nationalparks von Białowieża, Köln et al. 2017, pp. 87-89, 116-117.

4 Agricultural Structures and Production in Polesia

In swampland areas it is particularly difficult to determine the proportion of types of land use. Depending on the water level, a biotope located in a transitional area between the land and the water where there is no fixed shoreline can be an inaccessible wetland, a fishing zone, a haymaking area and (in winter) an iced-over transport route, all within the course of a year. In the voivodeship of Polesia, only 23 per cent of the land was arable.²⁵ A family who owned a small six-hectare property, for example, would not nearly be able to grow enough food there to sustain itself. Much of the land was so barren that it was made available free of charge for grazing so that the manure from the livestock could be used for fertilization. The forests, on the other hand, could not easily be managed so as to produce as large a timber yield as possible. The estimate made by a railway engineer in 1923 that a forest would generate four cubic meters of wood per year per hectare²⁶, had to be rounded down to one cubic meter, at least for the region around Tseliakhany.²⁷

The supply of food in rural Polesia was therefore only partly ensured by the cultivation of field crops. Livestock farming, but above all fishing, gathering forest plants and hunting small wild animals formed the main means of subsistence in hard times. Without the use of modern equipment, cultivation of grain meant an extensification of the work and, in this sense, agriculture was not a sensible alternative in Polesia.

Rural agriculture was based on individual and collective ownership of land, which was not easy to exploit. In Polesia, however, the middle class of landowners who had between 15 and 50 hectares of land only made up nine per cent of all the region's farms. Even families belonging to this land-owning class could only seldom afford service personnel, permanent farm hands²⁸ or leases. The size of the average farm was of little significance anyway if 47 per cent of the region's 208,814 farms had less than five hectares and 24 per cent had less than two hectares of land that was not necessarily productive. Understandably, there was a real hunger for land. At the other end of the scale

²⁵ "Arable land" (*grunty orne*) in 1931, according to Mały Rocznik Statystyczny 10 (1939), p. 72; for the distribution according to districts, see STEFAN RYCHŁOWSKI: *Dzisiejszy stan problemu meljoracji Polesia* [The Problem of the Melioration of Polesia as It Stands Today], Warszawa 1937, p. 10.

²⁶ [OKTAWIUSZ] NELARD (ed.): *Polesie ilustrowane: Monografia. Praca zbiorowa* [Polesia Illustrated: A Monography. Collected Volume], Brześć n/B 1923, p. 111.

²⁷ MARIAN STANISŁAW POŁOWICZ: *Wielkopole na front poleski! Projekt kolonizacji Polesia wieśniakami z Wielkopolski* [Wielkopolish [people] on the Polesian Front! A Project of Polesia Colonization with Villagers from Wielkopolska], Poznań 1931, p. 22. 3.6 m³/ha annually for the whole of Belarus 1911-1913 is cited by EUGEN VON ENGELHARDT: *Weißruthenien*, Leipzig 1943, p. 312. For a comparison: *Waldbericht der Bundesregierung 2017, Langfassung*, Bonn 2017, p. 12, quotes 11.2 m³ (with bark) as the (average) yield for Germany; RYCHŁOWSKI (as in footnote 25), p. 22, assumes 1.5 m³ per year and ha.

²⁸ *Drugi powszechny spis* (as in footnote 4), pp. 67-68; especially about the military settlers (*osadnicy*): KACPRZAK (as in footnote 15), p. 296.

were 1,488 farms (0.7 per cent of the region's farms) with over 50 hectares of land, including 202 (or 0.1 per cent of all farms) with over 1,000 hectares.²⁹ Although the landowner Roman Orwid-Bulicz, who possessed 4,500 hectares, complained that people exaggerated the extent of his wealth³⁰, it was however true that the social stratification in western Polesia remained virtually pre-modern.

There were not only psychological but also very real remnants of the serfdom that had been abolished across the Russian Empire in 1861. When the Polish state set up its voivodeship administration in Brest, there were still cases of easements within the agricultural constitution that stipulated that farming families held rights of use to pastureland, timber and other products of the forest. In addition, the land tenure system was characterized by partitioning of inherited [arable] land and even the land of small farms was fragmented, sometimes into dozens of individual plots.³¹ The land in the western territories of the former Russian Empire was thus caught up in a complex and sometimes conflicted set of legal circumstances. The fact that there had been no *obshchina* (redistribution and tax liability communities) in western Polesia at least made the transition from individual fields to modern saleable property titles easier, but the situation described above complicated the process of transforming farms into enterprises that could produce for the market. It was the express will of the modernizers, however, that the Polesian farming families should no longer operate a self-sufficient economy without surpluses from their agricultural production being made available for sale. In the Republic of Poland, especially in the eastern regions, farming families were asked to spend the winter months working on folk crafts (*przemysł ludowy*) like, for example, textile work.³²

4.1 Military Settlement (*osadnictwo wojskowe*)

The Sejm had stipulated in January 1921³³ that deserving soldiers and officers should receive a piece of land in the eastern regions of the Republic. This proposal was controversial, but the Sejm majority was in a hurry to provide

²⁹ LUDWIK GRODZICKI (ed.): *Struktura posiadania mniejszej własności rolnej na Ziemiach Wschodnich* (według danych Statystyki Produkcji Rolnej z 1931 r.). Z. 4: *Województwo Poleskie* [The Ownership Structure of Small Agricultural Properties in the Eastern Territories According to the Agricultural Production Statistics of 1931], fasc. 4: *Polesian Voivodeship*], Warszawa 1938, pp. 17, 33.

³⁰ ROMAN ORWID-BULICZ: *Der Preis des Sieges*, Bonn 1967, pp. 9, 18, 22.

³¹ *Rolnictwo na Polesiu* [Agriculture in Polesia], in: *Polesie: Tygodniowe Pismo* from 1928-08-05, p. 4; CICHORACKI, *Województwo* (as in footnote 14), p. 60.

³² JANINA ORYŃZYNA: *Przemysł ludowy na województwach: wileńskim, nowogródzkim, poleskim i wołyńskim* [Folk Industry in the Voivodeships of Vilnius, Navahrudak, Polesia and Volyn], Warszawa 1927, p. 10; cf. also AAN, 2678, sign. 2, f. 1-5.

³³ *Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* (Dz. U. R.P.) from 1921-01-12, pos. 17-18. For details on the legal texts, see BENECKE, *Ostgebiete* (as in footnote 16), pp. 125-126.

the now demobilized military personnel with land and housing. Those eligible to apply for land in the eastern voivodeships were therefore former, non-active military personnel. There was a majority ruling in favor of the law, partly because the affected regions had no representatives in parliament—due to the Polish-Soviet War and the unclear borderlines, the population there did not elect their representatives for the Sejm and senate until the next elections at the end of 1922. It was not only the Belarusian and Ukrainian locals who raised sharp objections to this settlement program, but also Polish columnists and even the (Polish) aristocracy in the eastern regions were against it.³⁴ It was feared—and rightly so, as it turned out—that the settlement would be seen as an intervention with a national undertone and would entail ethnic, social and perhaps also religious upheavals.

Only a small proportion of the applicants were assigned a plot of land. After 1923, the allocation process was slowed down. Polesia was less affected than the drier neighboring voivodeships of Volyn and Navahrudak. As a result, only around 30,000, at the very most 40,000 hectares³⁵ of generally good, but still Polesian land was given to the families and (also not infrequently) to individual “military” settlers. This foreign landscape, inhabited by Christian-Orthodox Belarusians and Ukrainians—or, in the shtetls, mainly Jews—seemed to the newcomers to be a wild and untamed landscape. Here, it was seen as important to cultivate one’s esprit de corps or at least one’s “Polish” contacts, both formally in the Settlers’ Association (*Związek Osadników*) and informally when, for example, the head of the district council (*starosta*) would ensure that the punishment for causing an altercation in the marketplace be waived if the perpetrator was found to be a settler.³⁶ The military settlers (*osadnicy*), many of whom were officers, became isolated, not only because their literacy set them apart culturally from the local people, who could often not read or write, but also socially. The average *osadnik* farm had a much larger area of land suitable for agriculture and development³⁷ and probably also better soil³⁸ and, despite the new landowners’ often lacking

³⁴ KACPRZAK (as in footnote 15), p. 136; cf. HENSCHER (as in footnote 14).

³⁵ The average size of the allotted plots of land in Polesia was 23 ha, cf. KACPRZAK (as in footnote 15), p. 241, and the highest number of military settlers mentioned in the literature was 1,378, cf. *ibidem*, p. 240; in 1921, 22,544 ha were designated to *osadnictwo wojskowe*, cf. *ibidem*, p. 236.

³⁶ Cf. the account from the 1930s by JÓZEF MACKIEWICZ: *Okna zatkałe szmatami* [Windows Clogged with Rags], Londyn 2007, p. 131; STANISŁAW ORSINI-ROSENBERG: *Zagadnienia styczne polityki gospodarczej i technologii społecznej na Ziemiach Wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej* [Tangential Issues of Economic Policy and Social Technology in the Eastern Territories of the Republic], Warszawa 1928, p. 45, describes, in this context, the protectionism in private life in the Eastern Territories.

³⁷ *Ėkonomičeskaja istorija Belarusi* [Economic History of Belarus], Minsk 2005, p. 252.

³⁸ So at least in the contemporary text by MACKIEWICZ (as in footnote 36), p. 131.

technical and local knowledge, these farms could produce higher crop yields than those of the autochthonous peasant smallholder farmers.³⁹

As a rule, it was ethnic Poles who received land⁴⁰, but an administrative record shows that having fought in the Polish Legions was also considered sufficient evidence of one's Polishness, or at least of one's entitlement to a farm homestead.⁴¹

But, as quantitatively small as the *osadnictwo* in Polesia and even in the neighboring voivodeships remained⁴², the phenomenon gave rise to antagonizing forces and a mutual sense of otherness due to the propaganda campaign that accompanied it. In the case of a complete *osadnik* settlement with several farms this is immediately obvious, but even single-farm families whose children attended the village school with local children experienced a kind of segregation because of differences in colloquial language and religious denominations. In order to gain influence in villages, the Communist Party of Western Belarus (KPZB), which was otherwise rather insignificant, strengthened (and in some cases awakened) anti-Polish attitudes towards the settlers by portraying them as outsiders and infiltrators.

However, considering the region recorded a higher number of births than deaths,⁴³ these settlers, of which there were around 6,000, only contributed marginally to the population growth.

From 1921 to 1931 the population of the voivodeship increased from 880,898 to 1,131,939⁴⁴, of which 134,301 were war refugees and returned evacuees (repatriates).⁴⁵ The landscape structure of the voivodeship, which in 1930 covered 3,666,500 hectares, was only marginally altered by the around 1,000 settler farms. However, a great deal of social damage was done to the region with very little effort.

³⁹ JANINA STOBNIAK-SMOGORZEWSKA: *Kresowe osadnictwo wojskowe 1920-1945* [Military Settlement in the Kresy, 1920-1945], Warszawa 2003, p. 243.

⁴⁰ 10,607 military settlers were listed, though no source citation is given for this figure by RYSZARD SYS: *Osadnicy wojskowi: Lista kompletna* [Military Settlers: The Complete List], URL: http://kresy.genealodzy.pl/zbior/pdf/osadnicy_wojskowi.pdf (2018-11-08).

⁴¹ AAN, holding 9 (Ministry of the Interior), sign.1382, f. 495, from 1926-03-31.

⁴² See also TERPIŁOWSKA: *Rozkład gęstości zaludnienia w budynkach mieszkalnych na Polesiu* [Distribution of Population Density in Residential Buildings in Polesia], ca. 1936, in: AAN, 2678, sign. 2, ff. 279-293, here f. 283.

⁴³ *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny* 10 (1939), p. 42: Even in the 1930s there was an annual birth surplus of 19,000 people; cf. CICHORACKI, *Województwo* (as in footnote 14), pp. 15-16.

⁴⁴ *Drugi powszechny spis* (as in footnote 4), p. 251. To be added to this figure are the 181,284 inhabitants of the Sarny district, which was separated from the Polesian voivodeship in 1930.

⁴⁵ CICHORACKI, *Województwo* (as in footnote 14), p. 27.

4.2 Land Parceling

In view of the advancing Red Army, the Sejm passed an agricultural reform law in 1920⁴⁶, which was modified and also applied in the eastern regions of the Polish Republic in 1921.⁴⁷ There was no particular sympathy for Soviet Russia, and Lenin's land decree of 1917 had long since discredited itself due to the fact that a requisition economy known as "war communism" prevailed in Soviet territory; despite this, however, the peasant families also felt little incentive to fight for the Republic of Poland. The law was intended to remedy this and provided exactly what the villagers understood by an agricultural reform: more land for the farming families. In the eastern regions, the state had sufficient land at its disposal, which had belonged to the Russian Empire.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, for years to come, the authorities reneged on the legally scheduled land parceling in all but a few cases. In 1925, a further law was passed, providing for a change of ownership of 200,000 hectares of land per year throughout Poland.⁴⁹ This was far too small to satisfy the hunger for land of a population that was, especially in the case of Polesia, growing at a particularly rapid rate. At the beginning of 1926 and 1927 respectively—the dates prove that there is no direct correlation with the establishment of Piłsudski's *Sanacja* regime—small parts of the properties of some large landowners were expropriated against full compensation. The list of those affected⁵⁰ included all the names of the aristocracy, but other landowners also had to sell sections of land measuring between 10 and 1,000 hectares. The question of the quality of the land and to whom it was sold remains to be clarified. There is also no evidence for the claim⁵¹ that more than half of the parceled land was given to *osadnicy*, as they had generally received their land years before. After a few years, the land parceling measures in Polesia—and in other places as well—were scaled back again. Due to the parceling, which theoretically made immediate sense to the farming families but also entailed high costs, ten to twenty thousand farms in the voivodeship were able to be enlarged during the 1920s, and several thousand new farms could be created.⁵²

⁴⁶ Dz. U. R.P. (1920), 70, pos. 462, law from 1920-07-15.

⁴⁷ Dz. U. R.P. (1921), 81, pos. 559, law from 1921-09-15.

⁴⁸ Initially, there were discussions on the expropriation of the land belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church, which was then partly carried out. However, already in the mid-1920s, the authorities refrained from continuing with this because of a general consensus that the Orthodox Church be Polonized rather than destroyed.

⁴⁹ Law from 1925-12-28, in: Dz. U. R.P. (1926), 1, pos. 1, from 1926-01-09; cf. ZBIGNIEW LANDAU, JERZY TOMASZEWSKI: *Wirtschaftsgeschichte Polens im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1986, p. 133.

⁵⁰ Dz. U. R.P. (1927), 2, pos. 13, point 9, ordinance from 1927-01-05.

⁵¹ U. A. PALUJAN: *Asadniki [Military Settlers]*, in: *Encykłapedyja Historyi Belarusi*. Vol. 1: A-Belitsa, Minsk, 1993, p. 202.

⁵² MATEUSZ Z POLESIA: *Polesie dziś i dawniej [Polesia Today and in Former Times]*, Brześć n. Bugiem 1930, p. 13.

4.3 Dissolution of Easements

The second aspect of the agricultural reform alongside the land parceling was already addressed in the first half of the 1920s, namely, the dissolution of the easements covering 321,232 hectares in Polesia⁵³ (nine per cent of the total area) and affecting over 15 per cent of the region's farms. Since these pasture and forest easements were assigned to entire village communities, their dissolution was often fraught with complications. And because—at least according to the observations of the Polish landowner Franciszek Wysłouch⁵⁴—at least a part of the village population considered the forest as general property and the pastures as belonging to the village, and also because easement rights had been fixed in writing, many farmers resisted their dissolution, even if, in return, they could now call a part of the pastureland or forest their own. A crucial factor for the farming families was a guaranteed amount of grass to feed their cattle and the right to gather mushrooms or catch small game.

Wysłouch knew local people, who he called *ochotniki*, who not only saw the forest as their home, but also spent a large part of their lives there⁵⁵, so the perceived line from rightful hunting to poaching was easily crossed. But the surveying work in Polesia progressed and, by 1933, a total of 118,780 hectares⁵⁶ of easements had been dissolved, thus allowing easier purchase and sale of pieces of land.

After inflation subsided, i.e. from 1924 on, land prices began to be calculated and collated. Polesia had the lowest land prices in Poland and they also differed considerably within the voivodeship.⁵⁷ Prices were higher around Brest and Kobryn as well as in “dry Polesia” and “agriculture Polesia” in the northwest⁵⁸ while in “transitional” and “wet” Polesia they remained low. In principle, the dissolution of the easements made it easier to sell land, but the landowners could only sell at low prices on the market.⁵⁹

⁵³ Rizhskii mir (as in footnote 8), p. 252.

⁵⁴ FRANCISZEK WYSŁOUCH: *Echa Polesia* [The Echo of Polesia], Łomianki n.d., pp. 177-184.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 177-185.

⁵⁶ HARALD LAEUN: *Polnische Agrarprobleme*, in: *Osteuropa: Zeitschrift für die gesamten Fragen des europäischen Ostens* 10 (1934), 1, pp. 14-28, here pp. 20-21. 1934-1938 in the whole of Poland, it had only been 43,800 ha, cf. *Mały Rocznik statystyczny* 10 (1939), pp. 70-71, tab. 3 A-B.

⁵⁷ STEFAN BISKUPSKI: *Ceny ziemi w województwie poleskiem w latach 1924-1929 / Prix de terres au département de Polesie en 1924-1929*, Warszawa 1931.

⁵⁸ On this term, see LUDWIK GRODZICKI: *Kilka słów o możliwościach kolonizacyjnych Polesia obecnie i po przeprowadzeniu melioracji* [A Few Words about the Colonization Possibilities of Polesia Now and after the Melioration], in: *Rocznik Ziemi Wschodnich i kalendarz na rok* (1937), pp. 177-182, here p. 177.

⁵⁹ WOJCIECH ŚLESZYŃSKI, ANNA WŁODARCZYK (ed.): *Jarmarki Poleskie—próba aktywizacji życia gospodarczego* [Polesian Fairs—an Attempt to Revive the Economic Life], Kraków 2013, p. 9.

The conflicts around illegal logging in forests and other such rural uses of land continued. When Orwid-Bulicz fled from the advancing Soviet army in September 1939, leaving his property to seek refuge in the west, he described how an inner voice told him that, by “constantly reporting on the local peasants’ poaching and timber theft” instead of turning a blind eye, he himself was to blame for their support of the invaders.⁶⁰

4.4 Land Consolidation

The third part of what was called agricultural reform involved abolishing the deeply interconnected arrangement of many very small and geographically scattered fields of various shapes and sizes. The agronomists considered the existing structure of the fields to be particularly unprofitable. And it was true that the farming families had to travel long distances and, in some cases, were unable to make use of valuable cultivated land because of the many property boundaries and long, narrow fields. However, the modernizers overlooked the fact that this complex interconnection of properties had a social function for families, family associations and village communities, namely, the obligation of solidarity within villages. Polesia had become more tightly close-knit and, due to the high birthrate, there were many families⁶¹, and thus also a large number of heirs among whom the rights to arable land had to be redistributed.

In Polesia, the amount of arable land within the agriculturally used areas was below average, that is, the size of an area of land needed to satisfy the needs of a family had to be larger here than in central and western Poland. For this reason, it seemed advantageous, from an economical point of view, to locate the farms as *khutora* (individual farmsteads outside of the village settlements). In fact, the land consolidation in Polesia, which was difficult to plan without land surveyors, was mainly carried out in the second half of the 1930s. By far the largest part of the 530,850 hectares (11-14 per cent of the total area of the voivodeship) of land consolidation in Polesia took place between 1929 and 1939.

In 1938, the *Polesie* newspaper was pleased to report that “the farmers understood the purpose” of the land consolidation.⁶² Was this assertion really true? The fact is that considerable areas of plots of land were consolidated. The total area of the merged plots was greater than the area of land assigned to the *osadnicy*, the parceled-out land and the areas affected by dissolved easements put together, as can be seen in the following summary.

⁶⁰ ORWID-BULICZ (as in footnote 30), p. 17.

⁶¹ Drugi powszechny spis (as in footnote 4), p. 4, counted 182,389 mostly one-room “flats and households” in the “villages;” JÓZEF OBRĘBSKI: *Polesie*, Warszawa 2007 [1936], p. 418, mistakenly recognized in this process mainly a dissolution of the extended family.

⁶² Komasaćja [Land Consolidation], in: *Polesie: Tygodniowe Pismo* from 1938-09-18, p. 7.

Areas Affected by Modernization and Settlement Interventions in the Voivodeship of Polesia in km ² , 1921-1939 ⁶³						
Dissolved easements	Land parceling	Land consolidation	Land allocation to <i>osadnicy</i>	Melioration	Total	Land needed for the nature park project
1,200	2,240	5,308.5	up to 400	580 to 660	approx. 9,900	approx. 1,600

In Soviet and post-Soviet Belarusian historiography with its productivist approach (i.e. the assumption that more production of goods is basically good), it was not the land consolidation as such that was criticized, but the fact that those affected by it had to share a substantial portion of the costs as well as having to relocate to individual farmsteads (*khutora*) outside of the village, which was part of this “objectively progressive phenomenon”...⁶⁴ The contemporary modernizers attested to a reclusive, stubborn and gruff conservatism among the Polesian people. But what does this mean in concrete terms? The families usually lived in village communities,⁶⁵ and relocating to a *chutor*, which would have encouraged a solitary mindset and lifestyle, would in fact have been anything *but* conservative, it would have meant *not* living in a village community that—ostensibly or actually—gave people security and sociality.

The new land obtained through the plot consolidation process went to the local people. This may perhaps explain why so much land area was able to be merged. For the locals, land consolidation meant weighing up having “more land” or “more sociality.” But for the intervenors, namely, the authorities with their land surveyors, Polesia was not a top priority, because, with the same effort, land consolidation could be achieved to greater effect in non-

⁶³ On the land parceling, cf. CICHORACKI, Województwo (as in footnote 14), p. 59; on the land consolidation, cf. ibidem, p. 61. In the four voivodeships of *kresy wschodnie* according to WLADYSLAW STUDNICKI: Das östliche Polen, Kitzingen-Main 1953, p. 148, 269,300 ha were subject to melioration works; a total of 66,000 ha (at a cost of 16,000,000 zloty), see: Polesia: Tygodniowe Pismo from 1938-11-13, p. 7; for the purposes of comparison: a total of 1,850 km² of land was opened up at the Zuiderzee, URL: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zuiderzeewerke#Die_Polder (2019-02-10).

⁶⁴ Rizhskii mir (as in footnote 8), p. 253; cf. BENECKE, Ostgebiete (as in footnote 16), p. 86.

⁶⁵ Skorowidz miejscowości Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. Cz. 8: Województwo Polesskie: Opracowany na podstawie wyników pierwszego powszechnego spisu ludności z dnia 30 września 1921 r. i innych źródeł urzędowych [Index of Polish Places. Pt. 8: Polesian Voivodeship: Processed on the Basis of the Results of the First General Census of 30 September 1921 and Other Official Sources], Warszawa 1924. In the three systematically selected municipalities (*gmina*) of Berezhnitsa Baikii and Brodnitsa, (not counting cities) 94%, 91% and 93%, respectively, lived in villages (according to calculation by D. S.), with an average of 680, 133 and 273 inhabitants, respectively.

swampy, more productive areas (especially in western Galicia where there were many extremely narrow fields) than in the impassable Polesia.

5 Melioration

Land consolidation was accelerated at a time when the project to carry out comprehensive and extensive land melioration in Polesia was no longer being seriously pursued.

5.1 International Models

The desired melioration (in the narrower sense of making land cultivatable and increasing its yield through irrigation) could be modeled on a number of land melioration projects that had already been successfully carried out in the Netherlands as well as in the Rhine, Ems, Weser, Oder and Warta river valleys and, to a lesser extent, also in eastern Polesia. In addition, experts and the local press followed with interest a number of melioration works that were taking place elsewhere in Europe, for example in the Pontine Marshes south of Rome.⁶⁶ The projects in Polesia gained momentum after the League of Nations had addressed the issue of a comprehensive melioration in favor of the development of waterways.⁶⁷ However, the fact that Dutch specialists were to be involved⁶⁸ aroused suspicion in Warsaw and Brest⁶⁹, because, though they were considered leading experts in their field, their work in land reclamation was known to involve tactics of modern social engineering with a strong element of state participation.⁷⁰

In any case, some peculiarities of Polesia had to be taken into account, such as the remarkable fact that the watershed between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea was situated here in the swampland.⁷¹ To avoid being limited to individual interventions, it was necessary for the authorities to employ a general plan in order to create usable land throughout Polesia.

5.2 The Advantage of Simultaneously Implemented Measures

There was a considerable practical problem associated with implementing the various melioration measures, which included the dissolution of easements,

⁶⁶ *Express Poleski* from 1933-01-15, p. 2.

⁶⁷ Commission consultative et technique des communications et du transit: Note du Comité d'experts mis à la disposition du Gouvernement polonais par la Société des Nations sur l'assèchement des marais de la Pologne, Genève 1927.

⁶⁸ GRAŻYNA RUSZCZYK: *Polesie: Fotografie z lat dwudziestych i trzydziestych* [Polesia: Photographs from the 1920s and 1930s], Warszawa 1996.

⁶⁹ MATEUSZ Z POLESIA (as in footnote 52), p. 13.

⁷⁰ LIESBETH VAN DE GRIFT: "On New Land a New Society": Internal Colonisation in the Netherlands, 1918-1940, in: *Contemporary European History* 22 (2013), 4, pp. 609-626, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777313000386>.

⁷¹ STANISŁAW KULCZYŃSKI: *Peat Bogs of Polesie*, Cracovie 1949, p. 29.

the parceling out of land and the settlement of military personnel. It would have been cost effective and more efficient to carry out all this work at the same time. For example, non-meliorated areas of peat could not be parceled out effectively.⁷² Furthermore, the wastewater drains ideally would be dug along the boundaries of plots of land that had already been consolidated, parceled and redistributed, while dissolving the easements could even hinder the process of land consolidation (which ended up being carried out a decade later).⁷³ It was complicated to reach an agreement on land drainage, in particular on a fair share of the costs, if an additional land consolidation was planned. And melioration work could also be carried out without thinking about the waterways, “but that wouldn’t end up being a single penny cheaper”.⁷⁴

By about 1928, the Hryuda and Asipauka rivers had been regulated and the Żyliński, the Queen Bona and the Motykalski canals had been rebuilt⁷⁵; these waterways had been damaged during the wars. They were all located in the western part of the voivodeship, which was more “Polish.”

5.3 Aims of the Various Actors

The idea of a possible improvement of Polesian land, i.e. of land melioration, inspired and spurred on a number of politicians, planners and engineers, who saw enormous potential in such an undertaking. The existing cultivated area would produce considerably higher yields⁷⁶, and new areas of land would also be able to be opened up for use. As mentioned above, one third of Polesia was considered to be poorly used swampland.

As early as 1923, the future Prime Minister Władysław Grabski propagated the idea of “executing melioration works for the strengthening of colonization.”⁷⁷

This was not an isolated opinion. But how much truth is there to the claim of a Belarusian anthology that “the Polish government, with its 1928 plan of draining the swamps and the system of drained areas of land, was pursuing, above all, political objectives—the Polish [sic!] colonization of western Belarus?”⁷⁸ In fact, in a speech he gave in Brest on 31 July 1926, the Minister of

⁷² AAN, 13/0: Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Reform Rolnych w Warszawie [Ministry for Agriculture and Agricultural Reform in Warsaw], 1919-1925, sign. 277, not pag.

⁷³ T. WID: Polesie w okresie rządów pomajowych [Polesia within the Period of Post-May Governments], Brześć n. B. 1928, pp. 19-20.

⁷⁴ T. T. TILLINGER: Drogi wodne na Polesiu [Waterways in Polesia], in: Kalendarz Ziemi Wschodnich na rok 1935, pp. 209-212, here p. 212.

⁷⁵ WID (as in footnote 73), p. 24.

⁷⁶ The League of Nations had named a number of concrete examples from the Zhilinskii Expedition from the 1870s on; see: Commission consultative et technique (as in footnote 67).

⁷⁷ F. KON: Zapadnaia Belorussia—koloniia panskoi Pol’shi [Western Belarus—a Colony of the Poland of the Pans], Moskva 1928, p. 5.

⁷⁸ Rizhskij mir (as in footnote 7), p. 240.

Agricultural Reform, Witold Staniewicz, stated that Polesia should be considered “a colonization area following the melioration works and, as such, a place where people from the more overpopulated parts [of Poland], especially from the southern part of the country, should be encouraged to settle.”⁷⁹ The author of a report in the yearbook of the Society for the Development of the Eastern Territories (*Towarzystwo Rozwoju Ziem Wschodnich*, TRZW) claimed that even if a large proportion of the “new land” were sold to locals, “the draining of Polesia could create enough land to accommodate 50,000 families [!] of Polish colonists without there being a need to subdivide and redistribute land already in Polish hands.”⁸⁰ Another anonymous author, on the other hand, argued exclusively from the perspective of Polish interests:

“The eastern territories have an agricultural significance for Poland, where many provinces are overpopulated. With the help of colonization, it would be possible and even easy to settle the Polish majority in Polesia. Our ideological disputes with Russia over [Poland’s] eastern territories have led to fifteen wars and three uprisings. This can only be settled in two ways: the colonization of the eastern territories by Polish elements and a process of assimilation.”

He went even further by claiming that, because the indigenous rural population were “negligent in raising the productive level of their economy,” “parceling out the drained land among the local farmers would equate to nullifying the melioration efforts”.⁸¹ Finally, the government newspaper *Gazeta Polska* reported in 1934 that Polesia “should be defined as a territory intended for expansion [!] and *osadnictwo*” and that “melioration and settlement projects should only be developed according to those points of view that take into account the necessary requirements for defending the state.”⁸²

On the other hand, some of the journalism written from the side of the *Sanacja* saw “great opportunities” in the melioration of Polesia, independent of any colonization projects. The *Sanacja* apologist T. Wid wrote enthusiastically in a book published in Polish and Yiddish about the possibility of draining 1,600,000 hectares of swampland in Polesia, about how the government would cover 40-50 per cent of the costs and that loans of up to 70 per cent of the total amount would be granted for the draining of individual areas for a period of up to nine years.⁸³ These figures are an indication that, on the one hand, the public sector did not want to (or could not) design the melioration as a fully financed national project and, on the other hand, they show that private individuals were not willing to carry out drainage works without subsidies and loans.

⁷⁹ WITOLD STANIEWICZ: Zagadnienie melioracji Polesia [The Issue of Draining Polesia], Wilno 1937, pp. 3-5.

⁸⁰ GRODZICKI, Kilka słów (as in footnote 58), p. 182; Rizhskii mir (as in footnote 8), p. 240.

⁸¹ H-SKI: Kolonizacja Polesia [Colonization of Polesia], in: *Słowo* (Wilno) from 1934-08-17, p. 7.

⁸² *Gazeta Polska* from 1934-03-23, according to Rizhskii mir (as in footnote 8), p. 241.

⁸³ Everything according to WID (as in footnote 73), p. 24.

Józef Poniatowski, a member of the Sejm, saw the drainage of the land as a prerequisite for possible colonization of Polesia through immigration.⁸⁴ He did not overlay this with any national or ethnic connotations, leaving the term “colonization” undefined. The longstanding voivode of Polesia, Waclaw Kostek-Biernacki, criticized the proposal that even melioration workers should be brought in from other regions. Such measures, he claimed, would deny the impoverished local population of employment and were turning people in the region against the state.⁸⁵

5.4 The Bureau

On 15 February 1928, on the eve of the world financial crisis, the Project Bureau for the Melioration of Polesia (*Biuro Projektu Melioracji Polesia*) was established by presidential decree⁸⁶ with the aim of “drawing up a plan for the general melioration of Polesia.”⁸⁷ The Ministry of Public Works, which was responsible for the initiative, had to release six million zloty within four years for these works⁸⁸—with an expected total expenditure of 276 million⁸⁹, according to other sources 330 million⁹⁰, and later 480 million zloty (including canal construction and “unforeseen costs”).⁹¹

The well-equipped bureau in Brest produced a number of project outlines and investigative geological, botanical and hydrological reports based on aerial photographs. On the basis of these findings, the experts involved discussed and debated the work that was to be carried out, however, they sometimes contradicted each other explicitly, for example with regard to the question of whether it was sensible to meliorate land in a subregion of Polesia be-

⁸⁴ JÓZEF PONIATOWSKI: Polesie w gospodarczej strukturze Polski [Polesia in the Economic Structure of Poland], Wilno 1934, p. 12.

⁸⁵ PIOTR CICHORACKI: Droga ku anatemie: Waclaw Kostek-Biernacki (1884-1957) [The Road towards Anathema: Waclaw Kostek-Biernacki (1884-1957)], Warszawa 2009, pp. 311-312.

⁸⁶ TOMASZEWSKI (as in footnote 13), p. 168; cf. JOSEF PRUCHNIK: Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen im Zusammenhang mit der Bearbeitung eines Entwässerungsplans der Sümpfe von Polesie in Polen. Verhandlungen der VI. Kommission der Internationalen bodenkundlichen Gesellschaft [special edition], Groningen 1932, p. 304.

⁸⁷ Dz. U. R.P. (1928), 17, p. 143, ordinance from 1928-02-15.

⁸⁸ Ibidem, § 4.

⁸⁹ BOLESŁAW POWIERZA, Inż.: O sfinansowaniu melioracji Polesia w warunkach 1934 roku [On Financing the Melioration of Polesia in the Conditions of 1934], in: Inżynieria Rolna (1934), 2-3, cited from the special edition, p. 4.

⁹⁰ J. RADZIKOWSKI: Kilka uwag w sprawie melioracji na Polesiu [A Few Comments on the Melioration in Polesia], in: Inżynieria Rolna (1926), 5, pp. 444-460, here pp. 446-447.

⁹¹ Ibidem, p. 447; Commission consultative et technique (as in footnote 67) calculated 450 million zloty.

fore an overall concept had been developed.⁹² However, this was not the main reason for the delay of the actual works.

5.5 Funding

The melioration work was to be “financed by state institutions (40 per cent), local organs of state power (40 per cent) and by the local population (20 per cent).”⁹³ But it was not just the families in the villages who were short of money. The economic crisis hit the country with full force in 1930, leading to annual negative economic growth until 1932, a fall in industrial production, which did not reach its pre-crisis level until 1937⁹⁴, and a considerable decrease in tax revenues. These conditions made the realization of such an expensive project impossible. Representatives of the state administration not only regarded the costs as high and the benefits as doubtful, but also suspected that the landowners would have no funds at their disposal and that the local “self-governments,”⁹⁵ which were also to share the costs, were too poor.⁹⁶ There are even reports that a melioration department was established in 1935 at a “private roads office” (*Prywatny Zarząd Drogowy*) operating in the district of Kosava, which tried to solve the financing problem by signing up local residents to perform *corvée* work.⁹⁷

5.6 Costs, Benefits and External Capital

Contemporaries were not unaware of the fact that, for example in the district of Luninets, only eight per cent of the agricultural area was actually used as arable land, but otherwise consisted of acidic soils, “which cannot be meliorated because this would require large sums of money.”⁹⁸

The clearer it became that Polish contributors alone could not afford the enormous costs of a complete melioration of Polesia, the more tempting the idea of attracting international funders became. The journalist and politician Władysław Studnicki explained:

⁹² E.g. JÓZEF PRUCHNIK, Inż.: Postępy prac przy melioracji Polesia: Referat (uzupełniony) wygłoszony na zebraniu tygodniowym P. T. P. w dniu 6 marca 1929 r. [Progress of Work on the Melioration of Polesie: Paper (Completed), Delivered at the Weekly Meeting of P. T. P. on 6 March 1929], in: *Czasopismo techniczne* (1929), pp. 135-141, here p. 140.

⁹³ *Ekonomicheskaja istoriia Belarusi* [Economic History of Belarus], Minsk 2004, p. 88; *Rizhskii mir* (as in footnote 8), pp. 240-241.

⁹⁴ *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny* (1939), p. 3, tab. 2.

⁹⁵ For the inaccuracy of the term “Selbstverwaltungen” (*samorządy*) see BENECKE, *Ostgebiete* (as in footnote 16), pp. 165 ff.

⁹⁶ POWIERZA (as in footnote 93), pp. 4-5.

⁹⁷ AAN, 2678, sign. 3, p. 18. Filled out questionnaire from the local group of Kosava (Kosowo) to the head office of the *Towarzystwo Rozwoju Ziemi Wschodnich* (Society for the Development of the Eastern Territories). Whether the proposal was implemented is not known.

⁹⁸ OBRĘBSKI (as in footnote 61), p. 325; cf. RYCHŁOWSKI (as in footnote 25), p. 10.

“If these works are to be carried out in the next few years, we will need foreign capital [...] In view of the fact that Holland is, above all, a country that specializes in drainage and land reclamation for agricultural purposes, it would be advisable to call on Dutch experts, with the help of Dutch capital, for the task of draining Polesia. If Dutch capital were to be brought in, we could combine all those legal entities responsible for the melioration of various state territories, on the condition that the selecting of colonists be made dependent on state authorities, namely, on a yet to be established colonial office.”⁹⁹

But the mistrust of potential investors with “foreign” capital prevailed. While offers from Jewish organizations were rejected due to rampant and on-going anti-Semitism—described, for example, by an author from the Poznan area¹⁰⁰—the reason for the aversion towards Dutch investors¹⁰¹ was primarily linked with the fear of land grabbing *avant la lettre* and the potential loss of Poland’s newly won independence.

5.7 The Results of Melioration

In 1934, the *Gazeta Poleska* reported that the project works for the melioration of Polesia were on the verge of completion. Due to the protracted general planning, only “sporadic and local” melioration had been carried out by then.¹⁰² Ultimately, between 1926 and 1936, only 58,000 hectares¹⁰³ were actually meliorated—according to later data 66,000 hectares¹⁰⁴—which, in view of the project costs, amounted to a costly enterprise. A phase of adequately harmonious German-Polish relations came to an end during the second half of the 1930s, and it was not long before one German author expressed scorn and mockery regarding the melioration works. Without evidence, he claimed that the project had “failed due to corruption.”¹⁰⁵ However, contemporary accounts reveal a burgeoning sense of uncertainty about the measures that should be taken, and the author Stefan Rychłowski finally proposed in 1937 that the melioration should be carried out gradually rather than all at once.¹⁰⁶ The fact that a lot could go wrong over the course of an exten-

⁹⁹ WŁADYSŁAW STUDNICKI: *Ziemie wschodnie, stan gospodarczy i widoki rozwoju* [The Eastern Territories: Economic Condition and Development Perspectives], Warszawa 1929, pp. 64-65; STANIEWICZ (as in footnote 79), p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ POŁOWICZ (as in footnote 27), p. 9; cf. H-SKI (as in footnote 81).

¹⁰¹ MATEUSZ Z POLESIA (as in footnote 52), p. 13.

¹⁰² INŻ. B. GALICKI, in: *Gazeta Poleska* from 1934-01-07, p. 7, excerpt in: AAN, holding 323/0, Akta Kazimierza Lewińskiego 1933-1934, sign. 64.

¹⁰³ *Historia Polski w liczbach. Tom 2: Gospodarka* [History of Poland in Numbers. Vol. 2: Economy], Warszawa 2006, p. 388.

¹⁰⁴ *Polesie: Tygodniowe Pismo* from 1938-11-13, p 7. *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny* (1938), p. 65.

¹⁰⁵ PETER ESCH [Erich Jaensch]: *Polen kreuz und quer: Blicke hinter die Kulissen*, Berlin 1939, p. 20; MARTIN BÜRGENER: *Pripet-Polessie. Das Bild einer polnischen Ostraumlanschaft*, Gotha 1939, p. 71, criticized in general the inactivity, but not the work or proposals, of the melioration bureau.

¹⁰⁶ RYCHŁOWSKI (as in footnote 25), p. 28.

sive melioration project was a justified concern, though one that was rarely expressed openly. In this respect, it is not only due to the more favorable propagandistic representability that, as Joachim Radkau remarks, governments generally prefer to build (and ceremoniously open) dams than to drain swamps.¹⁰⁷

5.8 Institutional Depoliticization, State Administration and the Interests of Local People as Factors Inhibiting the Melioration of Swamps

But did the project only fail due to a lack of money and chaotic organization? In the following, I would like at least to attempt to offer further explanations. It should be noted that these melioration projects were often connected with the idea that many families could move from Galicia, where there was a voracious hunger for land, and settle in Polesia. This classic colonialist notion was probably not liked by either the local villagers or the landowners. The question of what they would lose in the process was asked far too rarely. Meanwhile, the engineers, scientists and surveyors carried out their project work soberly and in accordance with the orders they had received, investigating soils, waterflow velocities, lakes, flora, fauna and drainage possibilities, irrespective of the social consequences.¹⁰⁸

However, it is striking how, during the 1930s, remarks appeared in periodicals, both in Polesia and beyond, reiterating again and again that there was no need for a great hullabaloo, extensive talks or any political struggle when it came to melioration; instead what was needed, their authors insisted, was simply the expertise of specialists. Behind the apparent objectivity of this approach we can observe not only an ignorance or lack of concern towards the non-technical and non-scientific world, but also an unwavering modernism, even a cult of science, technology and progress among the Polish milieu, which often regarded itself as a civilizing outpost.¹⁰⁹

Such colonialist, at best paternalistic posturing was encouraged by the fact that there was no regional legislature in the voivodeships, not even an elected advisory council. The Republic of Poland was conceived as a central state. Given the federal, noble-democratic traditions of the First Republic and the hate many political actors felt towards the centralist, autocratic Russian Empire as well as towards Prussia and then the German Empire up until the period before the First World War, this may seem astonishing. However, the reason for not introducing institutionalized legal bodies responsible for political decision making at the regional level, i.e. in the voivodeships, was not only due to the multi-ethnic make-up of these areas, but also because there

¹⁰⁷ JOACHIM RADKAU: *Natur und Macht: Eine Weltgeschichte der Umwelt*, München 2000, p. 111.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. for the wider context MARTIN KOHLRAUSCH, KATRIN STEFFEN et al. (eds.): *Expert Cultures in Central Eastern Europe: The Internationalization of Knowledge and the Transformation of Nation States since World War I*, Osnabrück 2010.

¹⁰⁹ MACKIEWICZ (as in footnote 36).

was a desire for resolute, unwavering governance and an eagerness to transcend the old, pre-war borders as soon as possible.¹¹⁰

Another phenomenon that further strengthened the cult around skilled technicians and specialists was the general depoliticization of politics and the state in the Polish Republic. While the nation's minorities were initially marginalized and even attacked using military force, as of 1926 and 1930 attempts were made to resolve Poland's internal dispute by means of mass arrests and detentions in internment camps on the one hand and, on the other, by effectively banishing party politics—initially at a creeping pace and then with increasing momentum—through the establishment of the “Non-party Alliance for Cooperation with the Government” (*Bezpartyjny Blok Współpracy z Rządem*, BBWR) with an explicit anti-political attitude. Such a course of action was probably the first of its kind in the history of European democracies!

The BBWR was successful in the elections and also admitted Jewish and Ukrainian representatives into its ranks.¹¹¹ It advocated not only a technocratic style of politics but also represented the grip that the state administration and several government-organized, but non-governmental organizations, had on the (actual) political sphere. This was covered up during Piłsudski's lifetime by the fact that he and a number of his loyal followers were full-blooded politicians. Melioration was not called into question by the BBWR, whose policies were modernist and, though supposedly apolitical, remained political at their core.

In the Sanacja camp there were certainly voices, like that of T. Wid, who wanted to improve the situation of Polesia's local population precisely by means of agricultural reform and land melioration measures, and thus also forge closer ties between this outlying population and the Republic.¹¹² On the other hand, openly colonialist representatives, such as the aforementioned Władysław Grabski, who mostly adhered to the current of national democracy, did not think beyond the idea of a “national assimilation” of Slavic

¹¹⁰ In the case of the German-Soviet occupation in 1939, the westward shift of Poland's borders and the founding of the equally Centralist People's Republic after 1945, the new rulers found this lack to be very convenient.

¹¹¹ ADAM PRAGIER: *Das Klima im Lande*, in: KLAUS STAEMMLER (ed.): *Polen aus erster Hand: Geschichte und Gegenwart in Berichten und Dokumenten*, Würzburg 1975, pp. 169-171, here p. 170, stresses that the *Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego* (Camp of National Unity), which was established in 1937 as an organization independent from the state, had adopted anti-Semitism, not from the Polish legions who were involved in the struggle for independence, nor from the BBWR, but from the National Democrats (*Endecja*); for Ukrainians cf. OLGA LINKIEWICZ: *Lokalność i nacjonalizm: Społeczności wiejskie w Galicji Wschodniej w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* [Localism and Nationalism: Rural Societies in Eastern Galicia in the Interwar Period], Kraków 2018, pp. 205-211.

¹¹² WID (as in footnote 73).

minorities – while, at the same time, “othering” the Jews and the Germans.¹¹³ However, this kind of national assimilation could not function in West Polesia if ethnic Poles were to settle there.¹¹⁴

For the local population, especially those living in rural areas, the question of who was meant to benefit from the melioration remained unanswered. They rightly feared that, given sufficient financial resources, Warsaw would have turned melioration into a national project accompanied by pompous fanfare. And even the Polish nobility living in Polesia were conspicuously silent on the matter.

5.9 Destruction by Melioration

Even if the draining of the swamps had been carried out in such a way as to bring about favorable financial conditions for the local population, it would still have meant a considerable interference in their traditional way of farming with a high proportion of water and forest management.¹¹⁵ Not everyone was aware that this local economy and art of living, which was based on extensive land use, intricate land tenure systems and a family-based economy that—in line with the ideas of Aleksandr Chayanov—aimed at satisfying the needs of the family rather than at expansion, was becoming less and less sustainable in the face of population growth. Moreover, a complete melioration would have made it impossible for locals to carry on with certain fundamental aspects of their traditional lives that outside observers often commiserated with or complained about, but which were also admired and even romanticized by many—namely, that the “Poleshuks” understood, not only how to gather protein-rich meats and animal products from waterways and forests¹¹⁶, but also knew how to produce the necessary tools themselves, even wooden bicycles¹¹⁷, and could therefore, for whatever unpleasant reasons may have necessitated it, live self-sufficiently. Were the Polesian farming families, in other words, ready for the greater integration with the commodity and monetary economy that melioration would bring about?

¹¹³ MAX ROSENFELD: Die Europäische Polenfrage und die polnische Judenfrage, in: *Der Jude* 2 (1917-1918), 10-11, pp. 642-654, here p. 646.

¹¹⁴ ORSINI-ROSENBERG (as in footnote 36), p. 46.

¹¹⁵ For instance, DAVID BLACKBOURN: *Die Eroberung der Natur*, München 2008, pp. 123-124, 132-140 for the Upper Rhine.

¹¹⁶ RADKAU (as in footnote 107), p. 159, suspects, with regard to the Pontine Marshes (that were drained under Benito Mussolini) that the locals, who had previously lived “from the abundance of fish in the lakes and waterways,” had no interest in the extensive melioration works.

¹¹⁷ Illustration in MAŁGORZATA SZEJNERT: *Usypać gory: Historie z Polesia*. [Raising Mountains: Stories from Polesia], Kraków 2015, p. 15.

5.10 A Monetary Economy in the Swamps: Taxes, Intermediary Trade, Conflicts of Interest and Ownership

The region's long-standing tradition of traveling abroad to work (*otchozhie promysly*) is enough to show that money was not demonized here. As was also common in other parts of Europe, the Polesian farming families found money particularly odious when they had to pass it over to the state as tax.

The state administration had an interest in collecting taxes¹¹⁸, which at times led to serious conflicts, but how the tax payers were meant to cope with this was of less interest to them. At no point did the authorities categorically and directly request the Polesian rural population to participate in the money and credit economy. After the civil war had come to an end and inflation was under control, no one fundamentally had anything against the use of money—the fact was simply that the rural population usually had none.

In the 1930s, on the other hand, the political actors, especially those of the Endecja, wanted to do away with small-scale intermediate trade. Some of the often anonymous writers of articles in Polesian newspapers spoke neutrally of merchants¹¹⁹, while others made explicit mention of Jews.¹²⁰ The suggested solution sounded simple enough: The Polesian farmers should receive more money by delivering their surplus goods directly to the consumers, who should therefore be able to buy at lower prices. Polish-managed sales companies and cooperatives were propagated as were Stefczyk banks, which—like the Raiffeisen agricultural credit cooperatives—granted loans in money and kind to smallholder farmers.

But modernizers complained that the local farmers would “sell to the Jews only” and turned other buyers away.¹²¹ As before, it was an enduring “conservatism” among the rural population that, again and again, had to serve as an explanation for this seemingly puzzling economic idiosyncrasy. It never occurred to the authors of such texts that the propagated sales companies represented a form of intermediary trade (which was, incidentally, bureaucratic in nature), that these companies, if successful, could even become a (quasi-monopolistic) market power, or that, during the civil war period when the local population was dealing with a cash shortage, “the Poles,” in contrast to “the Jews,” had simply requisitioned and robbed instead of paying for what they took.

In addition, the state and institutions closely linked with the government sometimes even themselves switched to a moneyless economy. Two further examples of this, in addition to the above-mentioned melioration carried out as *corvée* work, deserve mention: During the period of inflation at the beginning of the 1920s, the district administrations entered into lease agreements

¹¹⁸ Gazeta Poleska from 1934-03-11, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ Polesie: Tygodniowe Pismo from 1938-09-25, p. 8.

¹²⁰ For instance, *ibidem* from 1938-09-04, p. 4, and from 1938-09-18, p. 5.

¹²¹ Report on the situation in the municipality of Chuchevychi, in the Luninets district, in: AAN, holding 2478, 1935, sign. 9, f. 92.

that required rent to be paid in units of rye (in other cases, it was stipulated that payments be made in both cash and “rye currency”).¹²² Secondly, in the 1930s, when money became a scarce and expensive commodity due to a recession further exacerbated by an explicitly encouraged deflationary policy, the Agricultural Association of the Polesian Voivodeship responded by making it possible for farmers to pay their contributions into yet to be built village grain stores, not in zloty, but in the form of grain deliveries.¹²³ Through these kinds of measures, implemented by state or collective institutions, the farming families were urged to continue their moneyless economy and the Polesian village became further entrenched in its self-isolation.

In addition to the mistrust that locals felt towards the measures taken by third parties, which would have meant relinquishing their extensive economic framework, the complex and conflicted situation within Polesian villages, both literally and in a figurative sense, will also have led to the population’s general unwillingness to agree to melioration works.

In contrast to the activities at Zuiderzee/Ijsselmeer, where new land was quite literally seized from the water¹²⁴, or to the Soviet Union, where, after the brutal annihilation of so-called kulaks, there was no family ownership of land, not even hereditary land use rights, a complete melioration of Polesia that was to take place all at once would have to factor in the rights and needs of many local actors, for whom the small but privately owned plots of land were a guarantee of survival. Though there were cases of people moving to the cities, such migration, especially in the crisis period from 1930 to 1935, offered no real prospects. In the case of the Ijsselmeer, on the other hand, the question of whether the locals belonged to “us” or “them” never arose during the process of internal colonization (though it did in other meliorated regions of the Netherlands), simply because there had been no one living there prior to the works. And in the Soviet Union, those identified as kulaks were regularly cast as the “others”—hardly a single village was spared this phenomenon.

Owning property, no matter how small the piece of land may have been, was perceived by many farming families, not only as part of their identity, but also as an indispensable part of their lives as a whole. The redesign of the landscape also failed because of the land ownership rights of small property owners.

¹²² AAN, holding 13/0, sign. 735, f. 81 and passim.

¹²³ AAN, holding 1183/0: Urząd Wojewódzki w Brześciu nad Bugiem [Brest Voivodeship Office], sign. 58, Poleski Wojewódzki Związek rolniczy [Polesian Voivodeship Agricultural Association] (1932-1935), f. 2.

¹²⁴ VAN DE GRIFT (as in footnote 70).

6 Conclusion

When it came to the eastern territories of the Republic of Poland, all political actors linked national, security and defense policy with social and economic policy issues. While farming families always considered ethnic aspects a part of the social question, from the state administration's perspective the social question presented itself as a matter of nationalities and even of border defense.

All proposed measures to change the agricultural structure and agricultural constitution, be it the dissolution of easements, the parceling out of land, land consolidation or the settling of soldiers, were not discussed in terms of conquering nature, but instead formed part of a discourse around social and national questions. Only in the case of an extensive region-wide melioration, had it ever been achieved, would the aspect of land intervention have played a role or even become a foreground issue. A comprehensive melioration would not only have integrated Polesian agriculture much more strongly into the monetary economy but would also have massively transformed the landscape.

But swamp drainage only took place to a minor extent. The region also saw no development, either of a profit-oriented economy, or even of modern intensive agriculture. There were no such far-reaching and unpopular interventions in the agricultural constitution as the Soviet forced collectivization with its tractorization and the abolishment of families' hereditary titles (or at least rights) to land.

Since agricultural productivity was only increased to a minor extent prior to 1939, two opposing but mutually reinforcing developments took place: The key actors in the Republic of Poland understandably saw the geographical focus of their modernization activities in such projects as the construction of the Baltic Sea port in Gdynia, improved connections in the railway network that had previously linked the partitioned areas of Poland and was oriented towards Berlin, Vienna, Petrograd und Kiev and, after 1936, the creation of the Central Industrial District (*Centralny Okręg Przemysłowy*, COP).¹²⁵

The decision not to invest in infrastructure in the peripheral voivodeship of Polesia meant that the area became even more dependent on the industrial and macro-economic development of the Republic of Poland.

Moreover, Polesia was not the "last reserve" of areas to be developed in terms of agriculture in the Republic of Poland, as was the case with melioration projects in other regions in Europe.¹²⁶ There were certainly Polish forces who saw themselves as advocates of development, if not of Polesia, then of all the eastern territories in general—above all, the Society for the Development of the Eastern Territories—however, Polesia was not able to form a

¹²⁵ For more on this, see: MARIAN MAREK DROZDOWSKI: *Historia Centralnego Okręgu Przemysłowego: Geneza, budowa, wizja przyszłości, opinie* [The History of the Central Industrial District: Genesis, Construction, Vision of the Future, Opinions], Radom 2015.

¹²⁶ Cf. RADKAU (as in footnote 107), p. 228.

lobby in Warsaw, not least because the vast majority of the local population were not Poles, but Eastern Slavs and Jews. Despite the sense of cultural romanticism that had formed around the *kresy*, the political Polish mainstream showed particularly little interest in political reform or other innovations in Polesia; there was also a general awareness that any activities carried out in the name of propagating national unity would either have no effect on the rural population there and on the still predominantly Jewish urban population, or they would have the opposite effect. Therefore, the modernizing forces lost their target group in Polesia to some extent, and the temptation was great to create a new one in the form of an ethnic Polish population that could be established there.

Of the various interventions that took place in Polesia, it was only the land consolidation that benefited the rural population directly. Other measures, such as the dissolution of easements, the parceling out of land and the melioration (not to mention the settlement of military personnel) were of no use to them, were carried out on a small scale, or were targeted at non-Polesian immigrants. For the non-military intervenors, above all the state administration and several government related organizations, the results of the intended redesign of society and landscape remained of little value. Nevertheless, before the Soviet army invaded in September 1939, West Polesia certainly did look different than it had in 1921, when the First World War and Soviet-Polish and civil wars had left the region emaciated and broken. This was due, not only to the fact that most survivors of these wars had returned to their Polesian homeland, though it was initially choked with barbed wire and haunted with wolves¹²⁷, but it was also the result, as explained above, of a high birthrate that exceeded that of all other voivodeships. The period from 1921 to 1931 saw the number of farms increase from 126,251 to 208,814, including 70,000 very small farms.¹²⁸ This trend continued until 1939, albeit less conspicuously.¹²⁹ It was not possible to increase the area of cultivatable land proportionally¹³⁰, however, the 65 per cent increase in the number of farmsteads by 1931 alone changed the landscape more than all the measures carried out in the name of infrastructural and agricultural modernization, of which only land consolidation left more than minor traces.

The continuing social and economic difference between the locals and non-locals was no longer reflected in politics or in the public sphere due to a general shift towards depoliticization and repression.

¹²⁷ Cf. BENECKE, Quäker (as in footnote 16), pp. 516-517.

¹²⁸ For 1921, see Skorowidz miejscowości Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (as in footnote 65); for 1931, see: GRODZICKI, Struktura posiadania (as in footnote 29), pp. 17, 33; ŚLESZYŃSKI/WŁODARCZYK (as in footnote 59), p. 10.

¹²⁹ Mały Rocznik Statystyczny 1939, p. 42: 1936-1938 on average 30 births per 1,000 inhabitants per year in Polesia (cf. in Poland 25), deaths 15 (13, respectively).

¹³⁰ MIECZYSLAW MIESZCZANKOWSKI: Struktura agrarna Polski międzywojennej [The Agricultural Structure of Interwar Poland], Warszawa 1960, pp. 195, 203, tab. 84.

In the editorial he wrote for the first issue of the weekly newspaper *Polesie*, which was established in 1938, chief editor Hieronim Opitz simply disregarded the phenomenon of othering as a real and antagonizing issue. Using rhetorical trickery, he proclaimed a kind of decolonization of West Polesia and tried to simply erase eighteen years of more or less complicated and abortive attempts to turn the rural Polesian population into Poles, the “melioration of souls,”¹³¹ in favor of an illusion of clarity:

“The Polish *raison d’être* in Polesia is simple and singular: Polesia must be Polish. Not part of the Polish state, not closely tied to the Polish mother country (*Macierz*), not culturally or nationally assimilated, but clearly and simply: Polish.”¹³²

But this approach—assimilation without intervention—did not even solve the issue in the realm of the imagination. The unresolved social and national problems remained too vast and—at least outside of Polesia—the tales of this “strange, exotic land”¹³³ remained, on the eve of Soviet occupation, far too deeply rooted and enduring to be simply overwritten in this way. Landscape interventions proved mostly unsuccessful and radical, sweeping modernization never eventuated. This is reflected in the words of Franciszek Wysłouch¹³⁴, who, writing in exile in London after the Second World War, described Polesia as a non-industrial, wild land. Its geographical remoteness saw the region now become further shrouded in mystique; from the Polish perspective it was a landscape of memory, a place that aroused a unique sense of longing. If the interventions envisioned before 1939 had been successful, they would rather have disturbed the wistful charm of this imagined landscape.

¹³¹ Ziemia pińska [Pińsk Land] from 1929-03-24, p. 2.

¹³² Polesie: Tygodniowe Pismo from 1938-09-04, p. 1.

¹³³ F. ANTONI OSSENDOWSKI: Polesie, Poznań 1934, p. 1.

¹³⁴ For the first time, in FRANCISZEK WYŚLOUCH: *Opowiadania poleskie* [Tales of Polesia], Londyn 1968.

