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## TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND IN THE CONSCIOUSNESS AND ASPIRATIONS OF THE POLISH PEASANTS AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

During the period from enfranchisement to the First World War, significant and sometimes critical changes took place in practically all areas of peasant life. In particular, one can regard the modernization of the peasant family farm as being especially important, along with the changes which accompanied this process in the area of the spreading of education, civilization, culture, and the growth of social, political and national consciousness among the peasants. This was conditioned in turn by the formation, among peasant circles too, of new political parties at the turn of the 20th century. On account of the development of their civic spirit, the peasants were to become more and more a partner with an equal say in the affairs of modern Poland. Of interest to us here will therefore be not so much the economic effects of steering post-enfranchisement agriculture onto the path of capitalistic production, as the social consequences of such events.

For the above reasons, in this attempt to characterize the peasants I should like to concentrate on the following issues—the most important for the period of interest to us :

I—stratification processes and the place of the peasants within the social structure of the modern Polish nation ;

II—the modernization of agriculture and the development of education in the countryside, territorial self-government and peasant organizations ;

III—changes in the national consciousness of the peasants ;

IV—the social, political and national aspirations of the activists within the peasant movement.

In view of the limited length of the present article, I shall only

be able to present in shortened form the most important findings contained in the existing literature on the subject, to point up controversial issues, and also to indicate areas and questions for further research.

## I

Scholars have pointed to the slow, but developing processes of modernization of the structure of Polish society. Despite the numerical growth of the working class, in 1921 within the structure of the modern Polish nation peasants together with agricultural workers still accounted for as much as 65.2<sup>0</sup>/<sub>100</sub> of the country's population.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, one should bear in mind the fact that the percentage of the population directly employed in agriculture was higher. In addition, a considerable proportion of the working class came from among the peasants. And ties between this group of workers and the countryside were still very much alive.

The greatest number of works in the literature concerns the problem area of internal differentiation among the peasants.<sup>2</sup> Socio-political determinants exerted an important influence on such research in Poland, and sometimes also on its cognitive effects. This gave a particularly sharp edge to the polemics—still in progress today—surrounding such vital issues as the production

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<sup>1</sup> M. M. Drozdowski, J. Żarnowski, *Przemiany struktury społecznej II Rzeczypospolitej* [Transformations in the Social Structure of the Second Republic], in: *Droga przez półwiecze. O Polsce lat 1918 - 1968*, Warszawa 1969, pp. 260, 279.

<sup>2</sup> Basic, fairly recent compendia on the subject, in which reading lists on the topics covered in the present article can be found, are: *Historia chłopów polskich* [A History of the Polish Peasants], vol. II: *Okres zaborów* [The Partition Period], edited by S. Inglot, Warszawa 1972; I. Ichnatowicz, A. Mączak, B. Zientara, *Spółeczeństwo polskie od X do XX wieku* [Polish Society from the 10th to the 20th Centuries], Warszawa 1979; *Zarys historii gospodarstwa wiejskiego w Polsce* [An Outline History of Rural Economy in Poland], vol. III: *Gospodarstwo wiejskie epoki kapitalizmu (1870 - 1944)* [Rural Economy in the Era of Capitalism (1870 - 1944)], Warszawa 1970; *Historia kultury materialnej Polski w zarysie* [The History of Material Culture in Poland in Outline], vol. VI: *Od 1870 do 1918* [From 1870 to 1918], edited by B. Baranowski, J. Bartyś, T. Sobczak, Warszawa 1979.

effects of small and large-acre farms and their development prospects, the determinants of internal differentiation among the peasants, the extent of stratification processes within different categories of peasant farms, and the interrelations between the economic position and the social and political position of these groups.

The blossoming of research which took place at the beginning of the 20th century was connected, among other things, with the discussions then in progress concerning the agrarian programmes defined by the main political lines and groupings. The spreading of designs for the carrying-out of agricultural reform was accompanied by a debate on the question of the development prospects of small and large agricultural holdings. The revival of such designs in the 1930s was connected with the difficult situation in agriculture, and with the search for paths leading to an effective solution to a long-term crisis. The advocates of agrarian change—and among these were such eminent experts on rural affairs as Franciszek Bujak and Juliusz Poniatowski—made a case for the superiority of peasant farming over that based on large holdings. Poniatowski pointed among other things to the fact that peasant farms are capable of achieving quick results, and can also act as an impulse for the development of other branches of the national economy. This was confirmed by economic practice. We should also note the fact that one of the most formidable and eminent of Polish economists and scholars of the agrarian issue in Poland, Władysław Grabski, also leaned in the 1930s in the direction of argumentation in favour of the superiority of small-scale as opposed to large-scale farming.

Without going into the ideological arguments, or the problem of the influence of particular economic schools on the distortion of research findings which sometimes occurs, one cannot help being surprised at the durability and vitality of the peasant family farm in Poland, and at its extraordinary resistance even under extremely difficult conditions. Without doubt this is something which merits a thorough examination.

Another vital issue arousing controversy among historians and economists up to the present day, is the question of assessment of the scope of processes of “fragmentation” and “cumulation”

of peasant holdings. Establishing the scope of these phenomena is of vital significance in defining the role played by particular peasant groups—i.e., landless peasants and smallholders, and those with medium holdings and rich peasants—within various sectors of the peasant community, and by the peasant class<sup>4</sup> as a whole within the country's social structure.

Among the most commonly applied determinants of internal differentiation among peasants<sup>4</sup>—and these determinants have been subject to continual improvement over the course of many years of research and polemics—one can mention acreage of land-holdings (practically everyone regards this as the chief criterion), scale of crop and livestock production, number of farm buildings, implements and machines, use of hired labour, the degree of processing and technological development, non-farm income, form of land ownership.

However, application of the above-mentioned determinants of internal stratification among peasants is dependent in research practice, though not in theoretical deliberations, on the state of the sources. While the latter usually allow us to study agricultural structure in the main. Moreover, each peasant farm is such a complex production workshop, that application of the above-mentioned differentiation determinants makes it difficult to carry out analyses of a quantitative nature.

Konstanty Czerniewski<sup>5</sup> was able to carry out a somewhat fuller analysis of the social structure of the peasants during the capitalist era, since he was in possession of material from a farming questionnaire specially prepared for this purpose during the years

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<sup>4</sup> In describing the peasant community of the capitalist era, some historians and sociologists of late have used the term "peasant class", and not "group" or "stratum".

<sup>4</sup> Cf. in particular M. Mieszczankowski, *Struktura agrarna Polski międzywojennej* [Agricultural Structure in Inter-War Poland], Warszawa 1960; idem, *Rolnictwo II Rzeczypospolitej* [Agriculture in the Second Republic], Warszawa 1983.

<sup>5</sup> K. Czerniewski, *Zagadnienia struktury agrarnej* [Problems of Agricultural Structure], in: *Struktura społeczna wsi polskiej*, Warszawa 1937. Cf. *ibidem*; E. Strzelecki, *Ankieta rolna Instytutu Gospodarstwa Społecznego* [The Social Economy Institute Farming Questionnaire], R. Jabłonowski, *Ludność bezrolna* [The Landless Population], K. Bentelewska, *Wiejscy procederzyści, renciści oraz pracownicy umysłowi i fizyczni o statych uposażeniach* [Country Traders, Pensioners and White-Collar and Manual Workers on Permanent Incomes].

1934 - 1935 by the Social Economy Institute. This embraced all farms in the 35 villages taken as being representative, and was preceded by an experimental questionnaire, the so-called Między-  
leś questionnaire of 1932. In relation to the beginning of the 20th century, attempts were made to recreate social structure among the peasants through monographic studies of the countryside. The scientific value of these works, which arose especially within the framework of Franciszek Bujak's seminars, remains considerable even today. However, the question arises, to what extent can monographs devoted to particular villages be regarded as representative for given regions within the country. Studies on particular villages or regions of the country are still being carried out.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the current state of research allows us to describe or pick out the basic processes of land stratification among the peasants.

Among the most significant phenomena of the post-enfranchisement countryside, one can undoubtedly mention a check in the increase in acreage of farms at the expense of peasant holdings. Despite the maintaining of the prominent position of the landowners,<sup>7</sup> a process began (last of all in the Prussian sector—from the year 1880) of a gradual reduction in the number of large-acre farms, and of their passing chiefly into the hands of the peasants. It was partly owing to precisely these parcelization processes that medium-sized holdings maintained and even strengthened their position in the Prussian and Russian sectors. Thus for example, within the Polish Kingdom peasants with medium-sized holdings possessed more than a half of the farms and two-thirds of the land. While the proportion of rich peasant farms dropped here to 4.3% in 1904, and the amount of land

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<sup>6</sup> For a list of works concerning the history of particular villages and regions, see M. Mioduchowska, *Materiały do bibliografii historii ruchu ludowego w latach 1864 - 1974. Druki zwarte wydane w Polsce Ludowej (1945 - 1974)* [Bibliographic Material on the History of the Peasant Movement during the Years 1864 - 1974. Publications in Book-Form Issued in People's Poland (1945 - 1974)], Warszawa 1979, pp. 361 - 420. The list of works included in this book cites literature issued before 1939.

<sup>7</sup> At the time of enfranchisement large landholdings still accounted for 57% of all agricultural land in the Poznań region, 37% in western Galicia, 44% in eastern Galicia, and 56.5% of agricultural land in the Polish Kingdom in 1876.

occupied by them—to 15.7<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>.<sup>8</sup> The proportion of large peasant holdings in Galicia was even less, comprising barely 6.3<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub> of the land. Only in the Prussian sector did wealthy peasant farms comprise a significant proportion of peasant lands—60<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub> in Masuria, 52<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub> in Gdańsk Pomerania, 40<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub> in the Poznań region, and 22<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub> in Opole Silesia. The proportion of agricultural workers within a breakdown of the country population also increased, especially in the Prussian and Russian sectors. In the Polish Kingdom the number of such workers rose from 220,000 at the time of enfranchisement (1864) to 1,220,000 in 1901, which is to say 18<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub> of the rural population. On the other hand, one of the characteristic features of stratification processes in Galicia was the predominance of small farms and small holdings, amounting to 80<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>.

One can no doubt argue as to the tempo and considerable variations in the growth of capitalism and the scope of economic modernization in the different sectors and regions of the country. But the social consequences of these modifications were multifarious and far-reaching.

Above all the reorganizing of agriculture along the lines of capitalist economics, like the exigencies of the development of industry, effected a fundamental modernization of the structure of Polish society. It expedited unification processes within the social strata and classes of the different sectors, and constituted an essential condition for the shaping of a modern Polish nation, uniform despite the partitions. The peasant order (class) transformed from the peasant estate became, along with the newly-arisen working class, the chief component of the nation, initially mainly in view of its numerical strength—more than 80<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub> of the country's population—and subsequently also on account of its growing position in the capitalist process of production and, gradually, in socio-political life too.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. especially K. Groniowski, *Kwestia agrarna w Królestwie Polskim, 1871 - 1914* [*The Land Question in the Polish Kingdom, 1871 - 1914*], Warszawa 1966; idem, *Robotnicy rolni w Królestwie Polskim* [*Agricultural Workers in the Polish Kingdom*], Warszawa 1977.

## II

One can also point to the multifarious interdependencies and interactions between the new phenomena connected with the modernization of agriculture and the development of education in the countryside, territorial self-government and peasant organizations of a socio-economic and cultural and educational nature.

The reorganizing of post-enfranchisement agriculture along the lines of capitalist, market production—irrespective of any negative effects accompanying this process—forced the peasants into modernizing their farms, introducing modern methods of husbandry and animal-rearing, learning about new varieties of grain and seeds, about agricultural machines and machines for processing milk for example, and about the use of artificial fertilizers. The increased sale of agricultural and food produce, as well as the buying of industrial commodities, created conditions for combined activity on the part of the peasants in the countryside, and for greater contact with the town.

However, all these new enterprises could not have been duly accomplished without the growth and spreading of elementary and professional (agricultural) education, the involving of the peasants in work in territorial self-government, especially in the village and commune and over a somewhat longer prospect—without the gaining of a position of independence by the peasants in the socio-economic and cultural and educational organizations then arising in the countryside.

In describing elementary education in the countryside, education historians generally agree<sup>9</sup> on the fact that the greatest progress in the spread of education was made in the Prussian sector, considerable progress in Galicia, and the least progress in the Polish Kingdom. Evidence of the degree of effort and of the pace at which the number of elementary schools rose is provided by the following data: in the Poznań region in 1820 there existed around 400 schools, and in 1911—almost 3,000; in Galicia in 1840

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. the recently published work, including reading list, *Dzieje szkolnictwa i oświaty na wsi polskiej do 1918* [A History of Schooling and Education in the Polish Countryside up to 1918], vol. I, edited by S. Michalski, Warszawa 1982.

around 1,950 schools existed, and in 1910—around 5,200. In the Polish Kingdom, during a period of intensive development in elementary education, 1,710 new schools arose during the years 1904 - 1914, including as many as 1,025 during the two years immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War. However, the scale of illiteracy was still greatest in the Polish Kingdom, amounting to 69.5% of the population in 1906.<sup>10</sup> Historians also draw attention to the fact that the teaching syllabus was brought up to date too slowly, and that education in the Prussian sector was subject to Germanization measures, and in the Polish Kingdom—to Russification measures.

None the less, compared with the pre-enfranchisement period, one has to say—and this is something which is not always appreciated in the literature—that access to elementary education was made available to peasant youth for the first time on such a scale. One can probably even talk about the accomplishing of a breakthrough in the dissemination of education in the countryside in this period, which was of fundamental significance for the spreading of the printed word among the peasants. Stanisław Araszkiewicz, scholar of education and learning in the Russian sector, expresses the view that “the enfranchisement changed the attitude of the country population towards learning in a fundamental way”.<sup>11</sup>

For the spreading of reading and writing among the peasants, only a few per cent of whom could read and write at the time of enfranchisement, represented an indispensable condition not only for raising the level of professional qualifications and of civilization generally, but also for access to almanacs, newspapers, pamphlets, and finally books. In a letter of 6 January, 1894, to the editor of “Nowa Reforma” (New Reform), the peasant writer Jakub Bojko, subsequently an activist within the peasant movement, thus described the spreading among the peasants of the urge to acquire the reading habit, the need for richer and richer reading material for the peasant: “not so long ago the peasants

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<sup>10</sup> Z. Kmiećik, *Ruch oświatowy na wsi. Królestwo Polskie 1905 - 1914* [The Educational Movement in the Countryside. The Polish Kingdom, 1905 - 1914], Warszawa 1963, p. 95, cf. map following p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Dzieje szkolnictwa...*, p. 173.



were well content with an almanac or a dream-book, but today many of them read the daily newspapers, which are printed for the educated, and books, which are printed for the intelligentsia [...]. Just as a man before harvest-time wants more, the more he eats, so it is with the people: the more they read, the more they want to know how it was, and why".<sup>12</sup>

While access for increasing numbers of peasant youth to the teacher training schools arising along with the development of elementary education, and in Galicia to secondary schools and higher education as well, broadened the recruiting base for the country intelligentsia.

The majority of the 41,000 pupils attending Galician secondary schools in 1913 consisted of peasant youth. In some towns, such as Bochnia, Sącz, Tarnów and Cracow, the proportion of peasant sons at grammar schools amounted to 75<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>, and in Nowy Targ almost as much as 90<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>. This was not without significance for the ninefold increase in the number of peasant youths at the Jagiellonian University over the years 1850 - 1901. In 1901 225 of the 1,405 Jagiellonian University students were sons of peasants, which is to say more than 16<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>. Peasant youth was not so well represented in the secondary schools of the Polish Kingdom, and constituted only 10 - 13<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub> of the total number of pupils at such schools just before the First World War.

Alongside the aforesaid peasant readers of country newspapers, among the first organizers of education in the countryside and also the awakeners of political and national consciousness among farming people, and inspirers of independent organization among the peasants, an important role was played by former pupils of teacher training schools, secondary and higher-education schools recruited precisely from the country youth. Needless to say, not all of them took up work in peasant circles.

Along with the enfranchisement of the peasants, there was also a widening of the powers of communal and district self-govern-

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted after J. Kowal, *Towarzystwo Demokratyczne Polskie we Lwowie i jego rola w organizowaniu Stronnictwa Ludowego w Galicji* [The Polish Democratic Society in Lvov, and Its Role in the Organizing of the Peasant Party in Galicia], in: *Studia z dziejów ruchu ludowego ofiarowane Czesławowi Wycechowi w 70 rocznicę urodzin*, Warszawa 1969, p. 47.

ment, based chiefly on laws from 1864 in the Polish Kingdom and from 1866 in Galicia. The experience gained from the operation of territorial self-government, despite all its limitations—which is what researchers mainly draw attention to<sup>13</sup>—not only contributed to economic progress and a higher level of civilization in the countryside, and to activation of the peasants in the village and in the region, but also brought about positive changes in the consciousness and attitudes of the peasants. These phenomena, as they related to Galicia, were described by Stanisław Tarnowski in 1896 in a pamphlet entitled *Lud wiejski między ładem i rozkładem* [*Country People between Order and Disintegration*]: “In consequence of the increase in schools and reading, in consequence of active participation in parish and district affairs, over the past thirty years a new generation has grown up in the villages, a generation differing considerably from the preceding one. Its horizons are broader, its thinking more varied. Knowledge of the law under which the people live and of the conditions in which they live has become more widespread and more lucid, and knowledge of the outside world has become greater. Greater activity of the mind has led to a sharpening of the capacity to think and reason. The desire to read, the thirst for and storing of knowledge have also undoubtedly increased”.<sup>14</sup>

The participation of peasants in the work of country self-government was also conducive to the emergence of local spokesmen and activists. The experience gained by many peasants as members of village government, local clerks and village mayors from the 1860s on, proved to be of great service in organizing the peasant political movement at the turn of the 20th century. The most outstanding peasants—activists and subsequent parliamentary and state figures—also went through this school of territorial self-government—for example Wincenty Witos, Jakub Bojko, and Błażej Stolarski.

<sup>13</sup> Academic sessions devoted to the topic of communal selfgovernment were recently held at the universities in Łódź and Lublin. Papers delivered at these sessions are in the press.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted after A. Gurnicz, *O “równą miarkę”—dla chłopów. Poglądy i działalność pierwszej chłopskiej organizacji politycznej w Polsce Związku Stronnictwa Chłopskiego 1893 - 1908* [For an “Equal Say”—for the Peasants. The Views and Activity of the First Peasant Political Organization in Poland, the Peasant Party Federation, 1893 - 1908], Warszawa 1963, p. 44.

The development of socio-economic and cultural and educational organizations also came about in the post-enfranchisement period. In the Polish Kingdom alone, as a result of a ban by the Russian administration, these only arose after the 1905 revolution, which is to say some decades later, the effect of which could partially be seen in, among other things, the tardy growth of civilization in this part of the country. Researchers no longer see the chief role of these organizations as being the establishing of principles of social consolidation among the masses. However, emphasis is still largely placed on their contribution to the development of education and culture, progress in agriculture, and civilization in the countryside. Under the conditions which prevailed the role they played in this respect was indeed very great. For in view of the insufficient network of elementary schools and cultural institutions for workers, and in view of the Germanization and Russification attempts, the aforesaid organizations engaged in supplementary education of a general and professional nature. They organized agricultural schools, popular universities, and especially various kinds of training courses, they encouraged self-education and ran libraries and private schools. The scale of the achievements of some of these organizations—operating on an entirely voluntary basis—is impressive even today. Thus for instance, the Polish School Centre, operating from 1905 mainly among the peasants of the Polish Kingdom, managed in the course of only three years to organize over 900 local circles with around 150,000 members, ran 681 primary schools (where 63,000 people received education), 317 nurseries (for 14,401 children), and 505 libraries. In the two terms of 1906 the Centre's Popular University had 8,255 students.<sup>15</sup>

Also worthy of particular attention (though the least studied aspect to date) is the role of socio-economic and educational and cultural organizations—especially under the particular political conditions prevailing in the Prussian and Russian sectors—in arousing national consciousness among the peasants, and among the workers too, for that matter. This was especially significant

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<sup>15</sup> J. Holzer, J. Molenda, *Polska w pierwszej wojnie światowej* [Poland during the First World War], 3rd edition, Warszawa 1973, p. 468.

during the last two decades of the 19th century, i.e. up to the arisal and spreading of political parties among the peasants themselves. Especially in conditions where reading was still a rare habit in the countryside, these organizations represented the chief transmitter of ideas to the peasants, including those of a national character.

Stanisław Grabski, organizer of work among the peasants and an eminent expert on the subject, thus described the role of these organizations in arousing national consciousness among the peasants: "The leading aim of not only the two great conspiratorial organizations—the Polish Socialist Party and the National League—but of all the cultural federations and associations, in which hundreds of intellectuals throughout Poland worked quietly, though with great self-sacrifice and perseverance, over the course of at least 35 years (from 1880 until 1914)—"Sokół" (Falcon), the School Centres, the Popular School Society, the Agricultural Circles, the Popular and Farmers' Banks—the leading aim was one and the same—to win over to Poland the hearts of the Polish people. [. . .] However, historical objectivism requires me to emphasize the fact that by far the majority of the work most responsible for the patriotic enlightenment of the people did not arise from party initiatives. The patriotic work of the parties was not a source, but one of the symptoms of a general awareness among the body of our white-collar workers—an awareness serving to weld them into a single social stratum, in spite of differences in profession and even in party affiliation—of the duty to work among the people for Poland, so that they should feel on equal terms with the most educated sections of society as an heir to the entire thousand-year history of the nation".<sup>16</sup>

### III

I have already pointed to the factors serving to shape national consciousness among the peasants. These were varied and complex

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<sup>16</sup> S. Grabski, *Myśli o dziejowej drodze Polski* [Thoughts on the Historical Path of Poland], Glasgow 1944, pp. 154 - 155.

in nature.<sup>17</sup> At this point I shall merely restrict myself to an attempt at answering the question of why the winning-over of the peasants to the idea of independence became one of the leading assignments of the era, and to an indication of the differences and delays in the processes involved in the shaping of the consciousness of the peasants in comparison with other social groups.

Dissemination of the independence idea constituted one of the essential internal prerequisites for the regaining of Poland's independence in the event of favourable international circumstances. But at the end of the 19th century, among the most numerous social stratum of the modern nation—the peasants (and in large measure this related to the workers, too), awareness of the need for one's own state only existed among the none too numerous circles making up the peasant political élite. It was for this reason that the winning-over of the peasant majority in Polish society to the independence idea became one of the leading assignments of the era.

A number of controversies have begun to accumulate around the issue of the shaping of national consciousness among the peasants, as interest in the subject has grown over recent years.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> I have pointed elsewhere to more than ten major factors serving to shape national consciousness among the peasants, namely: the pull of tradition, the influence of population shifts, military service in the sector armies, education, reading of the press, almanacs and books, the policy of the sector authorities, "organic work", national liberation activity of social groups, strata and classes, political parties and socio-economic and cultural and educational organizations, military organizations and formations, folk culture and general national culture, and religion. Cf. J. Moleńda, *Uwagi w sprawie kształtowania się świadomości narodowej w pierwszym dwudziestoleciu XX wieku* [Some Remarks Concerning the Shaping of National Consciousness during the First Two Decades of the 20th Century], "Kwartalnik Historyczny", 1978, No. 2, pp. 315–328.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. especially H. Brodowska, *Chłopi o sobie i Polsce. Rozwój świadomości społeczno-narodowej* [The Peasants on Themselves and Poland. The Development of Social and National Consciousness], Warszawa 1984; J. Chlebowczyk, *Procesy narodotwórcze we wschodniej Europie środkowej w dobie kapitalizmu (od schyłku XVIII do początku XX w.)* [Nation-Forming Processes in Eastern Central Europe in the Capitalist Era (from the Close of the 18th Century to the Beginning of the 20th Century)], Warszawa 1975; S. Kieniewicz, *Historyk a świadomość narodowa* [The Historian and National Consciousness], Warszawa 1982; J. Koweccki, *U początków nowoczesnego narodu* [At the Beginnings of a Modern Nation], in: *Polska w epoce oświecenia. Państwo—społeczeństwo—kultura*, edited by B. Leśnodorski, Warszawa 1971; T. Łepkowski, *Polska—narodziny nowoczesnego narodu 1764–1870* [Poland—the Birth of a Modern Nation 1764–1870], Warszawa 1967; J. Moleńda, *Uwagi*

The essence of the debate does not, it seems, relate to a total negation of this process, but involves different views and evaluations regarding the scope of such consciousness, the degree to which it was something general, at various stages of its development. Controversies also arise from the fact that the very notion of national consciousness is variously interpreted. In order, therefore, to avoid any ambiguities, I ought to explain my understanding of the phenomenon in question, and to point at the same time to a fundamental, critical divide in the history of the growth of national consciousness among the peasants.

On the basis of the researches I have conducted, I have come to the conclusion that one can distinguish two basic stages in the long-lasting process—beginning at the end of the 18th century and ending with the Second World War—of the shaping of a modern national consciousness among the Polish peasants. The first stage consists of the existence of an awareness of ties with one's native tongue, religion, land (territory), customs, culture, people, in other words an awareness of an individual national identity. While the second stage consists of realization of the need for the existence, or under conditions of bondage—for the regaining, of one's own state. In concrete historical reality these two stages, especially during the second phase, encroached one upon the other, complementing each other. Moreover, ascertainment of the existence of specific ties during the first stage of the growth the consciousness, especially ties of language, customs, religion and territory, is not necessarily synonymous with awareness of those ties on the part of all members of a given community. There can also be far-reaching differentiation in the development of given kinds of ties, depending on time and specific conditions. Józef Chlebowczyk's research for instance—in the work already cited—revealed considerable differences in the growth of consciousness in ethnically-mixed territories in the "linguistic/national borderlands".

*w sprawie kształtowania się świadomości narodowej...; idem, Rola ruchu ludowego w kształtowaniu świadomości narodowej i społecznej chłopów [The Role of the Peasant Movement in the Shaping of National and Social Consciousness among the Peasants], "Roczniki Dziejów Ruchu Ludowego", 1983/84, No. 23/24; idem, Wpływ ukształtowania się nowoczesnego narodu na walkę o niepodległość [The Effect of the Forming of a Modern Nation on the Struggle for Independence], in: Z perspektywy sześćdziesięciu lat, Warszawa 1982.*

Nevertheless the processes of the shaping of a sense of individual national identity dominated during the first phase. With the majority of peasants, consciousness of the need to regain one's own state came later, and was a consequence of the phenomena associated with the first stage. Stanislaw Grabski has indicated that the winning-over of the peasants "to the struggle for the regaining of independence"—which I take to be consciousness of the second stage—was achieved at the end of the 19th century in Great Poland and Pomerania, and between 1905 and 1914 in Galicia, the Polish Kingdom and Silesia.<sup>19</sup>

My own findings more or less confirm Grabski's opinion concerning the chronology of the processes of development of national consciousness in the second stage, in relation to the Polish Kingdom and Galicia. But with the qualification that the intensification and spreading of these phenomena fell in the second half of the 1910s. For the development of consciousness of the need to regain one's own state (second-stage consciousness) developed for hundreds of thousands and finally millions, only in the second decade of the 20th century, and especially during the years of the First World War and at the beginning of the Second Republic. Reliable data serving to confirm this view are provided by analysis of the growing support of the peasants for the peasant parties and their press organs, campaigning widely for the rebirth of Poland. This support was expressed by the influx of thousands and even tens of thousands of peasants to the peasant parties and the not much lesser voluntary participation of peasant youth in independence organizations and military formations, in participation in active resistance against the German and Austrian occupying forces, and in disarmament of the sector armies, in overthrowing the old power apparatus and in setting up the new Polish authorities. Similar testimony is provided by the participation of peasants in national conferences and displays, the number of participants at which can be estimated in millions during the years 1916 - 1919, and also by the mass turn-out at the first Sejm election, as well as attitudes during the Polish-Russian war of 1919 - 1920.

Certain similarities to the processes involved in the develop-

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<sup>19</sup> S. Grabski, *Myśli o dziejowej drodze...*, p. 155.

ment of national consciousness among the peasants might be found in those affecting at least the largest groups proportionally, of workers, recruited from the countryside.

Initially it was only a minority of society within the Polish lands which was sensible of the loss of its own state following the partitions. It was with a minority of society, too, that national consciousness took shape in both stages of its development simultaneously, together with the development of a modern Polish nation. In the first place this applied to the heirs of the gentry nation—landowners, intelligentsia and certain groups of the bourgeoisie. It was because of this, among other things, that—as Jerzy Kowecki writes—“the repositories of national consciousness” at the earliest stage, in the last quarter of the 18th century, “were above all the first members of the Polish professional intelligentsia and the educated, patriotic sections of the gentry and middle classes”.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas consciousness of the new function of the state following the victorious bourgeois-democratic revolutions, a state granting equal rights to the peasant masses and providing them with legal protection, linking them with itself in the process, could only belong to the relatively small groups of Polish peasants who had taken part in the liberation struggles of the 19th century in Poland or beyond its borders, or who came within the sphere of their influence. At the same time, the vast majority of Polish peasants associated the former Commonwealth with villeinage, with freedom, rights, independence chiefly for the “lords” (by which expression they usually understood not only the landlords, but also the officials): they did not regard the Commonwealth as their own state.

For this reason it was rather dangerous for the future of the nation, for the prospects of regaining Poland’s independence, that in the consciousness of the majority of society its decline was not identified with the loss of one’s own country. Instead, the peasants remembered that many legal acts serving to improve their situation in the areas of enfranchisement, territorial self-government, schooling, and credit facilities for instance, had been promulgated

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<sup>20</sup> J. Kowecki, *U początków nowoczesnego narodu...*, p. 164.



by the partitioning powers. These factors should also largely be borne in mind in explaining the phenomenon whereby—in spite of the development of national consciousness among them—the majority of peasants did not initially sense the need to regain their own state. For the same reason, even in the second peasant generation following the enfranchisement reforms, there were fairly widespread fears that villeinage might return, that the future Poland would still be a “lords’ Poland”. For in peasant consciousness the issue of the state’s rebirth was linked with the question : what will it be like—will it be for the “lords” or for the “people” ? Satisfactory answers to all these questions and doubts had to be provided by those among the modern political formations developing at the turn of the 20th century who wished to win over the peasants to their policies, and especially to the independence idea.

#### IV

Although peasants could be found within the orbit and sphere of influence of all the political trends and groupings existing at the turn of the 20th century, I shall deal here exclusively with those active within the peasant movement.<sup>21</sup> For they were in the best position to meet the basic aspirations of the peasants. One might well pause here to consider why in fact the peasant movement within the Polish lands, as in only a few other countries, crystallized into one of the main independent political currents and groupings, and why even today it constitutes an integral part of the Polish party-political system. Another interesting and insufficiently explained issue concerns the question of why there was no fully-developed peasant movement in the Prussian sector prior to 1918, as there was in Galicia and the Polish Kingdom,

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<sup>21</sup> See in more detail J. M o l e n d a, *Rola ruchu ludowego w odbudowie niepodległości Polski* [*The Role of the Peasant Movement in the Rebuilding of Independent Poland*], “Roczniki Dziejów Ruchu Ludowego”, 1968, No. 10 ; i d e m, *Miejsce ruchu ludowego w życiu wsi i wśród innych obozów politycznych* [*The Place of the Peasant Movement in the Life of the Countryside and in the Midst of other Political Groupings*], in : *Polska XIX wieku, Państwo—społeczeństwo—kultura*, edited by S. K i e n i e w i c z, 3rd edition, Warszawa 1986.

and despite the fact that it was precisely the Great Poland and Pomeranian peasants who led the way within the Polish lands from an economic point of view as well as regards the level of civilization and the growth of national consciousness. Why, finally, did the peasant movement take on a more radical form in the Polish Kingdom, within whose agricultural structure the dominant position was held by peasants with medium-size holdings, and a more moderate form in Galicia, where the proportion of small farms and small holdings was as high as 80% ?

I shall restrict myself here to a mere indication of the most important issues spearheading the political thought and practice of the peasant movement, and preoccupying the peasants themselves, and of significance at the same time not only for the country community and the period of interest to us. First and foremost these should include :

- the separate status of the peasants and the independence of the peasant movement ;
- the durability of peasant farming ;
- peasant autonomy ;
- the idea of independence and of one's own state ;
- the commitment of the peasant movement activists to the idea of a People's Poland as the opposite of a "lords' Poland".

The demand for separate status for the peasants and for independence for the peasant movement, often undermined by forces both to the right and to the left of it, expressed itself before 1918 primarily in the struggle to gain equal rights, on a par with other social classes and strata, and with the political groups representing them. In agricultural concepts developed later, also emphasizing the special qualities inherent in the peasant class, again it was not hegemonic aims which dominated, but postulates relating to independence and to the equal right of peasants and peasant movement activists to occupy their due place in the life of the country. The peasant movement activists did not agree to the peasants' playing the role of "younger brother" either to the land-owners or to the workers.

The durability of peasant farming, one of the chief canons of the peasant movement, was to constitute a kind of economic base for the social and political independence and self-reliance

of the peasants. The larger peasant farms, representing the peasant's stable, permanent workshop, ought in accordance with the concepts of the peasant movement, not only to provide for his own family, but also to satisfy the food requirements of the country. The peasant movement also appreciated the spiritual values residing in the peasant family farm. The peasant family, possessing material security in its holdings and maintaining ties with family and neighbours, was to provide support and a sense of safety. The attachment of the peasants to the land prevented the latter from passing into foreign hands, which in the Prussian sector also helped to protect its Polishness.

According to some of the theoreticians of the peasant movement, peasant self-government, along with self-government of other groups and classes, was to be the most widespread form of organization of society. Self-governing organizations were to direct the manufacture of all goods, influence the shaping of interpersonal relations, and to afford protection against the domination of state bureaucracy. The peasants gained experience in the area of self-government not only from work in territorial self-government, but also within the co-operative movement, agricultural circles and other country organizations. To this day, however, we are not able to give a precise explanation as to why the rank-and-file activity of the peasants themselves within these organizations was subject to fluctuation.

I have already pointed to the winning-over of the peasants to the independence idea. The peasant movement activists must take the greatest credit for transmitting to peasant consciousness the need for regaining the state, and after 1918—for maintaining it and defending its sovereign rights. Taking their cue from the insufficient participation of the peasants in the national uprisings of 1830 and 1863, and from the current state of national consciousness among the peasant masses, who feared the return of a "lords' Poland", they put forward the slogan for a new model, "People's Poland". For they realized that the idea of Poland's independence would only attract the peasants if at the same time its content was socially progressive and consistent with their needs and vital interests.

To win the peasants over to a democratized independence idea,

the chief architect of which in the peasant movement was Bolesław Wysłouch, the peasant activists undertook action in two main directions :

1) They conducted a critical appraisal of the past, which was meant to break down the accumulated fears of the peasants that a gentry Poland might return, and at the same time to instil into them the thousand-year traditions of the Polish nation.

2) Simultaneously they propagated the ideal of a new, democratic-republican Poland, which was to carry out suitable socio-political reforms in accordance with the needs of the peasant masses. For at this stage Polish society had yet to encounter changes of a bourgeois-democratic character.

Taking into account the interests of the peasants, the independence programme of the peasant movement activists, in the formulation of which the peasant élite also took part, assumed a nation-wide significance as well. This happened not only, or not so much, because it was devised with the majority of society in mind, because it pointed to sound solutions to the fundamental problems of the era, but above all because it was disseminated among broad circles of the peasants. At the same time this constituted a fundamental, essential condition for their participation in the liberation movements, in direct action for the regaining of an independent state, and for their commitment in the struggle for a democratic shape for the latter during the first years of the Second Republic.

*(Translated by Phillip G. Smith)*