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# On the Threshold of Dismissal. Head of the Polesia Province Jan Krahel'ski in View of the Situation in Polesia in 1932<sup>1</sup>

*U progu dymisji. Wojewoda poleski Jan Krahel'ski wobec sytuacji na Polesiu w 1932 roku*

*На мяжы адстаўкі. Адносіны палескага ваяводы Яна Крагельскага да падзей 1932 года на Палессі*

## Abstract

In the Second Polish Republic, the culmination point of the huge economic crisis called the Great Depression occurred in 1932. The crisis affected particularly inhabitants of villages, including those dominated by national minorities in eastern provinces. One such region was Polesia. The aim of this text is to answer the question of how the situation of economic collapse was addressed by representatives of the state administration system, one of whom was Jan Krahel'ski – the Head of the Polesia Province in 1926–1932. At the end of his period in office,

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he often expressed his views on the condition of the province and the desirable means that could have reduced the consequences of the crisis. The text is based on archival materials acquired from archives of Poland, Belarus, and Russia. Krahelski was an advocate of moderate nationality policy. He refrained from the Polishisation of national minorities and tried not to escalate political repressions almost until the end of his period in office as Head of the province. The radicalisation of social moods combined with the deepening economic collapse forced him to revise his opinion about the methods of ensuring internal security. The analysis of the source materials, for which an important point of reference is also an armed rebellion that occurred on the borderland of the Kshirsky County [the Polesia Province] and the Kovel County [the Volhynia Province], suggests that administrative bodies in the eastern provinces could properly diagnose the general condition of the territory entrusted to them, but at the same time, they did not fully recognise its sources; therefore, they may have been surprised with the collapse of the order.

**Keywords:** Polesia, national minorities, Second Polish Republic, Great Depression, Jan Krahelski

### Abstrakt

Na 1932 r. przypadło w II Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej apogeum tzw. wielkiego kryzysu gospodarczego. Odbił się on zwłaszcza na położeniu mieszkańców wsi, także tej zdominowanej przez mniejszości narodowe w województwach wschodnich. Jednym z takich regionów było Polesie. Tekst poświęcony jest odpowiedzi na pytanie, jak w sytuacji załamania ekonomicznego reagowali przedstawiciele administracji państwowej, której przedstawicielem był również Jan Krahelski – wojewoda poleski w latach 1926–1932. Pod koniec okresu sprawowania urzędu niejednokrotnie artykułował on swoje poglądy na temat stanu województwa i pożądanych środków, które powinny zneutralizować skutki kryzysu. Tekst oparty jest o materiał archiwalny pozyskany z archiwów Polski, Białorusi i Rosji. Krahelski był zwolennikiem umiarkowanej polityki narodowościowej. Odżegnywał się od polonizacji mniejszości narodowych i niemal do końca sprawowania stanowiska wojewody starał się nie eskalować represji politycznych. Radykalizacja nastrojów społecznych związana z pogłębiającym się załamaniem ekonomicznym zmusiła go do rewizji stanowiska w kwestii metod zapewnienia bezpieczeństwa wewnętrznego. Analiza materiału źródłowego, dla której ważnym punktem powiatu koszyrskiego (województwo poleskie) i kowelskiego (województwo wołyńskie), wskazuje, że administracja w województwach wschodnich mogła właściwie diagnozować ogólny stan powierzonych jej terytoriów, ale jednocześnie niedoskonale rozpoznać jego źródła, w efekcie czego mogła zostać zaskoczona załamaniem porządku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Polesie, mniejszości narodowe, II Rzeczypospolita, wielki kryzys, Jan Krahelski

### Анацыя

На 1932 г. прыйшоўся ў II Рэчы Паспалітай апагей т.зв. вялікага эканамічнага крызісу. Гэта паўплывала на становішча жыхароў вёсак, у тым ліку ва ўсходніх ваяводствах, дзе пераважалі нацыянальныя меншасці. Адным з такіх рэгіёнаў было Палессе. Артыкул прысвечаны адказу на пытанне, як рэагавалі прадстаўнікі дзяржаўнага кіравання на

сітуацыю эканамічнага крызісу, у тым ліку Ян Крагельскі – ваявода Палесся ў 1926–1932 гадах. У апошнія гады выканання паўнамоцтваў ён неаднаразова выказваў свае погляды на стан ваяводства і неабходныя меры, якія павінны нейтралізаваць наступствы крызісу. Тэкст заснаваны на архіўных матэрыялах, знойдзеных у архівах Польшчы, Беларусі і Расіі. Крагельскі быў прыхільнікам умеранай нацыянальнай палітыкі. Ён адмовіўся ад паланізацыі нацыянальных меншасцей і спрабаваў не ўзмацняць палітычныя рэпрэсіі да канца свайго тэрміну на пасадзе ваяводы. Радыкалізацыя настрояў у грамадстве, звязаная з паглыбленнем эканамічнага крызісу, прымусіла яго перагледзець сваю пазіцыю адносна метадаў забеспячэння ўнутранай бяспекі. Важным пунктам для вывучэння зыходнага матэрыялу з'яўляецца ўзброенае паўстанне, якое адбылося летам 1932 г. на мяжы Кошырскага павета [Палескага ваяводства] і Ковельскага павета [Валынскага ваяводства]. Праведзены аналіз паказвае, што адміністрацыя ўсходніх ваяводстваў магла правільна ацаніць агульны стан падуладнай ёй тэрыторыі, але ў той жа час не магла дакладна распазнаць яго прычыны, у выніку чаго была захоплена зняцкаку парушэннем парадку.

**Ключавыя словы:** Палессе, нацыянальныя меншасці, II Рэч Паспалітая, вялікі крызіс, Ян Крагельскі.

This text deals with the position taken by the Head of the Polesia Province Jan Krahel'ski towards social and political problems that existed in the territory entrusted to him during the last period of his management of the combined administration system in Polesia. The original basis of the analysis will be Krahel'ski's statements made between the end of 1931 and the summer of 1932 when he was recalled from the function of Head of the Polesia Province. The significance of this period obviously does not have any bearing on the fact that it directly preceded Krahel'ski's dismissal. In our opinion, the key circumstances for focusing on these couple of months are two issues: the culmination point of the huge economic crisis called the Great Depression and the shift that began to emerge in the nationality policy of the authorities of the Second Polish Republic towards Slavic minorities.

The first issue had a significant impact on the situation of the inhabitants of Polesia. This impoverished rural region was affected very heavily by the agricultural collapse that the Second Polish Republic experienced during the years 1930–1935. The gravity of the crisis in rural areas manifested itself in such phenomena as 'price scissors' (Mieszczankowski, 1983, p. 286). This phenomenon occurred in a number of versions, but the main problem in Polesia (or, more broadly, in the eastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic) seemed to consist in the discrepancy between the value of decreasing income from food production and the constantly high tax burdens. This led to local unrest reinforced by the activation of local communist structures. It was expressed by several cases of collective resistance put up by the population against representatives of the state, particularly policemen and sequestrators<sup>2</sup>. On the other

<sup>2</sup> Information about individual incidents that occurred in Polesia from 1930 till September 1932 (Cichoracki, Dufurat, Mierzwa, 2019, pp. 505–510).

hand, the evolution of nationality policy that began to germinate in the management of the Sanation movement from the late 1920s (particularly with regards to Belarusians) was oriented mainly towards Polonisation. This meant a significant correction of the policy represented by Krahelski until then. After all, he was appointed Head of the province during the period when the idea of ‘regionalisation’ of nationality policy, associated with the liberal shift impersonated by Kazimierz Młodzianowski, who was the Minister of Internal Affairs during the key period of a few months after the May Coup, was being elaborated. In consideration of the above, we can say that he found himself in a difficult situation both as an administrator of the territory entrusted to him and as a politician implementing the ideas preferred in his own camp until then that were becoming outdated in his eyes. In this text, we will consider only Krahelski’s official statements addressed to his superiors in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, his subordinates, or representatives of the army. However, this documentation has an internal character and was not intended for propaganda purposes, it can be treated as a reliable reflection of views of the then Head of the Provincial Office in Brest.

In comparison to other Heads of the Polesia Province, Jan Krahelski is not a well-known person today. In spite of the relatively long six-year period of administering Polesia (in 1926–1932), he remains in the shadow of Stanisław Downarowicz (Head of the Polesia Province in 1922–1924) and his successor Waław Kostek-Biernacki (Head of the Polesia Province in the years 1932–1939). However, the fact of holding one’s office continuously almost from the takeover of power by the Sanation movement until the early 1930s should have an influence on the manner in which the political practice of the ruling camp is reconstructed in Polish historiography today. In this context, Krahelski’s activity can be treated like a good example of the implementation of the variant of the Eastern Borderland policy after May 1926 that is sometimes defined in historiography as based on the principle of regionalisation and reflecting the liberal approach of the then state authorities to Belarusian and Ukrainian issues (Chojnowski, 1979, pp. 73–106). Cognitively interesting results could also be obtained by comparing his activity in this field with the most prominent example of ‘regionalisation’, i.e., the Volhynia Program being implemented by the Head of the Volhynia Province Henryk Józewski<sup>3</sup>. Anyway, Krahelski declared himself as an opponent of ‘Polish nationalism’, which he regarded as even more harmful to the policy of the Polish state than Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalism imported to Polesia (AAN, UWPol., 39, p. 30)<sup>4</sup>. He treated the withdrawal from attempts to reach an agreement with Belarusians and Ukrainians as tantamount to a threat of territorial disintegration of the state<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The most important overviews: Kęsik (1995), Mędrzecki (1988), Zaporowski (2001).

<sup>4</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931 [the document was published also by Śleszyński (2014, pp. 207–244)]. A summary of the speech by the Head of the Polesia Province at the assembly of starosts on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1930 was published by Borka (2007, p. 18).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Our policy must be aimed at recreating the conditions of ... co-existence, for if we are unable to create them and to prevent national separatistic tendencies, we will have to lose the Eastern

Before discussing the position assumed by the Head of the Polesie Province in the situation of deepening economic crisis of the early 1930s, it is worth devoting some attention to his character and the circumstances under which he became the Head of the Polesia administration. Kraheliski took over this office shortly after the 1926 May Coup, so his nomination could be treated as part of the earliest wave of personal replacements carried out in administrative bodies by the victorious advocates of Marshal Józef Piłsudski. However, we can notice that his biography was connected with the triumphant political camp only to a small extent. Before 1914, he played only a minor part in the irredenta movement acting under the name of Piłsudski and he did military service in the Russian army and the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Corps during World War I. He took office under special circumstances: his predecessor Kazimierz Młodzianowski had been transferred to the position of Minister of Internal Affairs. Nevertheless, his nomination can hardly be called accidental. It almost seems that, in consideration of his previous experience and ties with Polesia and the neighbouring areas, Kraheliski was particularly predestined to manage the provincial office in Brest. Having joined the Polish Army, he served in the Polesia Group in 1919–1920. After the Polish-Bolshevik War, he was assigned, on behalf of the Ministry of Military Affairs, to the Border Commission in the East, where he became the Head of the Polesia Sub-commission. In March 1925, Kazimierz Młodzianowski appointed him to work in the Polesia Provincial Office, where Kraheliski was a local government inspector for almost a year. From January until July 1926, he was transferred to Luninets as the Head of the local starost office. Finally, we must add that from 1911 to 1914 he managed the Mazurki estate located in the future Baranavichy County, which bordered the territory of the Polesia Province from the north. This was also his homeland<sup>6</sup>. Thus, while his clerical experience in 1926 can be assessed as moderate, it is very difficult to deny in this specific case the advantage of Kraheliski's multidimensional ties with the territory that either constituted a part of Polesia or was very similar in many respects to the province that he was commissioned to manage. Today, it seems that, with his manorial, military, and administrative experience, he could be perceived almost as a specialist in the agricultural lands of the former Russian partition where the Orthodox population prevailed.

Kraheliski thought that Polesia stood out among the other regions of the state in many respects. In his view, these specific qualities manifested themselves in a sort of 'transitoriness', which was visible on various levels. He saw this phenomenon in nationality relations, which were characterised by a very large share of the population little or no national identification, assuming the 'modern' division into Belarusians,

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Borderlands and the development of our state will be reduced only to the ethnographically Polish lands' (AAN, UWPol., 39, p. 27 – A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931).

<sup>6</sup> Mierzwa Janusz, *Słownik biograficzny starostów Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, T. 2 (in print, information courtesy of J. Mierzwa).

Ukrainians, Poles, etc. A crucial matter for Krahelski was to outline the borders of Ukrainian and Belarusian influences. He regarded them as ‘difficult to specify’, although he admitted that the range of the Ukrainian (or potentially Ukrainian) element was larger than in the case of Belarusians (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 67).

Krahelski’s attitude to the results of the then-recent census that took place on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1931 seems intriguing<sup>8</sup>. The distinguishing feature of this project was the official introduction – only in the Polesia Province – of the category of ‘locals’, i.e., a community with an undefinable level of national awareness. It is widely believed among historiographers that the authorities took this action deliberately in order to generate a group nominally predestined for Polonisation. Making a similar assumption, we can suppose that Krahelski was not a suitable person to fulfil a goal like this, since he tried to convince his subordinate clerical personnel a few weeks after the census that ‘we should avoid [...] impeding the process of raising the national awareness of citizens being unaware of their nationality’ (AAN, UWPol., 39, p. 30<sup>9</sup>). Besides, he thought that these changes progressed quickly at the grassroots, particularly when it came to Ukrainisation (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 11<sup>10</sup>). It is also remarkable that in an extensive study addressed formally to the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces (GISZ) and, in practice, to General Kazimierz Sosnkowski (an inspector on behalf of the GISZ in Polesia), stipulated the need for a ‘critical analysis’ of materials gathered as a result of the census (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 6v).

In the years 1931–1932, Krahelski had a sceptical opinion on the attitude of a majority of inhabitants in the province of the Polish state. He generally estimated the mood of the population in this respect as ‘rather negative’. At the same time, he tried to separate groups differing from one another in this respect within the ‘manorial mass in Polesia’ and to find an answer to the question about the reasons for the unfavourable situation from the viewpoint of the authorities. In this context, he divided non-Polish Orthodox inhabitants of villages dominating in the province into three categories: In his opinion, the ‘firm advocates of our statehood’ were the smallest group. This group would consist of representatives of the older generation; however, they were not only unable to act as leaders of local communities, but they actually concealed their views. The second group distinguished by Krahelski could be said to certainly have

<sup>7</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in Warsaw, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1932.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting a document that was prepared in the Polesia Provincial Office after the second census. It contains strong criticism of the organisation and methodology of the census. It seems to have been written by Krahelski. However, the copy kept in the State Archive of the Brest Oblast is not signed with his name. For this reason, we have not included the aforementioned letter (DABV, f. 1, inv. 9, d. 2253, p. 7 – A letter of the [Head of the Polesia Province?] to the Ministry of Internal Affairs [after 9<sup>th</sup> December 1931]).

<sup>9</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931.

<sup>10</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in Warsaw, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1932.



a subversive attitude. It was larger than the previous one and increased further under the influence of communist agitation in times of crisis. Messages of the communist propaganda suggesting the temporary nature of the Polish states and encouraged people to resist the authorities met with a wide and favourable response. However, according to the Head of the province, this group did not represent the majority in Polesia (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 10). In the opinion of Krahel'ski, Polish rural areas were dominated by the third group, which he characterised as follows:

... to ogromna masa bezpartyjnego włościanstwa zupełnie polit[yznie] niewyrobionego, dla którego wszelkie, bardziej skomplikowane kwestie są najzupełniej obce. [...] masa ta w odniesieniu do naszego Państwa nastrojona jest raczej nieprzychylnie, lecz nie znaczy to wcale, by hołdowała ona ideologii komunistycznej, której nie zna i nie rozumie. Z powodu różnych, nieraz bardzo istotnych bolączek, [...] ludność należąca do tej kategorii, odczuwa niechęć i rozgoryczenie do naszych władz, szukając formy, w jakiej te uczucia mogłyby się uwewnętrznić. I jeżeli niejednokrotnie spotykamy się z objawem popierania przez tego rodzaju ludzi akcji wyrotowej, to nie jest dowodem, by byli oni zwolennikami komunizmu, lecz po prostu pragną dać wyraz swej niechęci do administracji<sup>11</sup> (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 10v).

It is easy to notice that Krahel'ski's similar conclusions, expressed after almost five years of his administration of the province, could put his own earlier activity in this function in a negative light (AAN, UWPo., 39, p. 30<sup>12</sup>). In the above quotation, however, his view seems to be far from simplifications. Krahel'ski tried to indicate nuances in the perception of the Polish state. He also recognised that the unfavourable situation had been caused by the administration, which committed errors towards the inhabitants of the province. He made a clear distinction between the period before and after May 1926. However, even with those reservations, which put the quality of the Sanation system higher than its pre-May predecessors, there was no doubt that he considered the approach of representatives of the authorities to be one of the key determinants of the success or failure of actions aimed at instilling loyalty towards Poland in the inhabitants of Polesia. At the same time, he made an interesting observation that the tools at the disposal of the administration were not optimal in Polesia conditions. 'The excessively complicated legislation [...], the purpose of

<sup>11</sup> '... it is a huge mass of peasants not associated with any party, with completely unrefined political views, to whom any more complicated issues are utterly strange. [...] this mass has a rather unfriendly attitude towards our State, but this does not mean that it adheres to the communist ideology, which it does not know and does not understand. Because of various, often very significant troubles, [...] the population belonging to this category holds a grudge and resentment towards our authorities, looking for a form in which those feelings could be expressed. And if we often come across signs of support for a sedition from people of this kind, this does not prove that they are followers of communism – they simply want to voice their dislike for the administration'.

<sup>12</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931.

which the local people could not absolutely understand' was an obvious encumbrance according to Krahelski (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, pp. 8v–9<sup>13</sup>). Incidentally, it must be added that the 'complete administrative illiteracy' of the Polesia population, which did not understand the laws and regulations and the mechanism of the functioning of the administration system, was described also by the sociologist Józef Obrębski in the 1930s (2007, p. 297). In Krahelski's view, the slowdown of changes in the agricultural system also had an adverse impact on moods. He saw the remedy not only in the acceleration of typical modernisation actions, such as the merger of farmland or the abolition of servitude but also in the agricultural reform (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 9v<sup>14</sup>; Śleszyński, 2014, pp. 260–261<sup>15</sup>).

In the context of the population's attitude to the state, Krahelski considered also other national groups that, despite being a decided minority of the Polesia population, played a significant part for such reasons as the concentration in cities, a higher level of education or – particularly in the case of the Polish group – their role in the state administration system. The Head of the province viewed the Russians as a potential threat to the functioning of Polesia as a part of the Republic of Poland. He thought that being only apparently loyal and with a relatively strong intellectual class, they had not put up with the loss of the status of the ruling nation. In his opinion, this set a clear model of action towards them for the authorities. Krahelski argued: 'we cannot have any illusions about the possibility of the loyal co-existence of the Russians within the borders of the Polish state, so the only option left towards them is to apply the iron hand policy and to act ruthlessly and firmly' (AAN, UWPol., 39, pp. 30, 34–35<sup>16</sup>; RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 12–12v<sup>17</sup>). We must immediately stress that similar assessments regarding the Polesia Russians were permanent in the Polesia administrative structure, regardless of who the Head was or what political power prevailed in the state. It is also necessary to add that Krahelski's critical opinion on the Polesia Orthodox clergy, which – as he thought – resisted the idea of autocephaly with the patronage of a local hierarch Alexander, the Bishop of Pinsk, should be placed in the Russian context (AAN, UWPol., 39, p. 32<sup>18</sup>).

Krahelski also had a relatively clear-cut view on the role of the Jews. Although he pointed out political and world-view divisions within this national-religious group, he pessimistically concluded:

<sup>13</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in Warsaw, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1932.

<sup>14</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in Warsaw, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1932.

<sup>15</sup> A record of the assembly of starosts of the Polesia Province held on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1932.

<sup>16</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931.

<sup>17</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in Warsaw, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1932.

<sup>18</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931.



oceniając stosunki polityczne na Polesiu, trzeba mieć na uwadze, że w chwili ewentualnych zaburzeń element żydowski może być najbardziej groźny dla Państwa, jako posiadający najlepiej przygotowaną wśród mniejszości narodowych kadrę inteligencji, która dzięki posiadanym walorom intelektualnym może stać się przewodniczką ruchu wywrotowego<sup>19</sup> (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 15<sup>20</sup>).

We have already indicated that Krahelski had a sceptical attitude to the actions of his administrative staff, which had a Polish character in terms of nationality. In 1932, Poles accounted for 88% of the state and local administration apparatus (DABV, f. 1, inv. 9, d. 2553, p. 28<sup>21</sup>). However, his critical remarks did not concern only Poles from this professional sphere, but actually the entire – though having a varied social status – national group, which he considered to be unable to go ‘beyond the patterns of a nationalistic defensive action’. In Krahelski’s view, the landed class had almost no ‘expansive value’ from the perspective of the interests of the state. This happened despite its indigenous character. The landed class was characterised substantially by the ‘egoism of the proprietary class’. Krahelski made similarly negative remarks to settlers, whom he considered forming a demanding element not free of ‘financial and often moral bankrupts’ (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, pp. 16–17<sup>22</sup>). By the end of 1931, he was certain that Polish organisations in the Eastern lands remained passive and ‘were unable to soak into this land’ within 13 years of independent state existence. He believed that the only way of that situation was to involve representatives of minorities, excluding – let us repeat – Russians, in ‘public work’ (AAN, UWPol., 39, pp. 29–30<sup>23</sup>). When listing problems connected with the functioning of Poles in Polesia, Krahelski admitted that ‘obviously, in the case of a danger threatening the State as a whole or only a part of it regarding the Eastern Borderlands, the entire Polish population ..., regardless of its political beliefs, will stand up for the State or the endangered state of Polishness in Polesia’ (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 17<sup>24</sup>).

Krahelski was aware of the negative consequences that World War I had brought to the region. This meant not only such obvious consequences as demographic or material destruction. The new arrangement of political borders cut off Polesia from

<sup>19</sup> ‘in our evaluation of political relations in Polesia, we must keep in mind that, at the time of potential disorder, the Russian element may be the most dangerous for the State as it is the one that has the best prepared intellectual staff among national minorities, which may become the leader of a subversive movement thanks to its intellectual values.’

<sup>20</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in Warsaw, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1932.

<sup>21</sup> ‘The structure of state and local government offices by nationality’

<sup>22</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in Warsaw, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1932.

<sup>23</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931.

<sup>24</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in Warsaw, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1932.

traditional markets and economic centres, which remained outside the eastern border of Poland. The indicated consequences manifested themselves even more strongly during the economic crisis (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 4–4v).

The Head of the province often emphasised the importance of the then economic collapse for social moods (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 10; Śleszyński, 2014, pp. 247–248); however, he treated the neutralisation of the crisis mainly as an economic challenge almost until the end of his Polesia mission. This was partly a consequence of his treatment of ‘economic policy’ as the first of the three ‘essential groups of internal policy’ (alongside ‘nationality policy’ and ‘denominational policy’) (AAN, UWPol., 39, p. 27<sup>25</sup>). Nevertheless, it seems that after two years after the beginning of the crisis, he was beginning to realise that the consequences of the economic depression were so serious that they must be considered not only in terms of economic or social problems but also with regard to the maintenance of internal order (AAN, KWPPwB, 1, p. 5<sup>26</sup>). At the end of December 1931, during a meeting with his subordinate civil servants, Krahelski said that ‘the general situation, which has considerably deteriorated, forces us to withdraw from purely economic work’ (AAN, UWPol., 39, p. 20<sup>27</sup>). He undoubtedly admonished his superiors as regards the provisional fight against intensifying unemployment and the accompanying ‘famine’. He considered this second problem to be particularly urgent in the part of the Polesia Province<sup>28</sup>. However, it seems that he failed to elaborate on any ideas that might be regarded as non-conventional in the field of narrowly understood prevention aimed at the maintenance of public order. His proposals actually boiled down to the coordination of actions of institutions responsible for the maintenance of order or the increase of funds from the Ministry of Internal Affairs intended for this purpose (AAN, UWPol., 39, p. 21<sup>29</sup>)<sup>30</sup>. Obviously, he recognised the justifiability of acts of repression against active followers of the subversive movement, but he clearly did not regard them as particularly urgent at the time (AAN, UWPol., 39, p. 31<sup>31</sup>). In March 1932, Krahelski stated that ‘the threat of

<sup>25</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931.

<sup>26</sup> A record of the briefing for county chiefs of the State Police of the Polesia Province on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1932.

<sup>27</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931.

<sup>28</sup> A reference to the memorial of the Head of the Polesia Province to Prime Minister Prystor dated 27<sup>th</sup> June 1932 (AAN, UWPol., 39, p. 20 – A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the Minister of Internal Affairs, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1932). A record of the assembly of starosts of the Polesia Province held on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1932 (Śleszyński, 2014, p. 254).

<sup>29</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931.

<sup>30</sup> Elements of such reasoning remained in Krahelski’s statements also during the crisis related to the emergence of the armed movement in the summer of 1932, and some of his ideas going beyond this scheme seem surprising today (‘equipping the police with buckshot guns’) (AAN, UWWoł., 71, pp. 1–11). A record of the session of the conference of representatives of general administrative bodies of the Polesia and Volhynia provinces and representatives of combined authorities, 25<sup>th</sup> August 1932.

<sup>31</sup> A record of the conference in the Polesia Provincial Office on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1931.

internal disturbances' is small, and even if it materialised, it would be successfully suppressed 'only by means of the police force, without resorting to co-operation with the army' (RGVA, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3, p. 25<sup>32</sup>).

However, on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1932, an assassination of the Head of the Borovno Commune forming part of the Kashirsky County took place. It would turn out that this was the first sign of the armed rebellion that took place in areas bordering the Volhynia Province. In successive days of July, the State Police from Polesia and Volhynia made initial attempts to suppress the rebellion, but they proved unsuccessful. This situation had a clearly demoralising impact on Krahełski, as the optimism of his earlier statements on the prospects of the state of internal security evaporated completely<sup>33</sup>. From that time on, he started recognising the 'high likelihood' of a communist diversionary action, as well as 'terrorist action towards representatives of the state administration system' (AAN, UWPol., 69, p. 20). His statements show signs of panic. When referring to armed rebellions that occurred in eastern provinces in 1923–1926 and assuming that they bore analogies to the situation in the summer of 1932, he compared the phenomena that had an actually incomparable scale (AAN, UWWoł., 71, pp. 1–11<sup>34</sup>). At the same time, he declared that the resources he has at his disposal to eliminate the danger are 'largely insufficient'. In the context of earlier reassuring statements, it is also worth noticing the argument added by Krahełski that 'within six years of holding office he has never alarmed the Ministry [of Internal Affairs] with visions of danger, even though elements often made subversive efforts to disturb the peace in Polesia' (AAN, UWPol., 69, p. 20<sup>35</sup>).

His dismissal that took place in September 1932 must have been a surprise for Krahełski. At the end of July 1932, he declared to the Minister of Internal Affairs that 'he is deeply convinced that if the government gives him the possibility' of implementing the program of improvement of the situation in the province, 'he will be able to change things fundamentally even today' (AAN, UWPol., 69, p. 21). Leaving Brest meant in practice the end of his service in the (combined) political administration system. He was immediately transferred to inactive status; half a year later, he was retired. In the autumn of 1934, he returned to the state apparatus for a short time as an inspector in the Central

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<sup>32</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in Warsaw, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1932.

<sup>33</sup> In the case of the point of collapse of safety in the Kashirsky County, Krahełski must have been aware of the contrast between earlier reports for the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the tone of documents made in July 1932. At that time, he wrote to Bronisław Pieracki: 'Dear Minister, I request you to consider the fact that I am not a pessimist and I do not succumb to panic' (AAN, UWPol., 69, p. 20 – A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the Minister of Internal Affairs, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1932).

<sup>34</sup> A record of the session of the conference of representatives of general administrative bodies of the Polesia and Volhynia provinces and representatives of the combined authorities on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1932.

<sup>35</sup> A letter from the Head of the Polesia Province to the Minister of Internal Affairs, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1932.

Management of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural Reforms, but this function had no political dimension<sup>36</sup>. However, we should not treat this negative turn in his clerical career as proof of the utter incorrectness of Krahelski's review of the situation in the province shortly before his dismissal. Many of his observations, particularly those concerning the attitude of the population of Polesia to the state, seem right today.

Krahelski's successor in the position of the Head of the Polesia Province was Waław Kostek-Biernacki. Within the Sanation elite, he was certainly treated as a man who could be entrusted with special tasks. When comparing him to Krahelski, we must note the distinct revision of the rules of nationality policy by the new Head of the province. Kostek-Biernacki interpreted the results of the census in a completely different manner than his predecessor had done, assuming the almost 70 per cent share of 'locals' shown in the census as an indisputable fact and, at the same time, a starting point for the elaboration of guidelines and the implementation of the Polonisation program for Polesia. It was characterised by the adoption of a firm tone in relations with the local Orthodox Church, actions aimed at the full dominance of the Polish language in education and, finally, almost the entire elimination of political, social and cultural structures representing Slavic national minorities in Polesia, another essential difference between both officials concerned the methods of ensuring internal order. From the moment of Kostek-Biernacki's arrival in Polesia, his methods can be defined as firm or even brutal<sup>37</sup>. Thus, the personal change in the Head position of the Provincial Office in Brest in 1932 seems to be a good illustration of the evolution of the perception of both ailments of the state and the methods of overcoming them in the management of the Sanation movement.

*Translated into English by Lingua Lab s.c.*

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KWPPwB – Komenda Wojewódzka Policji Państwowej w Brześciu, reference code: 1.

UWPol. – Urząd Wojewódzki Poleski, reference code: 39.

UWWoł. – Urząd Wojewódzki Wołyński, reference code: 71.

DABV – State Archive of the Brest Region, f. 1, inv. 9, d. 2553.

RGVA – Russian State Military Archive in Moscow, f. 464, inv. 2, d. 3.

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<sup>36</sup> Mierzwa, *Słownik biograficzny starostów Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, t. II (in print).

<sup>37</sup> For more details about W. Kostek-Biernacki's activity in Polesia, see: (Cichoracki, 2009).

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