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National minorities in northern and western Poland

The 1945 annexation of western and northern lands that had previously constituted the eastern provinces of the Third Reich, was for the Polish people an event of a deep historical and civilizational dimension.

What dominated and influenced that state of affairs was not the fact that the territories had been inhabited by people of the Polish descent but Stalin's will to give Poland territorial compensation for the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Republic (Kresy), incorporated into the Soviet Union. Poland gave 179 649 km² to the USSR and gained 103 788 km² at Germany's expense, and eventually lost 75 861 km² of its territory. The loss of the eastern provinces and the forced eviction of the German population froze Polish relationships with the Federal Republic for decades. Moreover, the Soviet Union declared itself a guarantor of Polishness in that area, introducing its armed forces – the Red Army (since 1946 the Soviet Army) to be stationed in Poland in the number of 100 thousand soldiers – 90 per cent of which stayed in the western and northern parts of the country.

The outstanding Polish sociologist Jan Szczepański, who in 1989 characterized social processes on the western and northern areas of Poland, wrote that the local communities arising in that area "had been an emanation of Polish society and reflected its abilities to solve problems resulting from extraordinary situations unknown to the traditional way of living. Thus, I regard the settlement of the lands as a test of values of Polish society"[1].

The modern northern and western lands of Poland comprise the following historical regions: Warmia and Masuria (southern Ostpreußen), Pomerania (Pommern), Lubusz Land (Ost Brandenburg) and Lower Silesia (Niederschlesien) together with a part of Upper Silesia (Oberschlesien). The capital cities of the regions are: Olsztyn (Allenstein), Gdańsk (Danzig), Szczecin (Stettin), Zielona Góra (Grűnberg) and Wrocław (Breslau).

After 1945, the western and northern lands witnessed a process unknown to the history of modern Europe, which was a mass and total exchange of the population. It embraced millions of people (Germans, Poles, Jews, Ukrainians and other nations). It changed the then existing social-political, economic, religious and national relations. It led to an ideological

[1] Szczepański, *Przedmowa,* [in:] A. Sakson, *Mazurzy — społeczność pogranicza,* Poznań 1990, p. XIV.

clash between the “conquerors” and “losers”, the “looters” and “pioneers”. Many found that land a damned land. In some areas the harm and suffering of individuals, communities and national groups have dramatically increased. The traditional cultures started to disappear, the indigenous people began to leave and new people – who remained strangers to one another for a long time - were coming instead.

“You, peasants, don’t have to emigrate beyond the sea. You want bread – there is bread in the west. You want land – there is land in the west. We will sow corn and then take it to the barns and granaries of ours. Out there in the west, people from towns will find shops and craftsman’s workshops left by the Germans. The professional intelligentsia will find work in offices and bureaus” - said the 1945 appeal of the Central Resettlement Committee.

Those who went to the „West” were people looking for a new place to live since the old one in the east no longer belonged to the territory of Poland, or those who arrived there with new names and new life histories. There were also those who saw there a chance to make up for the wartime they had survived left with absolutely nothing. They were those who truly believed in the mission of adapting that area and who treated the land as an ownerless treasury. The rest of the country thought of that land as the “Wild West” - an area governed by anarchy, corruption and the law of the “survival of the fittest”, where the fittest are represented by police officers and the security service rather than bandits. There were also those for whom it was the “beginning of the end” which involved the necessity of abandoning their homeland.

The social processes that took place on the western and northern lands after 1945 were characterized by particular intensity and complexity, which - on the one hand - resulted from a very complicated political, economic and demographic situation on that area and - on the other – the cultural clash consequent to the encounter of people of various national and religious backgrounds, different cultural and civilizational experiences, different faith and motives that had brought them to those lands.

The area of the western and northern lands was inhabited by six main groups of people:

1. **The inhabitants of former East and West Prussia, Pomerania, Lubusz Land and Silesia:**

Germans. According to the national census, which took place on 14 February 1946, the population of Poland included 2 288 thousand Germans, out of which 2 075 thousand – 90.7 per cent - occupied the territory of the western and northern lands. The German people constituted 41.3 per cent of the inhabitants of the area, 65.3 per cent of which lived in the countryside.

The subsequent waves of forced displacements started in 1945–1946 led to the gradual decrease of the German population. In 1950, there were 200 thousand Germans left in Poland. After the increased wave of emigration which had began in 1956, the number lessened, and in the following year it was 65 thousand people. In 1969, the authorities estimated that Poland had been inhabited by approximately 4 thousand "ethnic Germans" of an unquestioned identity ("recognized Germans") – but the number was considerably understated. The areas with largest German populations were Breslau, Koszalin and Stettin voivodeships. The Germans who stayed were usually craftsmen, specialists and physical workers saved from the displacement by local authorities. The present number of "ethnic Germans" has been estimated to be about 50 thousand people.

Masurians, Warmians, Kashubians, Slovincians and Silesians were native communities which, after the war, became described as autochthons. In 1948, their number was estimated to be 935 thousand people, while the national census of 1950 gave the number of 1 085 thousand.

The indigenous people took their roots from Slavic and Polish identities. For ages, however, they had lived within the boundaries of the German (Prussian) state and had a diversified state of national consciousness. Many of them found themselves Germans or Germanized Masurians and Slovincians. Others restricted their identities to a "regional homeland" and called themselves Kashubians, Silesians or Warmians. There were also those who, to a smaller of larger extent, identified themselves with Polishness. The whole of the population was subjected to a procedure that verified their sense of national belonging. The people swore their allegiance to the Polish nation and the Polish state, and, unlike their German neighbors, avoided forced displacement.

The erroneous and discriminatory policy the Polish authorities embraced towards those people, as well as the advanced process of Germanization led a gradual disintegration of the communities. It particularly manifested itself among the Slovincians, the Kashubians from the area of Bytów, the Mazurians, and later, among the Warmians and big groups of Silesians. In 1950 - 1995, as a result of another migration waves to Germany, Poland was left by 1.5 mln people.

In 1985, the estimated number of the indigenous people was approximately 984 thousand individuals (in 1971, the number was estimated at the level of 1.2 mln people, of which 730 thousand lived in Opole Silesia). At present, the people are a membership basis of

the German minority in Poland that, according to various estimates, comprises about 400 – 500 thousand people.

2. **Resettlers:** (Polish colonists) were people resettled from former Polish lands. They were the biggest group of people arriving on the western and northern territories. Their attitudes and motivations related to the settlement on that area were extremely differentiated. The group comprised of both looters and pioneers who arrived there to "return" the lands to Poland.

The level of civilization of those people was also very differentiated (Posnanians and Pomeranians on the one hand, and the Krupie people on the other). In 1946, their number was estimated at the level of 2 326 thousand individuals.

The group was characterized by big mobility and was susceptible to the processes of internal migration.

3. **The expellees from the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Republic (Kresy)**: also known as Polish repatriates, were initially an unstable community that believed in the possibility of returning to the lost homelands. Their different cultural traits led to a self-isolation from other groups but later, particularly after the second wave of displacements from the Soviet Union in 1955 – 1959, the community became a more dynamic element, striving for cooperation with other regional groups. After the displacements had finished, the community comprised 1.7 mln people.

4. **Polish re-emigrants from France, Belgium, Romania, Yugoslavia and other European countries:** they stood out from the environment they had to live in. The French language they spoke, different cultural habits and the fact that they lived in dense agglomerations of their own (mainly in Lower Silesia. In 1950, on the territory of the Breslau Voivodeship, there lived 84 thousand re-emigrants) helped them maintain their identity throughout the first part of the postwar period. All these aroused many antagonisms such as the feeling of superiority to the other groups. The professional groups predominant among them were miners and qualified workers.

5. **The Ukrainian people and members of other national minorities:** separate nationality, faith and cultural tradition as well as the low civilizational degree of the Ukrainians and Lemkos who were forcibly resettled onto the area of the western and northern lands during the "Operation Vistula", carried out from 4 May to 31 July 1947, made them foreign to other groups. They were displaced from their old residences in southeastern Poland (the Bieszczady region).The goal of the "Operation Vistula" was to eliminate the Ukrainian minority in Poland. The Ukrainians were isolated for a long time. They also chose self-isolation to live in closed

circles of their own community, regarding their situation as temporary. It concerned both bigger groups living together and individuals scattered throughout the region. In 1947, a total of 137 thousand Ukrainians were resettled. They settled mainly in the following voivodeships: Olsztyn – 58 thousand people, Stettin – 46 thousand, Breslau – 21 thousand, Posen – 7 thousand and Danzig – 4 thousand people.

A considerably big group of people in the postwar Poland were Jews. The largest Jewish populations lived in Lower Silesia (in the middle of 1946, their number was app. 80 thousand people), and in West Pomerania (30 thousand people). After some time, a great majority of Jews decided to migrate (mainly abroad). In 1947, the number of Jews on the western and northern lands dropped by 50%, and, in the following years, gradually decreased.

The national minorities residing on the western and northern lands included 10 thousand Greeks and Macedonians who arrived in Poland in the late 40s after the fall of the communist uprising. They settled mainly in Lower Silesia (Breslau, Zgorzelec, Legnica, Świdnica). Moreover, the territory of the western and northern lands was inhabited by 15 – 20 thousand Romani people, scattered throughout the area.

6. A separate minority, which has, until recently, remained unmentioned in the numerous studies on social changes on the western and northern lands, was a **group of Soviet troops stationed in Poland till 1991.** About 90% of the troops resided on the territory of west Poland. Their number was changing depending on the development of the international situation. The Soviet soldiers stationed in Poland influenced the shape of many local communities; in Lower Silesia, they constituted a substantial proportion of inhabitants in the following cities: Legnica, Szprotawa or Bolesławiec. On other territories, like in Pomerania and Lubusz Land, the troops created isolated communities and lived in stations one would search on a map in vain (np. Borne-Sulinowo). The presence of numerous Soviet forces usually had a negative impact on the local citizens (many social pathologies) and the development of social processes in that areas.

The early postwar atmosphere of temporariness did not favor the creation of new communities among the inhabitants of the western and northern lands. It was not until August 1945 that the northern border between Poland and the Soviet Union was finally established, and until 1946, Masuria was a district (and not a voivodeship). The indigenous people were given "temporary" certifications of their Polish identity, and the colonists – "provisory" documents that confirmed their ownership of the farms and buildings. The first notarial deeds appeared in 1955, and the ownership rights of the resettlers were equalized just in 1957.

Another important factor were the phenomena of the "Cold War", when various forces undermined the stability of the western and northern frontiers. Another symptom of that time were many negative prejudices and stereotypes characteristic of each of the groups.

The 2002 national census contained nationality and home language related questions, asked for the first time since after 1945. According to the census, Poland is inhabited by 450-500 thousand representatives of national minorities that make up 1% of the total population. The largest minority are Silesians – 175 thousand people, and Germans – 153 thousand, Byelorussians – 48 thousand, Ukrainians – 31 thousand and Romany – 13 thousand. The census results were widely criticized since they did not reflect the actual situation.

One of the largest national groups on the western and northern lands are the Ukrainians whose biggest population resides in Warmia, Masuria and Pomerania. The minority is characterized by a good organizational activity and a relatively high sense of national identification.

A Ukrainian identity expresses itself through the Orthodox church, considered a national church of the Ukraine. An important role in cultivating the national identity takes the Association of Ukrainians, whose main concern is a creation of a net of the minority education system (primary and secondary schools with Ukrainian as the language of instruction can be found in the towns of Górowo Iławeckie and Bartoszyce in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, and in the town of Biały Bór – West Pomeranian Voivodeship). Like the Orthodox church, the Association of Ukrainians is a publisher of many journals (e.g.: "Our Word"), calendars and books.

A group culturally related to the Ukrainian people are Lemkos – Ruthenian (Ukrainian) montagnards of the Western Carpathians who developed a sense of ethnic identity. The Lemkos, whose present number in the country is about 50 thousand (in 1935, it was app. 150 thousand), shared the fate of the Ukrainians and were displaced from their homelands. Currently, the people, whose sense of national identity is rather undefined (they are thorn between Polish and Ukrainian identities), lives in the areas of Legnica, Koszalin, Zielona Góra, and in the Bieszczady Mountains. In 1989, the Association of Lemkos was found in Poland.

Another big minority in Poland are Germans with the largest population living in Opole Silesia. According to the 2002 national census, there are 107 thousand people who identify themselves with their German background in that area (in Warmia and Masuria – 4.5 thousand, in Pomerania – 3.3. thousand). Despite the size of the population and the financial support from the German state, they do not have their own system of minority education. The German

minority has a lot of organizations; every county in the Warmia-Masurian Voivodship has a separate autonomic minority organization. The most important minority organization in Poland is the Social-Cultural Association of Germans in Silesian Opole that publishes a weekly magazine „Schlesiesches Wochenblatt".

Like the Alsatians in France, the Masurians, Warmians, Kashubians and Silesians are autochthonic communities with a strong sense of their identities. They are ethnic Polish people who, for many years, had lived within the boundaries of the German (Prussian) state. In 1945, they became a part of the reviving Polish state, and the sense of their national identities was very differentiated. They were communities molded by processes characteristic for the social borderlands, and the merging of various cultural-civilizational, linguistic, economic, demographic, and political influences have been more intensive on those areas. The civilization-cultural circles and social-political relations that predominate there, are always those that, for many reasons, appear more attractive or real for the local people. The power and range of the processes, which has remained unknown to homogenous areas, depends on various circumstances. Consequently, the attitude of a substantial part of the inhabitants of the social borderlands remains unclear and labile.

As a result of natural assimilation processes and the deliberate Germanization Policy, the degree of identification with the German nation and state among particular communities of the indigenous people (autochthons) in 1945 was differentiated. During the interwar period, the Polish movement in Silesia and Warmia was popular and widely supported. On the other hand, the germanization of the Slovincians and Masurians was very advanced. The majority of them declared to be Germans or German Masurians.

The Catholic Warmians and Evangelical Masurians are a small ethnic community (app. 10 thousand people) and inhabit the area of the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship. To sustain their identity they found (among many others) The Masurian Association or The Masurian Evangelic Association.

An active and big community are the Kashubians, whose population has been estimated to be 300 thousand people. They are regarded as a culturally-regional or ethnic minority. The Kashubian language is taught in many primary schools. The Kashubian-Pomeranian Association is very active and has many branches on the territory of Pomerania. It publishes magazines, books and other texts in Kashubian as well as cultivates old customs and Kashubian traditions (the language, gear, songs, museums, festivals, etc.).

The Silesians are a minority that aspires to be a nation. The Silesian Autonomy Movement is a main organization that, like the Basques, is striving to win autonomy for the region. The Silesian autonomists base their attempts on the strong sense of their Silesian identity, which is neither Polish nor German, and on the Silesian culture (the language and traditions), as well as their specific history.

A relatively small national minority on the western and northern lands are Byelorussians and Lithuanians who mainly reside in Warmia and Masuria, as well as the Romani, Jews, Tatars, Greeks and Macedonians. The representatives of the last group do not form tight communities and inhabit the whole area of the Recovered Territories.

After 1945, as a result of another waves of emigration, the Jewish population in Poland systematically decreased. Their number has been estimated to be 5 thousand people. The scattered groups of Jews usually inhabit urban areas, and their largest populations are in Warsaw, Lodz, Stettin and in the cities of Lower Silesia: Breslau, Legnica and Wałbrzych. In 1961, about 35% of Jews lived in Lower Silesia. At that year, there were six primary and three secondary schools where 1270 Jewish pupils could learn their mother tongue. Today, the representatives of the small community of Polish Jews are associated in (among many other institutions) the Social-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland.

Currently, there are about 4 thousand Greeks and Macedonians inhabiting north and west Poland. They mainly live in Breslau, Zgorzelec, Legnica and Świdnica.

Among the groups between national and ethnic minorities, there is the 20 thousand people community of Romani, scattered throughout Poland, as well as the Armenians, Crimean Karaites and Tatars. The three last groups have not resisted the process of assimilation, which has led to a substantial degree of identification with the Polish people. In 1985, about 2.5 thousand Tatars lived in Poland, with a majority living in the Bialystok Voivodeship. In the city of Bialystok, there were 1.8 thousand citizens of Tatar ancestry. Apart from that region, a group of Polish Tatars – as the community is called – lives in Danzig and Warsaw. Most of them cultivate their religious traditions, and are members of the Muslim Religious Association.

National minorities are a permanent element of the integrated and often multicultural post-migration communities of the modern northern and western lands of Poland, as well as a strong proof of their identities and specificities.

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