

Jan Molenda

THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS
OF THE POLISH PEASANTS AND THE PART THEY PLAYED
IN THE REGAINING OF INDEPENDENCE BY POLAND

The regaining of independence by Poland in 1918 has been since then hotly discussed, though the discussions are becoming less sharp now that the generations which fought for it and could argue about their respective merits are going off. This does not mean that the importance of those events is less appreciated at present than it used to be. Just the opposite, looking back seventy years we increasingly realize that the revival of Poland had for many spheres of national life a significance that went far beyond 1918 and even beyond the prewar Poland. Indeed the recovery of statehood by this country must be regarded as one of the most far-reaching events not only in the 20th century but in Poland's whole history.

The fact that since the mid-19th century many other nations have won independence makes us seek far-reaching and universal reasons for this phenomenon which was spread over a long time. It had to do first of all with the shaping up of modern nations and with the growth of national consciousness, until then restricted to only some circles but now being the feature of many strata of society.

**"TO WIN THE SOUL OF THE POLISH PEOPLE FOR POLAND"
—BEING THE MAIN PROBLEM IN THE PERIOD AFTER PARTITIONS**

The national consciousness of Polish society did not appear evenly in all its members. At the beginning of the period under study (1864) the feeling of national identity and desire to regain

an independent state was present only with the "enlightened classes", landed gentry, part of the towns people and town proletariat and the intelligentsia. This did not always go together, by the way, with a readiness to get engaged in activities serving the cause of the country's independence. At the same time the national awareness of the peasants, like that of the working class which was of country origin too, was just beginning to emerge. Here let us recall that these social groups formed together with the lower middle class over 90% of the society¹ being the foundation of the then shaping up modern nation. That is why their national consciousness was becoming the main problem and basic condition for Poland to regain her independence and then to preserve it.

Some historians had seen the importance of that problem much earlier. So for instance, in 1929, the prominent historian Marceł Handelsman considered that in order to understand the causes for Poland's revival it was necessary, among other things, to investigate "in what way Polish society turned from a passive object of politics into a creative subject shaping its own destiny".² And the then well-known activist of the party of national democrats and student of peasantry, Stanisław Grabski, thought that "the winning of the soul of Polish people for Poland" was one of the greatest achievements in this struggle at the turn of the century.³

Many opinions have been expressed on the national consciousness of the peasants and on how it was growing, some of these views being extreme and contradictory. The fact is that

¹ According to the census of 1921, without Upper Silesia and the Wilno Area the particular social groups numbered: peasants—53.5%, workers—15.3%, rural workers—11.7%, lower middle class—11.5%, employees—4.1%, bourgeoisie and landed proprietors, people living on their income—2.3%, having no income—1.6%. M. M. Drozdowski, J. Zarnowski, *Przemiany struktury społecznej II Rzeczypospolitej* [Changes of the Social Structure in the 2nd Polish Republic] in: *Droga przez półwiecze. W Polsce lat 1918 - 1968*, Warszawa 1968, pp. 260, 276.

² M. Handelsman, *Budowa państwa polskiego w czasie wielkiej wojny—Uwagi metodologiczne* [Building the Polish State during the Great War—Methodological Remarks], 2nd ed. "Niepodległość", vol. III, 1933, p. 31.

³ S. Grabski, *Myśli o dziejowej drodze Polski* [Thoughts on Poland's History], Glasgow 1944, p. 155.

a comprehensive study of the problem has been confronted with difficulties due to the poor state of sources, inadequate research methods and the fact that it is not easy to find objective determinants of that type of awareness. That is why this particular article tries to present the problems and research questions rather than the results of studies.

The very concept of national consciousness has no single meaning. I am not going to quote here many different definitions of that type of consciousness formulated first of all by sociologists, psychologists, philosophers. Besides, they are not very useful to a historian of past periods whose method of analysis depends on the extant sources determining the research questions he puts. Still there is a need to explain what a given researcher means by the term of national awareness. Without having stated it one cannot always know whether the divergent opinions on the time the peasants' national awareness began to emerge resulted from the differing views on the problem's substance of particular writers or from the fact that the term means something else to each of them.

STAGES IN THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL AWARENESS OF THE PEASANTS

To facilitate the researches, I have distinguished two main stages during which the peasants' national consciousness was shaping up. The first had to do with a feeling of existing bonds with the native language, religion (local priest, church, parish), with the land (at first with the holding as the place of work, with one's village, area, surrounding nature), folk culture of the region. This could be described as the awareness of one's national separateness. The second stage is the realization of one's existence in an enslaved country and desire to live in an independent State. These two stages used to overlap in the concrete historical reality, they were complementary to one another. What characterized the first stage, was its prevailing tendency for a constant struggle, a defence of one's land, native language, religion. Those values were most cherished by the peasants, they identified themselves with

them and any attack on them was felt as damaging the peasants' livelihood, their families and local community. Of course the holding was for the peasant not only his job but also the only stay of an independent life for himself and his family. The native language, with illiteracy being still wide-spread in the nineteenth century countryside, enabled the peasants to settle indispensable matters in the local office or at court. And as for religion, it was giving spiritual support, strengthened local bonds and was associated with the tongue of the forefathers, with Polish ways. At the second stage the peasants were already joining in actions aimed at the recovery of the country's independence.

Among the rather extreme opinions on the peasant's national consciousness Stanisław Ossowski's considerations on the stages the feeling of national identity went through deserve to be recalled here. No matter whether that consciousness attained only a lower degree of an attachment to the village, region or community—"to the private homeland"—or a higher degree of the feeling of identity with the nation—"with ideological homeland",⁴ he still called those who felt it patriots. Way back in 1917 he wrote: "Indeed we must call the patriot not only someone who does realize his relation to the nation but also someone who does it at another level suitable to his intellectual development, so we must also regard as the patriot an illiterate peasant who does not even call himself a Pole, but a Kurp, Mazur or simply a Catholic, who does not know what Poland is, whom the thought of independence fills with fear that it may bring back soccage and who despite it all sticks to his land, his language and customs, who feels unconsciously a bond with his countrymen and whom no persecutions will ever make renounce his nationality of which however he is unaware".⁵

This opinion can serve as a warning against any schematic approaches to this problem. And moreover its rightness was confirmed by the mass peasant movements at the turn of the century. The sacrifices the peasants used to make, their endurance and

⁴ S. Ossowski, *O ojczyźnie i narodzie* [About the Homeland and the Nation], Warszawa 1984, p. 26.

⁵ S. Ossowski, *O patriotyzmie, Dzieła* [About Patriotism, The Works], vol. VI, Warszawa 1970, p. 20.

tenacity in fighting for land, language, religion was the result of their identification with the values that were close to their hearts, those of their "private homeland", of their land. But this laid at the same time foundations for what might be called "the ideological homeland", although initially only few peasants out of the many-million-strong masses did realize that Poland had to become independent. So the historian has probably no easy task when he tries to capture that particular passage between the lower state of awareness (that of the "private homeland") and the strongly felt demand for an independent State (the "ideological homeland").

The borderlines in the shaping of the peasants' national consciousness are less difficult to determine although in this sphere, too, some controversies keep returning. The initial borderline, opening the first stage, goes back to the late 18th century. It is linked to the peasants' participation in the uprising of 1794 in particular. The final borderline, closing the processes of the second stage, was marked by the unprecedented in their history presence of the peasants in the resistance movement during the Second World War. This does not mean, of course, that after 1945 the necessity of maintaining the feeling of national identity and that of the State's independence has ceased to exist.

It is much more difficult—as I have already indicated—to determine the time at which this process of growing national consciousness was passing from the first to the second stage. This is due to the fact that in each sector of partitioned Poland, and even in particular regions, the factors influencing the process and its duration were different.

Stanisław Grabski expressed the opinion that peasants were won over to the cause of "fighting for independence" in Great Poland and Pomerania at the end of the 19th century, whereas in Galicia, the Kingdom of Poland and in Silesia between 1905 and 1914.⁶ This statement by Grabski seems to suggest that he considered the peasants had achieved there the second stage in their feeling of national identity. Other historians, without qualifying the degree of that awareness, are also of the view

⁶ S. Grabski, *Myśli o dziejowej drodze...*, p. 155.

that it was in Great Poland that it happened earlier than in other areas.

The researches I have done so far seem to suggest that the passage to the second stage in that evolution of peasants' consciousness was taking place as late as the years of the First World War and the initial period of the 2nd Republic.

I should rather share the well-balanced opinion of the eminent specialist in this field, Stefan Kieniewicz, who stated: "we must not remain blind to scores of pieces of evidence [he means diaries] provided by peasants from various regions and sectors of partitioned Poland which are rather unanimous in indicating that in the early 20th century a Polish peasant-patriot was rather the exception than something typical".⁷ So we can speak of the national consciousness of individuals and not of groups, peasant communities.

The main borderlines in this process were: the enfranchisement of peasants, recovery of independence by Poland in 1918 and the Second World War.

One can hardly discuss in a single article the shaping up of peasants' consciousness in those so different periods, also owing to the diversity of sources, methods to study them and factors determining that particular feeling. To study in this respect the period from 1864 to 1918 has not been simply dictated now by the 70th anniversary of Poland's independence. Indeed, between the January Uprising (1863) and the end of the First World War crucial and far-reaching events did happen: the winning over of peasant masses for the cause of independence and their active commitment to it. This may be regarded as one of the greatest successes of the Poles during the period when they were deprived of their State. True, in the years of the 2nd Republic, the number of peasants with a feeling of national identity was steadily growing, which would be proved by their massive participation in the resistance movement during the Second World War, by far much more numerous than their presence in the Polish legions and POW organization in 1914-1918. But those changes were a

⁷ S. Kieniewicz, *Historiok a świadomość narodowa* [*Historian and National Identity*], Warszawa 1982, p. 248.

mere continuation of the transformations that had taken place in the preceding period.

THE WAYS NATIONAL AWARENESS OF THE PEASANTS WAS SHAPING UP

This does not mean that there were not earlier individual peasants taking part in national uprisings and who had the national awareness of the second, higher stage. Today we do know quite a lot about the peasants' participation in national uprisings, mostly in the Kościuszko one of 1794, that in Great Poland in 1848, and in the January Uprising of 1863. However when Jerzy Kowecki writes about the peasant participants in the Kościuszko Insurrection of 1794, he indicates that "it would be a simplification to regard that fact as a proof of national consciousness and of a general patriotism".⁸ Similarly says Stefan Kieniewicz: "Not every peasant taking part in the January Uprising was a conscious Polish patriot, nor can one regard every peasant who remained passive in 1863 as being deprived of Polish feelings".⁹

In the first two decades of the 20th century the main determinants of the peasants' national consciousness, especially as regards the second stage of its development, was their adherence to political parties and military organizations and units which were proclaiming the ideas of independence. But this sort of membership did not always go together with national awareness, especially that of the second, higher stage in its formation. So it does not seem feasible to obtain objective, that is quantitative determinants of that awareness, at least at the present state of methods and research techniques relating to the mass sources. Still, obstacles of this type should not make futile any investigations into that far from easy area.

In the studies done so far, most attention has been paid to the factors forming the peasants' feeling of national identity.

⁸ J. Kowecki, *U początków nowoczesnego narodu* [Beginnings of a Modern Nation], in: *Polska w epoce Oświecenia. Państwo—społeczeństwo—kultura*, ed. B. Leśnodorski, Warszawa 1971, p. 165.

⁹ S. Kieniewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

For instance, Stefan Kieniewicz divides them into the inhibitory and accelerating ones: "So I should rather regard the process of the peasant becoming aware of being a Pole as the resultant of divergent and heterogeneous forces. In the negative case (from the point of view of national interests) these are: living in poverty which keeps his mind only on the matters of livelihood, and the ignorance that goes with it; bad memories of serfdom and the myth of 'the Poland of lords', the myth of 'the good emperor', a frequent ignorance of peasant interests with national agitators. In the positive case: the old patriotic memories going back to the prepartition and insurrection days; the slow but steady growth of welfare and education; the more and more frequent conflicts with the foreign authorities on matters of language, religion and economy; propaganda of Polish political parties".¹⁰ To this could be added: migration of people following the country's industrialization and at the same time their going abroad in search of work, doing military service in the invaders' armies, the readership of newspapers, calendars and books; social-economic and cultural-educational organizations, military organizations and units, folk and national culture, religion.

In the concrete historical circumstances of the given sector or region all these factors would be more or less intensive and act at various times. And they did not always contribute to the development of Polish identity. So, for instance, school or military service might also facilitate Russification and Germanization. Besides, education or minimal subsistence were only creating conditions for an interest in political and national matters. Also some social-economic activities of the landlords and clergy did not always contribute to the awakening of peasants' national consciousness, especially that of the second stage. However, in accordance with the article's subject I shall concentrate here

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 247. On the factors shaping our national consciousness cf. also: H. Brodowska, *Chłopi o sobie i Polsce. Rozwój świadomości społeczno-narodowej* [Peasants about Themselves and about Poland. Evolution of Social-National Consciousness] Warszawa 1984; J. Molenda, *Uwagi w sprawie kształtowania się świadomości narodowej w pierwszym dwudziestolecu XX wieku* [Remarks on the Formation of National Identity in the Two First Decades of the 20th Century], "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 1978, No. 2. pp. 315 - 328.

rather on the factors accelerating the growth of that consciousness, those which were removing the peasants' reluctance to co-operate with "enlightened classes" and were encouraging them to take part in the nation's life.

It is impossible to discuss here all the afore-mentioned factors. Each of them could be the subject of a separate work. So let me concentrate only on :

— those which had to do with what was essential for a peasant—his holding as his place of work and source of food for the family, and the village with its institutions and organizations ;

— those which affected the peasant community during long periods of time ;

— those which embraced great numbers of country people.

Investigations done so far seem to confirm that the peasants' national consciousness was shaping up in the years 1864 - 1918 mainly under the impact of :

— the recent past which was filled with injustices of the serfdom and was linked in their minds to the repartition Poland ;

— the church and religious institutions ;

— the millions of emigrating peasants who while seeking work abroad were at the same time coming to know different political and national conditions ;

— the work done by social-economic and cultural-educational organizations, issues of calendars, pamphlets, papers of the people whose aim was to spread education and civilization in the countryside, indispensable for the awakening of the peasants' national consciousness ;

— the experiences of the 1905 - 1906 revolution in the Kingdom of Poland and of the First World War ;

— an organized participation of peasant activists in the work done by political parties, national representations, military organizations and units.

WHICH POLAND : OF THE "LORDS" OR OF THE "PEOPLE" ?

To most Polish peasants the former Polish Commonwealth was still the land, as it had been for centuries, in which justice,

freedom, political rights and independence were reserved mainly for "the lords". So they did not identify themselves with that land and did not consider it their own. This partly explains the fact why most of the peasants, as they were gaining the feeling of national identity, did not at first wish to get an independent State. Even later, when the peasant movement did adopt the idea of independence, most of the peasants had misgivings about future Poland becoming "the Poland of landlords". And this anxiety, evidenced by numerous sources, lasted till the First World War. It found its expression in numerous diaries of the peasants and their letters to people's papers. Let me quote here the opinion of their leader, Wincenty Witos: "The majority of the peasants were very concerned, fearing that once the Polish State was restored, back would come serfdom and the total enslavement to the nobles".¹¹

This anxiety was constantly nourished by the propaganda of Poland's invaders. Indeed they attributed the lifting of soccage and the enfranchisement to the magnanimity of their emperors. At the same time they would pass over in silence the struggle of Poles themselves, especially during the 1863 uprising, for an acceleration of those reforms. Moreover they intended to separate the nationally "enlightened" classes from Polish peasants. In this respect, in building up the idea of "an emperor's peasant", most successful was the propaganda in Galicia.

So the past was fixed in peasants' minds one-sidedly as something negative. It was essential therefore to teach them a more optimistic, patriotic history of Poland which they would be prepared to accept as their own, identify themselves with it. Similarly it was important to support the current co-operation of peasants with the "enlightened" classes and thus reduce the long-standing mistrust between them, to create national bonds and those between particular groups. I should like to draw attention to the ability of various strata of Polish society at that time to come together and work for the common good, that is the building

¹¹ W. Witos, *Moje wspomnienia [My Memories]*, vol. I, Paris 1964, p. 132.

up a modern nation. And in this case it was the peasant groups who worked in the long run for the country's independence. Incidentally, it must be said that just those so important activities of particular groups and the political trends representing them, their readiness to make concessions and conclude compromises, came to be severely criticized by some historians in the Stalinist era. The fact that the peasant parties, like those of the workers', would arrive at compromises in their negotiations with the parties of the right was regarded by those writers as a betrayal of working class interests. Studying the course of inter-party negotiations in the years 1908 - 1918 I could come to the conclusion that they were concerned with political and national conflicts and not social ones. There was no question at all for any of the negotiating parties to renounce their social programmes.

Historical education as being an essential factor in the shaping up of national consciousness, including that of the peasants, during the period under discussion, has not been studied comprehensively yet. Educational policy of the foreign powers, especially in the Russian and Prussian sectors, avoided teaching the history of our country. As regards the peasants, those gaps used to be filled—this must be stressed particularly—by social organizations, independent of foreign authorities, concerned with extraschool education which included first of all subjects that were left out or one-sidedly taught by official schools. We can quote now numerous examples of how peasants used to be invited to celebrations of all sorts of national anniversaries, how their excursions were organized to the places of national culture or tradition but also to Virgin Mary shrines. We also know that among all sorts of agricultural courses there were also those in the history of Poland held only for the initiated. But we still do not know enough how they affected the consciousness of the participants. We learn from the letters by Polish peasant emigrants in Brazil or the United States at the turn of the century, who had come there from the Kingdom of Poland, that they realized their national identity at the national anniversary celebrations. This indicates that their attendance at such festivities was not prompted by their national awareness, but that their being there favoured the awakening of that feeling.

We get a better knowledge, though not complete here either,

by studying a kind of historical education systematically included in the papers of the peasant movement.

From the point of view of our subject this education was so important because it made peasants interested in the past of their country, made them identify themselves with it, consider it their own. Among the subjects discussed were events of the then recent history, with which the country people were so concerned, that is the abolition of soccage, affranchisement, the peasants' attitude towards national uprisings. In the polemics with the foreign propaganda it would be pointed out in the people's press that the abolition of serfdom, of soccage and the affranchisement was not simply an act of grace on the part of the foreign monarchs but that it happened under the pressure of the Polish nation's progressive forces. It was being explained that the best representatives of the nobility, townspeople, intelligentsia by fighting for agrarian reforms wished to make the peasants citizens of the country committed consciously to the cause of independence. The noble opponents of those reforms were blamed at the same time for the insufficient presence of peasants in national uprisings. This was also intended to remove the deep-rooted fears of the peasants, remembering their not so distant past, to make them feel that the soccage era had passed without return, that Poland would not be the Stage of the nobles again. Instead, there would be now a "people's Poland"—just, democratic, providing civic rights also for the peasants.

THE PART PLAYED BY THE CHURCH IN THE NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE PEASANTS

Our knowledge of how much the Church influenced the formation of peasants' national awareness in that period is rather scanty.

However, the peasants' devotion to religion would strengthen first of all local bonds, local patriotism, what we have called the "private homeland". The initiation in Polish ways would begin early in the childhood by the learning aloud and reciting of prayers in the mother tongue in peasant cottages. Also in church

the peasant heard Polish language. Moreover in sermons, religious songs, in the texts figuring on devotional articles, there would appear sometimes historical-patriotic sentences. Pilgrimages to religious shrines, especially to the monastery in Częstochowa—symbol of the national unity, were bringing the country people in touch with the old culture and Poland's past. This was particularly significant in the period when both the Russian and Prussian authorities began banning the Polish language from schools and offices, removing any traces of Poland in the curricula and public places. And the persecution of Catholic religion by the Orthodox Russia and Protestant Prussia led to the invaders being regarded as foreign in religion and the Catholic faith as being one's own and Polish. So engaging peasants in the defence of the Catholic faith, of their country church and parish, that is their "local homeland", meant eventually making them defend Poland as such. One must therefore conclude that the identification "a Pole—a Catholic", often presented negatively, was after all deeply rooted in the concrete conditions of the Russian and Prussian sectors. There it did strengthen the feeling of national identity with the peasants and helped to integrate the activities of particular social groups, making up then a modern nation, and did so at the levels of a village, region, sector and of the country as a whole.

Much was done in this respect by the priests who were active in agricultural circles and other country organizations—social, economic, cultural and educational. They did very much, particularly in the Prussian sector as there, apart from the Catholic clergy, were few representatives of the intelligentsia in the country. At the meetings of such organizations, the country priests, often presiding at them, were better placed, in view of their religious functions in the parish, to play a role of arbiters in settling disputes, sometimes long-standing ones, such as for instance the regulation of servitudes between peasants and landlords.

Owing to the stimulating activity of some local priests, a number of villages, such as Albigowa, Handzlówka, Lisków became famous for their achievements in education, civilization, culture and patriotism. The greatest contribution in this field was

made by Fathers : Waclaw Bliziński, Antoni Tyczyński, Władysław Krakowski, Stanisław Adamski, Piotr Wawrzyniak.

Priests were also influencing peasants by co-operating with political parties, active in the country, mainly of the national-democratic tendency. But probably most of them were engaged in the campaign for making the country school and local administration Polish in the revolutionary years of 1905 - 1906 in the Kingdom of Poland.

Persecution of the Uniates, their forceful conversion to Orthodoxy after the liquidation of the Greek-Catholic Church in the Chełm and Podlasie regions in 1875 brought the results opposite to the intended ones. In fact the repression of the Uniates, mostly Ukrainian peasants, by Russian authorities, pushed the former towards the Roman-Catholic Church which in turn brought them into the sphere of Polish language thus favouring eventually their Polonization.

Still it must be said that not all aspects of the priests' non-religious activities did contribute to the awakening of national awareness with the peasants. I mean here those priests who would take part in the work of conciliatory groups who were opposed to the emancipation strivings of the people's party, to patriotic celebrations, to the Polish fusiliers and legionaries who after the outbreak of the First World War marched into the Kingdom of Poland.

INFLUENCE OF THE LABOUR EMIGRATION ON THE PEASANTS' CONSCIOUSNESS

Recent studies of the influence the many-million-strong peasant labour emigration had on the Polish countryside have indicated that this emigration contributed both to the progress and welfare of the country, as well as to the strengthening of the peasants' national consciousness. The first chairman of the Galician People's Party, Karol Lewakowski stated in his letter of August 1895 to the paper "Nowa Reforma" that "a several-years stay in the free United States would turn the peasants into citizens. A new world of thoughts and aspirations broke into the sterile peasant minds

with all its lure of novelty and truth kindling up in them ambitions and demands they had never experienced before".¹²

Much information on the way life in emigration used to shape the peasants' consciousness we can get from numerous letters left by them. So we learn that they would realize their national identity only after having got in touch with a Polish priest and parish, Polish school, having participated in celebrations of national anniversaries. In the afore-mentioned "Letters of Polish Emigrants in Brazil and the United States, 1890 - 1891", who had come there from the Polish Kingdom, their publishers have come to the conclusion: "what is most striking is their attachment to their home village and region, to places where they had been brought up and worked, to the environment embracing both people and nature. The feelings are here strong and common. To use Stanisław Ossowski's terminology the patriotism they show is that to 'the private homeland'. But the emigrant may also have a feeling of belonging to the Polish national community in a broader sense, to the 'ideological homeland', to the Polish nation as a whole".¹³

However, letters of this type could not influence the national awareness of peasants in the Kingdom of Poland for the simple reason that they used to be retained by the Russian censorship. Still, similar views could be spread by the numerous re-emigrants, those who had decided to return home. And this was done especially by seasonal workers abroad whose feelings of national identity, while they were working in foreign countries, were similar to what felt those who had emigrated to America. So for instance, Walenty Rozmus of Bór, nourished the hope, like many others, that he would be well treated in France, because he stated in a letter of 1 January, 1909 written to a recruitment agent—"The

¹² S. Kowalczyk, *Ruch ludowy wobec wyborów do Sejmu w Galicji w 1895—materiały i dokumenty* [People's Movement in the Face of Diet Elections in Galicia in 1895—Materials and Documents], "Roczniki Dziejów Ruchu Ludowego" 1965, No. 7, s. 283.

¹³ *Listy emigrantów z Brazylii i Stanów Zjednoczonych 1890 - 1891* [Letters of Polish Emigrants from Brazil and the United States 1890 - 1891], ed. and introduction: W. Kula, N. Assorodobraj - Kula, M. Kula, Warszawa 1973, pp. 114 - 115.

French respect Polish nation".¹⁴ Even more clearly patriotic motives were expressed in a letter by Michał Hołowicz of the Ostrowo commune (Radymno post office) in a letter of 3 January 1909 to the same agent: "I'm going to offer to you, Sir, workers desinterestedly, men and women, sober above all, to go to France and not to Prussia, the enemy of our nation". Even if we suppose, which is likely, that he had borrowed that argumentation from the organ of the Galician Polish People's Party "Przyjacieli Ludu", the fact that he used it indicates clearly he not only identified himself with his nation but also knew what were its relations with other nations.

RURAL ORGANIZATIONS AS AN AREA OF COMMON ACTIVITIES OF PEASANTS AND "ENLIGHTENED" CLASSES

In the Prussian sector political, national and religious repression, as well as obstructions made to the Poles in industry, trade, land acquisition, were felt by all the classes, to a greater or lesser extent. This stimulated more than in the remaining sectors, a solidary cooperation of all those classes in fighting against Germanization and in defending the rights of Polish ownership. The situation of this kind allayed the long-standing peasants' distrust of the so called "enlightened" classes and contributed at the same time to the awakening of their national feelings. Not without influence was here a stronger economic position of the rural population. Indeed in the Prussian sector there were relatively more well-to-do peasants, the agriculture was here more developed than in other sectors which created a basis for closer co-operation (through economic organizations) between the more prosperous farmers and the land-owning, commercial and industrial circles.

Many historians regard this ability of integrating the activities of various groups, which was more advanced than in the remaining

¹⁴ More on it see: J. M o l e n d a, *Listy chłopów galicyjskich w sprawie sezonowej emigracji do Francji z lat 1908 - 1909 jako źródło historyczne* [Letters by Galician Peasants on the Seasonal Emigration to France of the years 1908 - 1909 as a Historical Source], "Przegląd Polonijny" 1983, No. 4, p. 43 - 50.

sectors, as a solidaristic subjection of the peasants to land-owners, bourgeoisie and Catholic clergy. This opinion is not based, however, on extensive studies. One should try instead to investigate to what extent the peasants were becoming independent and partners precisely in economic organizations owing among other things to their good husbandry and strong economic position. Just that massive participation of peasants in the fight against Germanization gave them the feeling of their strength, of the social and civic position they had gained. And it was perhaps due to the large measure of their independence, social position and partnership in various walks of national life that they did not feel the need, before 1918, to organize themselves into a separate rural party as it was the case in Galicia and the Kingdom of Poland. Still it is a fact, not sufficiently stressed yet by the way, that all these undertakings along with the independence demands propagated by the "Gazeta Grudziądzka" issued from 1894 (in 1913 its circulation reached the then very high figure of 130 thousand copies) that they contributed there to the earliest formation of peasants' national consciousness in Polish lands. This is the more noteworthy that political parties as such could not have a major influence on this process during the period under discussion because they emerged in the Prussian sector some time later.

Somewhat different and certainly smaller was the role of social, economic and cultural-educational organizations in the two remaining sectors (besides in the Kingdom of Poland they were formed tens of years later). Here it was the agrarian policy in particular which did not stimulate a co-operation between peasants and landed proprietors. It favoured big estates, slowed down the tempo of enfranchisement and of agrarian reforms.

Many prominent Poles would indicate that progress in this area was not only in the interest of peasants but of the nation as a whole. Thus an expert in agrarian problems, three times minister of agriculture in the 2nd Republic, in his youth an activist in the people's movement, Juliusz Poniatowski, wrote the following words on the social-economic factors slowing down the peasants' participation in national concerns: "The fact that peasants joined national life relatively late was due not only to the efforts of foreign invaders. For a long time they had been kept

off by Polish hands too. With what reluctance was the peasant being freed from the enslavement of soccage [...]. One cannot help feeling that half a century later the by now mature problem of breaking up estates in favour of landless peasants reveals the same sins of the land-owners as it was the case when soccage was being abolished".¹⁵

However, there were also tendencies on the part of some land-owners in the Kingdom of Poland and Galicia, especially those connected with the national-democratic movement, to make concessions and conclude compromises in social-economic matters with the peasants. In the Kingdom of Poland it was stronger than ever during the 1905 - 1906 revolution.

The combined efforts of peasants and clergy, teachers, landed proprietors were directed at that time mainly towards making Polish country schools, communal offices and rural courts of law. For the first time were the peasants instructed to such an extent by the representatives of the "enlightened" classes (directly or through various leaflets) on how to carry out their plans at rural meetings. Also for the first time did the peasants experience repression together with their "elder brothers", as the landed proprietors were then called, (fines, imprisonment, deportation) for political and national activity. Political-national manifestations (much more numerous than the social ones) which only in 1905 affected over two-thirds of the Kingdom's communes, proved of crucial importance for the spreading and strengthening of the national consciousness with the peasants in that part of Poland, mainly, however, of the first stage consciousness. One must stress here a major role country teachers played in this process both in the Polish Kingdom and in Galicia.

THE PEASANTS' FIGHT FOR INDEPENDENCE DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The second stage in the development of peasants' national identity in the Kingdom of Poland and Galicia got suddenly

¹⁵ J. Poniaowski, *Przedmowa [Preface]*, in: J. Chałasiński, *Młode pokolenie chłopów*, Rome 1946, pp. 3 - 11.

accelerated under the impact of the First World War which facilitated the fight for Poland's independence. Now the peasants could see, as a result of shifting fronts and war contributions, that the Polish lands were treated by all the armies and changing authorities—Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German—as foreign territories. They watched how, no matter what the commands and authorities, old or new, used to declare and no matter how kind was the attitude of the local population, the war services for each of the changing sides were bringing a ruin to particular holdings and to the country as a whole. They saw now clearly that no foreign authority paid any attention to the welfare of the local population, the Poles.

Over 3 million 200 thousand Poles forced to fight in the foreign armies, and most of them were peasants, experienced a shock finding themselves on the opposite sides of the front. Their treatment was also worse than that of the Russians, Germans, Austrians, they were sent to the most difficult sections which made the proportion of killed and wounded among them greater. Also among the millions of Poles evacuated or sent to work into Russia and Germany the majority were peasants. And thousands of Poles had to suffer as prisoners of war, some of them being sent to compulsory labour in the industry and agriculture of those foreign powers.

Each of these groups of Poles, once they had been forced to leave their homeland, could see for themselves that their treatment there was much worse than that of the local population. They could also observe that services to the military, as well as restrictions of civil rights of the population resulting from the state of war, were by far greater in the occupation zones than in the proper territories of those States. Any hopes, expressed in various peasant petitions asking for a just treatment and a more lenient attitude towards the war victims by Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary, were ultimately dashed by the experiences of the First World War. Simultaneously were also shattered the myths and illusions about the "just emperors". The concessions on political and national matters made by the occupying powers did not meet the Poles' aspirations and were coming to late.

All these experiences being on an unprecedented scale and

affecting the livelihood of peasant families exposed clearly the foreignness of that administration and were creating thereby favourable conditions for the idea of an independent State that could look after the interests of its citizens.

The propaganda for independence was increasing successively in the years 1905 - 1906, 1908, 1912 and 1914 - 1918. But it met with a stronger response with the peasants only in the two final years of the war and at the beginning of the independent Polish Republic. So its efficiency on a massive scale coincided with the crisis of the occupying powers and the emergence of the independent State.

Just at the period the peasants' political and national activity was suddenly becoming as strong as never before. It expressed itself above all in their adherence to the bodies working for independence such as the people's parties, national representations, military units and organizations, as well as in their acts of defiance against the occupying authorities combined with the shaking off of the foreign rule in Polish territories and the establishing of Polish authority.

The sudden and massive growth of national identity with the peasants during the First World War had been also noticed by their contemporary observers. One of them, a leading activist of the PSL (Polish People's Party) in the Kingdom of Poland, Stanisław Thugutt wrote in this connection: "The same peasant in whose heart the century-long wrongs had settled with acute bitterness and distrust, occasionally with hatred of the mansion, the same worker considered until recently by his gracious employer as the less valuable part of the machine, both have passed the examination in the hour of national need with honours [...] in the first war year they were sulking with Poland, the nobles' affair, which they did not need and which smelt of soccage. But during that war they advanced towards that Poland with giants strides and—they arrived on time".¹⁰ And indeed during the First World War whole peasant groups became nationally conscious.

¹⁰ S. Thugutt, *Wybór pism i autobiografia* [Selection of Letters and Autobiography], Warszawa 1939, p. 159.

It is also noteworthy that in the initial years of independence when the authorities were still weak and unstable, thus when it was a propitious time for advancing agrarian demands, the peasants gave priority to the interests of the nation as a whole. There were at that time no major social-economic manifestations. Also, by comparison with 1905, there was now less violence in any massive incidents. Parliamentary methods were prevailing over the spontaneous crowd reactions. This was evidence of changes occurring in the peasants' political consciousness. And it could be put down to the efficiency of the parties active in the countryside, especially the national democracy and the people's movement which taught the ways of political culture, favoured the solution of conflicts between parties by negotiations and compromises.

It must be noted, to be precise, that although the national democrates had given up (from the turn of the century till 1915) proclaiming the ideas of independence in their programmes, leaflets and in the press (which did not mean that it was a resignation in the strategic sense), it was the parties of the people's movement and the military units and organizations that remained the main propagators in this field.

True, the authors of independence programmes and of the people's vision of the future republican-democratic "People's Poland" were members of the country intelligentsia such as Bolesław Wysłouch, Jan Stapiński, Jan Dąbski (the two latter sons of peasants by the way), Edward Abramowski, Father Izidor Kajetan Wysłouch (cousin of Bolesław), Aleksander Zawadzki, Konstancja Jaworowska, Helena Radlińska, Maria Dąbrowska, Maksymilian Malinowski, Juliusz Poniatowski. But there were hundreds of wise peasants who were on various commissions drawing up the final variants of programmes. Even more numerous were the peasant press correspondents and publicists who wrote about the wishes and expectations of their milieu while propagating the political thought of their party. The outstanding ones among them were: Jakub Bojko, Andrzej Średniawski, Wincenty Witos, Andrzej Pluta, Tomasz Nocznicki, Błażej Stolarski, Piotr Koczara, Teofil Kurczak, Jan Sadlak.

The celebrated novelist, Maria Dąbrowska, estimated the

number of peasant activists working for the cause of independence in the Kingdom of Poland alone to be several thousand and thought very highly of them: "The peasant masses are here by far more ignorant than anywhere else. But the ranks of peasant spiritual aristocracy we have, are in their intelligence much superior to the average peasant and worker in Western Europe. All of them are people of shrewd and subtle minds, endowed with common sense and having the gift of grasping things as they really are. We have in the Kingdom alone several thousand of such well-read and enlightened farmers. Even as against the millions of peasants in Poland this is a nucleus of a major people's movement. Once the average level has been raised, those enlightened peasants will gain influence and significance in the country. Today just those several thousand are taking part in Poland's political life, in the struggle for independence. Their contribution, by comparison with the resources, is no less intensive than that of the intelligentsia".¹⁷

During the following years the membership of peasants in the people's parties was greatly increased. So the Polish People's Party "Wyzwolenie" was estimated to number around 5 thousand members in 1915, 18 thousand in 1918, and 35 - 50 thousand in 1919. The circulation of "Piast", organ of the Polish People's Party Piast, the second largest party of this type after "Wyzwolenie", grew from 8 thousand copies in 1914 to 70 thousand in 1917. The circulation of the "Gazeta Grudziądzka" edited by Wiktor Kulerski and which propagated independence ideas in the Prussian sector reached, as I have already mentioned, as many as 130 thousand copies. It was one of the highest in the whole press issued at that time on Polish territories. The parties "Wyzwolenie" and "Piast" played a major role in Poland's political life during the first world war and in the first years of independence.

Similarly grew the number of peasants belonging to military organizations and units. So, for instance, according to the incomplete data, the percentage of peasants serving in the Polish

¹⁷ M. Dąbrowska, *Włościańskie poglądy i programy* [The Peasant Views and Programmes], "Wiadomości Polskie", No. 34 of 19 July, 1916, p. 4.

Legions increased from 7.2% in November of 1914 to around 25.7% during the period from February to April of 1919. In the last two years of the war much more peasants enrolled in the Polish Military Organization—POW. In 1918 they made up from 50 to 60% of the POW membership which numbered altogether 20 thousand.

One must take into account that many active and nationally conscious peasants were remaining under the influence of other political parties, especially those of the national-democratic camp and were working in social, economic, cultural, educational and charity organizations succouring mainly starving townspeople.

In view of all these facts one must state that on the eve of independence there were in the countryside considerable political and military forces, by no means smaller than in towns, which were determined and ready to shake off foreign rule at the first opportune moment.

One must also stress the fact that during the war, and even before it, peasants, like other social and political groups, were getting ready both politically and militarily to solve the Polish question although at that time the restoration of the Polish State seemed at first rather unreal. And both lines of preparation and activity, that is the military and political-diplomatic ones, in which many peasants from the lowest to the highest rank did participate, proved useful, although in various spheres, when the time came to liberate particular parts of Poland from foreign rule.

The peasant members of the Party had their representatives in at least seventeen national representations which acted in one, two or even three sectors and were trying hard, according to the circumstances, to arrive at various solutions of the Polish question. The position of the peasants' Party members was not yet very strong in the central authorities of those representations. Those members belonged, by the way, mostly to the intelligentsia. But in the communes or even in rural districts the only cadres that could be delegated to various councils, committees, national sections and local centres of the POW were often the most shrewd peasants, adherents of the party. This was for them the first major education in political and national activity, in conducting

negotiations and concluding compromises with representatives of other political schools.

Peasants, the Party adherents, were also acquiring experience in organizing mass meetings, manifestations, protests, and even armed actions in the last months of the war.

The greatest protests on the three-sector scale, involving hundreds of villages and thousands of peasants, were held after an agreement was concluded between the central States and the Central Ukrainian Council, on the strength of which the vast regions of Chełm and Podlasie were detached from Poland. This caused the most massive national movement since the 1905 - 1907 revolution. And it was a sort of rehearsal before the historic days of October - November 1918.

In the countryside of the Polish Kingdom local circles of the Party and the POW commands taking over the communes both were joining peasants, in the last month of the war, in their protests against requisitions by the occupying forces and tried to organize that movement. Special POW units carried out diversive actions in the country aimed at desorganizing the requisitional attempts. Thus for instance in the Krasnystaw district, where the party organizations and POW units were strong, they disarmed, on the 3th and 4th November, 875 Austrian soldiers. This reduced food supplies of the central States while being a good school of diversive action for the country youth.

These political and military experiences could be used subsequently by the most enlightened peasants during the memorable days of October—November 1918. As in the previous period they played a major part at the level of communes and districts, although the most prominent of them proved also very active at the highest national level. So, for instance, the peasant from Wierzchosławice in the Cracow area, chairman of one of the major parties, the Polish People's Party "Piast", Wincenty Witos was appointed to the post of chairman of the first local government independent of the foreign powers—the Polish Liquidation Commission, and another son of peasants, brigadier Boleslaw Roja, also in Cracow, led the disarmament of the Austrian garrison. Witos was also invited to be a member of the Provisional People's Government of the Polish Republic in Lublin. However, having

learned on the spot that this was not a national coalition government, he refused to take part in it. Members of the Polish People's Party "Wyzwolenie" took in that Lublin government 4 portfolios out of 14. So it included the whole presidium of the Party's Executive, elected at the Congress in January 1918: chairman—Błażej Stolarski (minister without portfolio), vicechairmen—Tomasz Nocznicki (minister without portfolio) and Juliusz Poniatowski (agriculture), secretary—Stanisław Thugutt (minister of the interior). The fifth member of the Polish People's Party, but of "Piaśt", who became minister of education, was Gabriel Dubiel.

It was particularly significant, however, that the POW members and former legionaries were in the communes and rural districts in fact the main or often only force which was taking part, in Galicia and the Kingdom of Poland in October—November 1918, in the actions of disarming police stations and small military units scattered throughout the country with a special mission of requisitioning corn, livestock, guarding stores of food. These actions had been successively carried out by the POW—as I have already mentioned—still before the disarming of military garrisons in towns. As for the peasant members of the People's Parties and the POW they were taking over authority in communes and districts where they had influence, kept order without waiting for decisions from above. Besides, the Party peasants in the Kingdom of Poland, had already since 1917 been strengthening their influence in commune and district councils, and in some districts (those of Pultusk, Krasnystaw, Tomaszów, Janów, Biłgoraj (they even had gained the majority). And once the Provisional People's Government of Polish Republic was formed in Lublin, "Wyzwolenie" while seeking support for it addressed itself in a "Proclamation to All Commune Inhabitants" to start immediately elections for commune councils. "The local authority falling out of the invaders' hands—it said—should pass immediately and directly into the hands of an autonomous people's organization".¹⁸

Peasants in the Great Poland and Silesia were taking part, even more massively than in other sectors, in the liberation of

¹⁸ "Wyzwolenie", No. 46 of 13 Nov. 1918, p. 409.

those territories from the German rule. Already in November 1918, in Great Poland's communes and districts, they were in great numbers taking over the administration which from then on was to be subordinated to the Main People's Council in Poznań. The guards and POW units which were then fighting in the Great Poland uprising were made up in their majority of peasants. In the voluntary recruitment of the insurgents (27 December, 1918 - 16 January, 1919) their troops were quickly growing reaching on 12 January, 1919 almost 17 thousand soldiers. It is estimated that peasants and rural workers made up over 50% of them. Almost 2 thousand insurgents were killed.

Many Upper-Silesian peasants were getting military training from the autumn of 1918 in the local "Sokół" organization, and from January of 1919 mainly in the POW. The latter numbered in July of 1920 over 11 thousand members and in April of 1921—40 thousand. Peasants, too, were a major force in the three Silesian uprisings of 1919, 1920 and 1921, and made a majority in rural districts. The number of those taking part in the third uprising was over 50 thousand and the number of those who were killed—1218.

The voluntary recruitment of thousands of Great Poland and Silesian peasants into insurgent units and their fight for the incorporation of those territories into the Polish State was one more proof of their civic patriotic activity and their feeling of national identity.

Yet this feeling was not universal. As in other social groups a portion of peasants in Upper Silesia and the majority of them in Warmia, Mazury and Powiśle voted in the plebiscites to belong to the German State.

The Polish-Russian war of 1920 showed that the peasant masses did carry out the tasks of defending and feeding the country that had just regained independence. Among the voluntaries in the Polish army many were peasants' sons, mostly secondary school pupils and students.

It may seem understandable that the peace slogans were well received by peasants. But it is also a fact that their desertion from the Polish army, as well as their support for the Provisional

Revolutionary Committee of Poland attached to the Red Army were only incidental phenomena.

So all this indicates that the peasants' common attitude towards the State was in 1920 very much the same as that of other social groups. This attitude had been strengthened by the fact that at the hour of the greatest menace to the country's independence the chairman of a people's party, Wincenty Witos, was appointed Prime Minister of the "national unity government". Another peasants' son, member of the Party, Jan Dąbski headed the Polish delegation at the Polish-Soviet peace conference in Mińsk and then in Riga where he put his signature on the Riga treaty.

The war of 1920 confirmed the peasants' readiness for an integrated activity with other social groups in the formation of Poland's eastern frontier. This was noticed by a member of the military council in the 15th army of the western front, D.B. Polunian who in analyzing the causes for the Soviet troops' defeat in their march towards Warsaw, stated in September 1920: "The peasants who were in the Denikin army had no ties with the Denikin officers. But in the Polish army the national idea was binding together the bourgeois, peasant and worker, that was visible everywhere". One must agree with the opinion of the Soviet historian, W. Sirotkin, who is quoting those words, that "Soldier of the world revolution, Polunian, without suspecting it himself, touched on the fundamental problem of the epoch".¹⁹

During the years of the independent Polish Republic, the integration of peasants with the rest of the nation, their identification with the State were becoming stronger and more extensive. This must have been due first of all to the spreading of education, to the teaching at the free schools and to the support this got from the civic and patriotic upbringing of the military service.

True there was also bitterness because many hopes had not been realized though they had been raised by the country's regained independence. The conflicts were at their strongest in the 1930s. But it is noteworthy that, despite their critical attitude towards successive governments and even sharp opposition to

¹⁹ W. Sirotkin, *Drogi światowej rewolucji* [The Roads of World Revolution], "Historia i Życie", No. 18 of 16 Sept. 1988, p. 1-2 [Supplement to "Życie Warszawy"].

their policies, the peasants did not blame for it, with only few exceptions, the State which they came to regard as their own. This was the merit of the People's Party politicians who had been teaching peasants to distinguish between the direct actions of governments and the superior values of the State.

It was particularly with the peasants brought up already in independent Poland that the consciousness was changing since they regarded the State as something quite normal and felt bound to it. Józef Chałasiński, the distinguished sociologist studying the "young generation of peasants", came to the conclusion: "The class most strongly bound to Free Poland are the once *glebae adscripti* for whom also today Polish land constitutes the sense of their lives. [...] The young generation of this class is now so closely linked to the idea of a Free Poland that it will not allow anybody to take it away from them".²⁰

J. Chałasiński's opinion has been confirmed by the peasants' participation in the resistance movement during the Second World War on a scale never noted before. The afore-quoted Juliusz Poniąkowski wrote comparing the participation of peasants in the independence movements during the two World Wars: "The former POW activists of 1918 estimate comparatively the growth of the Home Army units in districts as being 50 - 100 times bigger this time and occurring in complete harmony with the community. Gone are the 'orientations' so ill-famed in the First War, gone is from the Polish land the 'soldier without fatherland', a stronger among his people. To destroy what is Polish one should destroy now the whole society".²¹

So the Second World War became a sort of apogee in the independence activities of Polish peasants. How much the situation had changed by then, how strong became the national identity of not only the peasants in the years 1918 - 1939 is shown by the fact that during the Second World War nobody would put the question whether after it had ended Poland should be again independent.

(Translated by Ludwik Wiewiórkowski)

²⁰ J. Chałasiński, *Młode pokolenie chłopów* [The Young Generation of Peasants], vol. I, Warszawa 1938, p. 119.

²¹ J. Poniąkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 3 - 11.