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## The Colonial Question and the Pre-Unification Peasant Movement (1918–1931) in the Second Polish Republic

### A Critical Discourse Analysis of Key Peasant Press Titles\*\*

#### Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze, from a postcolonial perspective, the attitudes of the interwar peasant circles toward the so-called “colonial question.” This question is understood as two-fold: internal colonization, particularly in the Eastern Borderlands, and Polish aspirations and projects related to overseas colonization. Drawing on a critical discourse analysis of key press titles published by the leading parties of the pre-unification peasant movement (the center-right PSL “Piast” and the center-left PSL “Wyzwolenie”), the article demonstrates how the colonial question was closely connected to major challenges facing interwar Poland, including agrarian overpopulation, land hunger, land reform, and migration. The article argues that although perspectives on internal colonization varied significantly among peasant groups based on political affiliations, there was near-universal opposition to overseas colonial projects. These were primarily perceived as efforts to circumvent fundamental land reform in Poland and to preserve the privileged position of large landowners.

**Keywords:** Eastern Borderlands, emigration, Polish colonial projects, peasant movement, Polish People's Party, land reform, Second Polish Republic

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kresy, emigracja, polskie projekty kolonialne, ruch ludowy, Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, reforma rolna, II Rzeczpospolita

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## Introduction

The so-called colonial question in the Second Polish Republic – i.e., Polish aspirations and projects to acquire colonies of its own, to become a partner of other colonial states by creating a colonial condominium, or at least to obtain a concession for organized, compact settlement in some overseas countries – has become a subject of research over the past several years not only among academic scholars,<sup>1</sup> but also in the broader public discourse.<sup>2</sup> This article is a contribution to that research, focusing, from a postcolonial perspective, on a critical analysis of how interwar peasant circles engaged with the colonial question. In addressing these issues, I refer not only to overseas colonization projects but also to internal colonization, particularly in the Eastern Borderlands.<sup>3</sup>

Adopting a postcolonial perspective in the study of Polish history is hardly controversial today. Nowadays, the question is not whether the use of such a

<sup>1</sup> See, *inter alia*, B. Balogun, *Polish Lebensraum: The Colonial Ambition to Expand on Racial Terms*, "Ethnic and Racial Studies" 2018, vol. 41, no. 14, pp. 2561–2579; G. Borkowska, *Polskie doświadczenia kolonialne*, "Teksty Drugie" 2007, no. 4, pp. 15–24; M. Grzechnik, *Aspirations of Imperial Space. The Colonial Project of the Maritime and Colonial League in Interwar Poland*, [in:] *CES Open Forum Series 2019–2020*, ed. G. Ekiert, A. Martin, <https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/publications/aspirations-of-imperial-space-the-colonial-project-of-the-maritime-and-colonial-league-in-interwar-poland> (access: 10.04.2025); M.A. Kowalski, *Dyskurs kolonialny w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Wydawnictwo DiG, Warszawa 2010; J. Lingelbach, *On the Edges of Whiteness: Polish Refugees in British Colonial Africa During and After the Second World War*, Berghahn Books, New York–Oxford 2020, pp. 104–129; P. Puchalski, *Poland in a Colonial World Order. Adjustments and Aspirations, 1918–1939*, Routledge, London–New York 2022; M. Skulimowska, *Polish colonial aspirations in Africa: The Maritime and Colonial League in Angola and Liberia, c. 1920–1939*, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis, University of Kent, 2019, <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/80551/> (access: 02.07.2025).

<sup>2</sup> See, M. Gonera, *Polskie marzenia o zamorskich koloniach. Dlaczego się "nie udało"?*, „Onet Podróże”, June 2, 2021, <https://podroze.onet.pl/ciekawe/jak-polska-chciala-zdobyc-kolonie-w-afryce-brazyliei-chinach/lnb80mw> (access: 10.04.2025); M.A. Kowalski, *Kolonie Rzeczypospolitej*, Bellona, Warszawa 2006; G. Łyś, *Bzik kolonialny. II Rzeczypospolitej przypadki zamorskie*, W.A.B., Warszawa 2023.

<sup>3</sup> On the Polish colonization of the Eastern Borderlands, see, *inter alia*, B. Bakula, *Colonial and Postcolonial Aspects of Polish Discourse on the Eastern "Borderlands"*, [in:] *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality. Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. J. Korek, Södertörn Academic Studies 32, Södertörns Högskola, Huddinge 2007, pp. 41–61; D. Beauvois, *The Noble, the Serf and the Revizor. The Polish Nobility Between Tsarist Imperialism and the Ukrainian Masses (1831–1836)*, Routledge, London 1991; idem, *Trójkąt ukraiński. Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793–1914*, trans. K. Rutkowski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2005; G. Borkowska, *Perspektywa postkolonialna na gruncie polskim – pytania sceptyka*, "Teksty Drugie" 2010, no. 5, pp. 46–52; K. Ciancia, *On Civilization's Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021; A. Fiut, *Polonizacja? Kolonizacja?*, "Teksty Drugie" 2003, no. 6, pp. 150–156; B. Huk, *Ukraina. Polskie jądro ciemności*, Stowarzyszenie Ukraińskie Dziedzictwo, Przemysł 2013; W. Kuligowski, *The Polish Hearts of Darkness. Postcolonial Dimensions of History and Culture*, trans. K. Szuster-Tardi, "Czas Kultury" 2019, no. 3, pp. 125–131; Ch. Mick, *Colonialism in the Polish Eastern Borderlands 1919–1939*, [in:] *The Shadow of Colonialism on Europe's Modern Past*, ed. R. Healy, E.D. Lago, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2014, pp. 126–141.

perspective is justified, but rather: how to apply it; which aspects, periods, or issues in Polish history can be better illuminated if we analyze them with the framework of postcolonial theory. Adding my own contribution to this discussion, in this article I would like to show that the adoption of such a perspective is heuristically fruitful, not only with regard to the history of the peasantry in the serfdom era (16th to 19th centuries), which has recently become commonplace,<sup>4</sup> but also in later periods, in particular the interwar period. Applying the postcolonial perspective together with modern world-system analysis to study the situation of peasants in the Second Polish Republic can help us grasp in new way important links between, on one hand, the internal socio-economic processes taking place in Poland at that time – such as agrarian overpopulation, hunger for land, land reform, migration – and, on the other hand, the global situation.

The adoption of such a point of view is justified, among other things, if we acknowledge the thesis, widely shared among proponents of modern world-system analysis, that from the sixteenth century onward, Central and Eastern Europe – to which Poland belongs – together with Latin America, and later also Africa and parts of Asia, were incorporated into the European capitalist world-economy as semi-peripheral and peripheral regions, relegated to subordinate positions. The agricultural and rural character of these regions not only became the reverse of, but even a condition for, ongoing capitalist industrialization and urbanization in the countries of the Western European core.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, within the semi-peripheral and peripheral regions, processes of economic, political, legal, and cultural subordination of the subaltern classes were developing, which in the Polish context meant above all the domination of the nobility and the clergy over the peasants. Historians have traditionally characterized these processes as the formation of the serfdom system.<sup>6</sup> These processes bore all the hallmarks of so-called internal colonization – that is, processes by which one group (ethnic, cultural, class, racial, or regional) gains dominance over another within a single state organism.<sup>7</sup> The effects of this domination were still strongly felt after the abolition of the serfdom system in the 19th century and throughout the entire interwar period, which is of particular interest to me.

In this context, I will focus on the following interrelated issues: first, how the situation of the peasantry in the Second Republic was linked to peasant labor

<sup>4</sup> See K. Pobłocki, *Chamstwo*, Wydawnictwie Czarne, Wołowiec 2021; M. Rauszer, *Sila podporządkowanych*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2021; J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Universitas, Kraków 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, Academic Press, New York–San Francisco–London 1974.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Blum, *The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe*, “American Historical Review” 1957, vol. 62, no. 4, pp. 807–836.

<sup>7</sup> See M. Hechter, *Internal Colonisation. The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966*, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1975, pp. 8–10; M. Rauszer, *Sila...*, pp. 107–135.

migration – especially permanent and seasonal emigration – and to internal colonization taking place mainly in the Eastern Borderlands, and second, how this situation was related to Polish aspirations and projects of overseas colonization. In particular, I would like to focus on how peasants-affiliated circles viewed these issues. In this regard, the main source on which I will base my analysis will be the interwar peasant press, in particular the weekly magazines: *Piast* and *Wyzwolenie*, the official press organs of the two main interwar peasant parties: the center-right Polish People's Party "Piast" (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe "Piast"*; henceforth: PSL Piast) and the center-left Polish People's Party "Liberation" (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe "Wyzwolenie"*; henceforth: PSL Wyzwolenie). I will also occasionally refer to the weekly magazine *Lud Katolicki*, the official organ of the clerical-conservative Polish Catholic People's Party (*Stronnictwo Katolicko-Ludowe*), founded by Bishop Leon Wałęga of Tarnów as a counterweight to the PSL Piast.

The Galician-born PSL Piast was a centrist party but leaned toward the right of the political scene, cooperating – especially in the first half of the 1920s – with the national movement, which often gave it a nationalist character. The Piasts also supported the idea of Poland as a regional power, which was reflected primarily in their backing of internal colonization, especially in the Eastern Borderlands, but also in the Western ones (the lands of the former Prussian partition), by ethnic Polish peasants. PSL Wyzwolenie, operating primarily in the lands of the former Russian partition, was politically much further to the left than PSL Piast and belonged to the so-called independence left (*lewica niepodległościowa*), in whose ranks were many supporters of Marshal Józef Piłsudski, one of the founding fathers of the reborn Polish state. It also had a strongly anticlerical, – but not antireligious – position, calling for greater separation between Church and state. The Liberators, as they were called, did not succumb to the nationalist tendencies that were not alien to the Piasts, seeking to represent the interests not only of Polish but also of Ukrainian and Belarusian peasants, while at the same time distancing themselves from antisemitic attitudes – although not always consistently. Being left-oriented, the Liberators were nevertheless more than skeptical of communist ideology, especially the idea of agricultural collectivization. Both parties, despite fighting each other throughout the 1920s, united in March 1931 with the left-wing Peasant Party (*Stronnictwo Chłopskie*), in the face of Sanacja repressions and the global economic crisis, which hit the Polish countryside particularly hard, to form the People's Party (*Stronnictwo Ludowe*), the largest political party of the Second Polish Republic.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For more information about the peasant movement in interwar Poland, see O.A. Narkiewicz, *The Green Flag: Polish Populist Politics 1867–1970*, Croom Helm, London 1976, pp. 147–238. J. Borkowski et al., *Zarys historii polskiego ruchu ludowego*, vol. II: 1918–1939, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1970; Z. Hemmerling et al., *Krótki zarys historii ruchu ludowego*, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1969, pp. 45–158. On PSL Piast, see A. Garlicki, *Powstanie Stronnictwa Ludowego – Piast 1913–1914*, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1966; J.R. Szaflik, *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe Piast 1926–1931*, Ludowa Spół-

## Peasants in Interwar Poland: Agrarian Structure, Land Reform, Migrations

To begin with a seemingly obvious but important observation: the newly formed Polish state was a multinational/multiethnic and multireligious country, whose territories were overwhelmingly inhabited by a rural population, mostly peasants. In 1921, 65 percent of the total population consisted of peasants, and this did not change significantly in later years; in 1938, peasants made up 61 percent of the total population.<sup>9</sup> In the Eastern Borderlands, peasants were an even more numerous group: as many as approximately 88 percent of Ukrainians were peasants, as were nearly all Belarusians, who, according to historians, “were socially very homogeneous, probably the most peasant community in interwar Poland.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout the entire interwar period, Poland was a semi-peripheral, multiethnic, rural capitalist state in which agriculture was the dominant branch of the economy, and peasants were the most numerous – but also the most underprivileged – racialized social class.

The reader may be puzzled by the identification of a social class such as the peasantry in the Second Polish Republic as being subject to the mechanisms of racialization. We should recognize, however, as Étienne Balibar has convincingly shown in his classic analysis of the relationship between class and race, that “class conflict is always already transformed by a social relation in which there is an inbuilt tendency to racism.”<sup>11</sup> Balibar, referring to the findings of several historians of racism (e.g., Leon Poliakov, Michele Duchet, and Madeleine Reberieux), stated that “the modern notion of race, in so far as it is invested in a discourse of contempt and discrimination and serves to split humanity up into a ‘super-humanity’ and a ‘sub-humanity’, did not initially have a national (or ethnic), but a class signification or rather (since the point is to represent the inequality of social classes as inequalities of nature) a caste signification.”<sup>12</sup> To understand this better, we should first problematize the uncritical popular perception that race is a strictly biological notion – namely, a matter of phenotype (physical appearance, especially skin color) and of genes or “blood.” Instead, we should acknowledge, following contemporary critical race theory, the social and cultural construction of race, which emphasizes that there are markers other than biological ones that racialize people located on the “wrong side” of

dzielnia Wydawnicza, Zakład Historii Ruchu Ludowego, Warszawa 1970. On PSL Wyzwolenie, see J. Jachymek, *Myśl polityczna PSL “Wyzwolenie” 1918–1931*, Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, Lublin 1983. On the weekly magazines *Piast* and *Wyzwolenie*, as well as other peasant press, see A. Paczkowski, *Prasa polityczna ruchu ludowego (1918–1939)*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1970; S. Stępień, *Prasa ludowa w Polsce. Zarys historyczny*, Wydawnictwo “Prasa ZSL”, Warszawa 1984, pp. 86–164.

<sup>9</sup> See M. Mieszczankowski, *Rolnictwo II Rzeczypospolitej*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1983, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise indicated in the text, all translations are by the author. Cz. Brzoza, A. L. Sowa, *Historia Polski 1918–1945*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2007, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> E. Balibar, “Class Racism,” trans. Ch. Turner, [in:] E. Balibar, I. Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*, Verso, London – New York 1991, p. 205.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 207.

the colonial difference (such as accent, language, demeanor, religion, and other essentialized or naturalized cultural traits).<sup>13</sup> That is why I am of the opinion that in Poland, practically throughout its entire history, we have been dealing with processes of racialization not only of ethnic minority groups such as Jews or Roma, but also of subordinate classes, especially peasants<sup>14</sup>. I understand racialization here as a structuring of social relations in which a certain set of characteristics associated with a particular group is radically essentialized and then used to justify intergroup power hierarchies.<sup>15</sup>

The key element of this process is the attribution of a common origin and a kind of common fate or destiny to the members of the racialized group, which ontologically separates them from the rest of the human race or a given society. An example of such attribution is the use of the term *cham* with reference to peasants in Poland. In contemporary Polish, this term (which can be translated into English as “boor”, “churl”, or “bumpkin”) means a person behaving rudely and boorishly, violating established conventions of behavior and rules of co-existence with other people. It is worth pointing out that for several hundred years, Polish noble landholders used this derogatory, contemptuous and class superiority-laden term to denote those laboring in serfdom – especially to justify their slave-like condition. In this context, it is worth remembering that the term comes from the biblical story of Noah, who cursed his son Ham’s descendants to be slaves. This story was subsequently used in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition to justify the institution of slavery.<sup>16</sup> In Polish territories after abolition of serfdom, this term was still in use in relation to the peasantry or, more broadly, to those belonging to the lower social classes. Let me here give just one telling testimony from the interwar period given by Wincenty

<sup>13</sup> See T. Mincer, *Kulturowe rozumienie pojęcia rasy*, “Prace Kulturoznawcze” 2012, no. 14/1, pp. 115–128; A. Kościńska, M. Petryk, *Odejść. Rzecz o polskim rasizmie*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2022, pp. 13–16, 31; P.W. Ryś, *Rasizm klasowy i terminy pokrewne. Próba uporządkowania pojęć*, “Dyskurs & Dialog” 2022, no. 1, pp. 23–43, [https://dyskursdialog.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/02\\_Rys-1.pdf](https://dyskursdialog.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/02_Rys-1.pdf) (access: 16.07.2025).

<sup>14</sup> Such a point of view is also presented by M. Bobako, *Ludowa historia Polski, czyli jak nie pisać o rasie*, “Prace Kulturoznawcze” 2023, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 109–121, <https://wuwr.pl/pkult/article/view/15853/14184> (access: 11.07.2025) and P. Wielgosz, *Gra w rasy. Jak kapitalizm dzieli, by rządzić*, Karakter, Kraków 2021, pp. 29–32.

<sup>15</sup> On the notion of “racialization,” see R. Barot and J. Bird, *Racialization: The Genealogy and Critique of a Concept*, “Ethnic and Racial Studies” 2001, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 601–618; in the Polish contemporary context, see M. Bobako, *Konstruowanie odmienności klasowej jako urasawianie. Przypadek polski po 1989 roku*, Biblioteka Online Think Tanku Feministycznego 2011, <http://www.ekologiasztuka.pl/pdf/f0108Bobako2011.pdf> (access: 14.04.2025).

<sup>16</sup> See D.M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 2003; idem, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 2017; D.M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery*, Ashgate, Burlington, Vt. 2009. A detailed analysis of the biblical story of Ham and its application in specifically Polish conditions can be found in J. Matuszewski, *Cham*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 1991, who analyzes the ways in which the term *cham* functions in Polish society and culture, especially in literature, from the sixteenth century to the second half of twentieth century.



Witos – a peasant from the village of Wierzchosławice in Małopolska (Lesser Poland), the prominent leader of PSL Piast and later the unified People's Party, and three-time Prime Minister of the Second Polish Republic. In his famous proclamation *To the Brothers Peasants*, published at the beginning of July 1920 in *Piast*, at a critical moment in the Polish-Soviet War, shortly before he was for the first time entrusted with the mission of forming the government (the so-called Government of National Defense), Witos, referring to his political opponents' attacks on him, lamented: "When, on the one hand, the press sounded the alarm, calling for the defense of the noble Fatherland [*Ojczyzna szlachecka*] against the invasion of the 'boors' [*chamy*], on the other, hundreds of insulting letters filled with calumnies that cannot be repeated without offending people's ears were sent to me, I was sent dozens of death sentences with the day and hour set for their execution. They saw only 'Szela in me, a common boor [*pospolity cham*], a traitor to the Fatherland, for whom a murderer's bullet would still be an immeasurable mercy..."<sup>17</sup>

Returning to the characterization of interwar Poland as an agrarian capitalist state, it is important to emphasize that in the Second Polish Republic, the main capital was land. For this capital, from the very beginning of the state's existence until its end, there was prolonged and intense fight, referred to euphemistically as the so-called agrarian question. An important aspect of this fight was the struggle for the enactment and then subsequent implementation of land reform, which was to radically transform the agrarian structure – considered anachronistic by many.

The agrarian structure of the newly formed Polish state was characterized by a specific bipolarity, developed over a complex, centuries-long process of shaping landownership. In this process, the key role was played by several factors, including the dominance of the nobility (*szlachta*), serfdom of peasants, the weakness of the central government, and the strong position of the Catholic Church as a major landowner (weakened during the partitions). Another crucial influence was the actions of the partitioning states – above all, the gradual abolition of serfdom, the end of forced labor, and the enfranchisement of peasants, which varied from one partition to another. In the Prussian partition specifically, German colonization of the eastern territories was strongly supported by the state from the late 19th century onward.<sup>18</sup>

The agrarian structure was such that, on the one hand, the overwhelming majority of farms (almost 65 percent) were dwarf farms (less than 2 ha) and smallholdings (2–5 ha), which together owned only 15 percent of the arable land; on the other hand, large farms (over 50 ha) accounted for less than 1 percent of all agricultural real estate, but their owners held almost 48 percent of the land (including arable land, wasteland, and forests). "Healthy" farms – i.e.,

<sup>17</sup> W. Witos, *Do Braci chłopów*, „Piast,” July 4, 1920, no. 27, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> A brief overview of this process in the context of the subsequent agricultural reforms undertaken in the Second Republic is given by M. Błąd, *Land Reform in the Second Polish Republic*, "Rural History" 2020, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 97–110.

the most economically and socially desirable ones, which could provide a self-sustaining workplace for an average peasant family, ranged from 5 ha to 50 ha – made up 37.5 percent of all farms, and these farms held 37.9 percent of all land. However, only 10 percent of all farms were large enough (so-called capitalist farms) to generate a profit.<sup>19</sup>

The domination of large private landownership in agriculture, the underdevelopment of industry, and a fragmented, dysfunctional peasant economy – combined with rapid population growth – led to the so-called land hunger in the countryside, which was a key aspect of the dangerous phenomenon of agrarian overpopulation – that is, an excess of people of working age (so-called superfluous people) on peasant farms.<sup>20</sup> The problem of overpopulation was solved – but, it is worth emphasizing, only partially – by permanent and seasonal labor emigration, which was a mass phenomenon long before Poland gained independence.<sup>21</sup> According to estimates, up to the outbreak of the First World War, almost 8 million Poles emigrated – mostly peasants.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that in the Polish territories under the partitions, emigration could only take on such a mass character after the abolition of serfdom. The key element of serfdom was the assignment of peasants to the land (*glebae adscriptum*), that is, the ban on leaving the land without the landlord's permission. The complex processes of the abolition of serfdom, enforced labor, and the enfranchisement of peasants proceeded differently and at different paces in all three partitions, though they were essentially completed in the 1860s.<sup>23</sup> This opened the way to mass economic emigration, especially for that part of the rural population that had not benefited from the agrarian reforms of the 19th century.

The postwar, gradual halt in emigration – both permanent and seasonal – along with the simultaneous repatriation and re-emigration of a considerable number of people; the underdevelopment of industry and commerce, further exacerbated by wartime destruction, which caused, among other things, a rapid increase in urban unemployment and agrarian overpopulation in the countryside; and above all, the agrarian structure inherited from previous centuries, the anachronistic nature of which was widely recognized – all of

<sup>19</sup> More on the topic of the agrarian structure in interwar Poland, see M. Błąd, *Land Reform...*, M. Mieszczankowski, *Struktura agrarna Polski międzywojennej*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1960; idem, *Rolnictwo...*; W. Sułkowska, *Dyskusja nad kierunkami przebudowy systemu agrarnego w Polsce (1918–1939)*, Akademia Ekonomiczna, Kraków 1993.

<sup>20</sup> See M. Mieszczankowski, *Rolnictwo...*, pp. 61–62.

<sup>21</sup> More on emigration from Eastern Europe to the Americas in the period from the mid-19th century to the outbreak of World War II, see T. Zahra, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 2016; on labor emigration from interwar Poland, see E. Kołodziej, *Wychodźstwo zarobkowe z Polski 1918–1939. Studia nad polityką emigracyjną II Rzeczypospolitej*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1982.

<sup>22</sup> See W. Sułkowska, *Dyskusja...*, p. 115.

<sup>23</sup> More on this topic, see S. Kieniewicz, *The Emancipation of the Polish Peasantry*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1969.



this meant that one of the most pressing problems to be solved by the newly established Polish state was land reform.<sup>24</sup> In particular, and understandably, the forces representing peasant interests considered land reform to be among the most urgent issues requiring immediate attention. This reform – which, notably, was never fully implemented – was one of the key political, social, economic, and legal challenges faced by the Second Polish Republic from the very beginning of its existence. The debate surrounding the reform constituted, among other things, one of the fundamental topics considered by the Legislative Sejm, which was in session from 1919 to 1922.<sup>25</sup> As to the necessity of the reform, virtually all political forces were in agreement – at least in principle – although they differed considerably regarding its implementation. On the one hand, the reform aimed to create as many self-sufficient peasant farms as possible; on the other, it was not to compromise the country's food security; and third, if it were to be a reform rather than an agrarian revolution, it had to be “a directed change in the ownership structure in agriculture carried out within the existing legal order without violating the fundamental principles of the existing political and social system.”<sup>26</sup> The problem, however, was that this system had not yet been established, but was still taking shape.

Initially, up until the mid-1920s, the issue of the land reform was strongly linked with the problem of emigration and, especially just after the war, with repatriation, re-emigration, and immigration to Poland, as well as internal colonization – primarily, though not exclusively, in the Eastern Borderlands. At the beginning, peasant circles hoped that the land reform would solve the problem of land hunger among the landless and smallholders, relieve social tensions stemming from rural overpopulation, curb emigration,<sup>27</sup> and provide returnees with the means to establish self-sustaining farms.

<sup>24</sup> More about the land reform in interwar Poland, see M. Błąd, *Land reform...*, K. Konopka, *Mechanizm reform agrarnych w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (1918–1939)*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Białostockiej, Białystok 2010; O.A. Narkiewicz, *The Green Flag...*, pp. 169–195; W. Staniewicz, *The Agrarian Problem in Poland between the Two World Wars*, “The Slavonic and East European Review” 1964, vol. 43, no. 100, pp. 23–33; M. Stanulewicz, *Reforma rolna jako próba regulacji stosunków agrarnych w Polsce. Koncepcje i próby ich realizacji 1918–1944*, [in:] *Reformy rolne w Polsce międzywojennej i powojennej. Prawo – realizacja – skutki – problemy repriwatywacyjne*, ed. W. Szafrński, E. Borkowska-Bagińska, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2008, pp. 11–62. For a comparative analysis of this reform against the background of agrarian reforms in other European countries, see W. Sułkowska, *Reformy w polskim rolnictwie na tle reform w rolnictwie europejskim (1850–1939)*, Wydawnictwo Oddziału Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Kraków 1994.

<sup>25</sup> For the proceedings of this debate, see M. Drewicz, *Głęboka przemiana rewolucyjna. Sejmowa debata nad reformą rolną w Polsce w 1919 roku. W 90. rocznicę*, Wydawnictwo Werset, Lublin 2009.

<sup>26</sup> W. Sułkowska, *Dyskusja...*, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> On the attitude of the peasant parties toward peasant emigration, especially to Latin American countries, see J. Mazurek, *Kraj i emigracja. Ruch ludowy wobec wychodźstwa chłopskiego do krajów Ameryki Łacińskiej (do 1939)*, Instytut Studiów Iberyjskich i Iberoamerykańskich–Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego, Warszawa 2006, pp. 291–415.

As early as January 1919, on the eve of the opening of the sessions of the Legislative Sejm, an anonymous article appeared in *Wyzwolenie*, in which the author stated that the PSL did not want to drive anyone out of Poland – except its enemies – and hoped that: “Once the land is distributed, the Polish people will not need to wander abroad. And whoever sends this Polish poor wretch to work in Germany, Belgium or America, let him go there and try for himself how sweet it is to drag a hard yoke around his neck.”<sup>28</sup> A similar view was held by Józef Sanojca, later Vice-President of the PSL Wyzwolenie, who, in the article published in March 1919, accused the nobility of driving the peasantry into deep poverty and bitterly stated: “There were one and a half million unemployed people in Poland before the war and the Polish peasants were the farmhands of the whole world.”<sup>29</sup> These were, among other factors, the reasons why Sanojca demanded land for the peasants without compensation for the large landowners.

Shortly after the Legislative Sejm adopted the resolution of July 10, 1919 on the principles of land reform,<sup>30</sup> PSL Wyzwolenie MP Jan Smoła wrote that the agrarian reform “will first and foremost give [...] the possibility of keeping the Polish people in the country, instead of the people, this workforce of Poland, wandering to foreign countries and building foreign forces.”<sup>31</sup> He also warned, prophetically, that the right wing and the large landowners would do everything “to tear the whole thing apart and not carry it out.”<sup>32</sup>

More skeptical voices regarding the possibility of solving the emigration problem through the land reform emerged from within PSL Piast. In the first issue of *Piast* in 1920, an anonymous author wrote soberly: “one of the biggest issues which Poland will have to solve is the question of emigration. People who think that a strong Poland will not have emigration are mistaken. The agrarian reform cannot give everyone land, domestic industry will not be able to employ all hands.”<sup>33</sup>

## Internal Colonization in the Eastern Borderlands – Divergent Peasant Opinions

One of the solutions to the agrarian question proposed by the peasant circle affiliated with PSL Piast was the internal colonization of the eastern territories by peasants from ethnically Polish areas. It should be made clear that, from the

<sup>28</sup> *Z czem idzie Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe na Sejm*, „Wyzwolenie,” January 19, 1919, no. 3, p. 84.

<sup>29</sup> J. Sanojca, *Trzy nasze punkty*, „Wyzwolenie,” March 19, 1919, no. 10, p. 141.

<sup>30</sup> By a margin of one vote (183 deputies were in favor, 182 against), largely due to the attitude of the deputies of the Jewish faction, who in all votes on the form of this resolution consistently voted together with the peasant clubs. See S. Mańko, *Polski ruch ludowy wobec Żydów (1895–1939)*, Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego–Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warszawa–Rzeszów 2010, p. 201.

<sup>31</sup> J. Smoła, *Wielka i doniosła uchwała Sejmu*, „Wyzwolenie,” July 27, 1919, no. 30, p. 375.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem. On the attitude of big landowners to the land reform, see W. Mich, *W obliczu wywłaszczenia: kwestia reformy rolnej w publicystyce ziemiańskiej 1918–1939*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2001.

<sup>33</sup> L., *Wychodźstwo i osadnictwo*, “Piast,” January 4, 1920, no. 1, p. 4–5.

very beginning of the Second Republic, the Piasts movement promoted slogans concerning the eastern territories that carried strong nationalist overtones. Literally on the eve of regaining independence, issue no. 45 of *Piast* featured an article entitled “Polish Lands for Poles,” signed by an anonymous priest, B., who began his argument as follows: “When the agrarian reform is enacted, we must lay down the principle: land from Polish hands only into Polish hands can pass. This will be very important for the eastern borderlands, where big landownership is predominantly Polish. This is the case, for example, in eastern Galicia. We did not seize that land from anyone, we did not force anyone out of it, it is our hereditary property and must remain so. The Polish nobleman will leave it, the Polish peasant must settle on it. It is a natural law that a younger brother, not a stranger, inherits from an older brother, even if the younger brother is far away and the stranger was a neighbor of the departing one. From the Polish nobility the Polish people (*lud*) should inherit – the Polish people from the western part of the country.”<sup>34</sup> But what about this “stranger neighbor”? According to clergyman B., there was no need for concern, as “It will not harm the local Ruthenian population, as they have enough land of their own, fertile land, capable of feeding as many people as they already have, while we lack land. We are the only ones entitled to this land, because it is Polish land.”<sup>35</sup> Adjacent to this article appeared another text entitled “Our Rights to Eastern Galicia,” written by an author signed Kresowiec (“Borderer”), in which he focused primarily on the historical justifications for the Polish claim to the eastern territories, which, apparently (obviously), should belong to Poland. Outlining a brief history of the so-called Red Ruthenia, he wrote, among other things: “We rebuilt it, populated it and defended it from Tatar and Turkish captivity.”<sup>36</sup>

A markedly different view on this issue was taken by supporters and sympathizers of PSL Wyzwolenie, who, adopting a class-based rather than nationalist perspective, consistently maintained throughout the interwar period that land parceled out in the east as part of the land reform should be distributed fairly to all eligible peasants, regardless of nationality. In March 1923 – nearly three years after the first act on the implementation of the land reform, passed on 15 July 1920 – Eustachy Rudziński, a PSL Wyzwolenie MP, responded to accusations from *Piast*<sup>37</sup> that PSL Wyzwolenie had “supposedly betrayed Poland in favor of Belarusians and Ukrainians,” and that it was “taking away

<sup>34</sup> Emphasis in the original text. Unless otherwise indicated in the text, emphasis in other citations consistent with the original text. Książd B., *Ziemia polska dla Polaków*, “Piast,” November 10, 1918, no. 45, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup> Kresowiec, *Nasze prawa do Galicyi wschodniej*, “Piast,” November 10, 1918, no. 45, p. 8. See also a similar argument by the author writing under the initials S.K. in the article *Ziemia Czerwienińska, czyli tak zwana Galicya wschodnia*, “Piast,” January 11, 1920, no. 2, pp. 2–3.

<sup>37</sup> See J. Brodacki, *Sojusz Thuguttowców z Białorusinami*, “Piast,” February 25, 1923, no. 8, p. 3–4; Wiktor, *Thuguttowcy chcą chłopu odebrać ziemię na Wschodzie*, “Piast,” February 25, 1923, no. 8, pp. 4–5.

Polish peasants' land in the East!" He clearly and decisively asserted: "We wish to carry out all social reforms, and in the first place the land reform, in these parts of our country in the same way as in the whole of Poland, without harming the Belarusian and Ukrainian people."<sup>38</sup> He also accused the political right – including Piasts – of aiming "to convert everyone by force into Poles, or to exterminate those who resist. It treats the whole of the eastern borderlands, where Ukrainians and Belarusians live in compact masses, as an area of Polish expansion to the east, as an area of Polish colonization and settlement on the lands there."<sup>39</sup>

Two weeks later, Rudziński described the agenda of the Polish right – which represented the interests of large landowners – as follows: "Take away land from Belarusian and Ukrainian peasants and push our landless and smallholders to the east – this is their wisdom – because then they will be able to defend themselves more easily against the agrarian reform in the country, and in the meantime the Polish peasant will quarrel with the Belarusian and Ukrainian peasant over land and in this way the peasants, instead of tearing land from the large landowners, will tear it from each other [...] Some large landowners even came up with a joke to make an arrangement with France, which has a lot of land in Africa, and send Polish peasants to colonies there. Monkeys live in Africa, why couldn't a Polish peasant live there? Anything is possible to get out of the land reform in Poland."<sup>40</sup>

### Peasant Views on Polish Aspirations and Projects of Overseas Colonization

What seemed like a bad joke to Rudziński – incidentally soon to become a delegate (from April 1923) to the State Emigration Council (*Państwowa Rada Emigracyjna*) – became from around the mid-1920s onward, a seriously debated issue that gained broader resonance in the public discourse and began to attract increasing attention from official government circles.<sup>41</sup> This was particularly true after the outbreak of the great structural crisis of the global capitalist economy at the end of 1929, when countries, in an effort to protect themselves from mass unemployment, began increasingly to close their labor markets to immigrants, whether seasonal or permanent.<sup>42</sup> In Poland, where the

<sup>38</sup> E. Rudziński, *Polski Witos i niepolskie "Wyzwolenie"*, "Wyzwolenie," March 11, 1923, no. 11, pp. 2–3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, *Osadnictwo wojskowe na kresach a reforma rolna*, "Wyzwolenie," March 25, 1923, no. 11, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> According to P. Puchalski, *Poland...*, p. 30, a formal expression of this was the establishment, in August 1926, of the Research Institute for the Study of Emigration and Colonization (*Instytut Naukowy do Badań Emigracji i Kolonizacji*) as an autonomous and state-funded unit linked to the Polish Emigration Society (*Polskie Towarzystwo Emigracyjne*).

<sup>42</sup> Not insignificantly, the inhibition of migration from Polish lands was also influenced by growing nationalist and chauvinist tendencies – as in the case of Germany, which was the main destination of seasonal labor immigration.

crisis had a severe impact – particularly in agriculture, where it persisted until 1935,<sup>43</sup> certain organizations and institutions, most notably the Maritime and River League (*Liga Morska i Rzeczna*), founded in April 1924 and significantly renamed in October 1930 as the Maritime and Colonial League (*Liga Morska i Kolonialna*, abbreviated as LMiK)<sup>44</sup>, with the support of the governmental circles, began not only to seriously consider but also to act in favor of more organized overseas colonization, including the possibility of acquiring colonies for Poland. It must be remembered, however, that earlier – during and immediately after the First World War – voices were occasionally raised demanding part of the German colonies be granted to Poland. As early as 1917, Zdzisław Ludkiewicz, later Minister of Agricultural Reforms in the second government of Władysław Grabski, postulated that Poland should be granted colonies with an area at least equal to that of the reborn Poland.<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the proposal to grant Poland part of the German colonies was independently put forward by: Kazimierz Warchałowski, then president of the Polish Central Committee in Brazil; Professor Jean Dybowski, a French agronomist of Polish origin; Walerian Bukowiecki-Olszewski and Major Leon Bulowski, two experts from the Bureau of Congress Works – an institution established to support the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in securing Poland's interests at the conference; and finally, Michał Pankiewicz and Kazimierz Głuchowski, the founders of the Polish Colonial Society (*Polskie Towarzystwo Kolonialne*).<sup>46</sup> Also during the session of the Legislative Sejm, MP Tomasz Dąbal, then Vice-President of the Polish People's Party "Left" (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe "Lewica"*) parliamentary faction, submitted an interpellation on 14 March 1919 regarding Poland's claim to former German colonies, in particular Cameroon.<sup>47</sup> According to Grzegorz Łyś, "MP Dąbal was shamefully laughed at"<sup>48</sup> – also, it should be noted, by members of peasant circles, as evidenced by a statement published in *Piast* by Jan Rychel from Skowierzyn in the Tarnobrzeg district, the constituency from which MP Dąbal had been elected: "At present, Mr. Dąbal, instead of working on carrying out the land reform, is putting forward stupid motions for the incorporation of German colonies in Africa to Poland, probably just so that Mr. Dąbal can be a «major»

<sup>43</sup> See M. Mieszczankowski, *Rolnictwo...*, pp. 31, 35. On the agrarian policy pursued by the Polish government during the Great Depression, see J. Ciepielewski, *Polityka agrarna rządu polskiego 1929–1935*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1968.

<sup>44</sup> More on this organization, see T. Białas, *Liga Morska i Kolonialna 1930–1939*, Wydawnictwo Morskie, Gdańsk 1983; M. Grzechnik, *Aspirations of imperial space. The colonial project of the Maritime and Colonial League in interwar Poland*, [in:] *CES Open Forum Series 2019-2020*, ed. Grzegorz Ekiert and Andrew Martin, <https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/publications/aspirations-of-imperial-space-the-colonial-project-of-the-maritime-and-colonial-league-in-interwar-poland> (access: 10.04.2025).

<sup>45</sup> See W. Sułkowska, *Dyskusja...*, p. 122.

<sup>46</sup> See M.A. Kowalski, *Dyskurs kolonialny...*, pp. 42, 60, 100; P. Puchalski, *Poland...*, p. 53–55.

<sup>47</sup> See *Kronika działalności posłów ludowych*, "Przyjacieli Ludu," April 06, 1919, no. 14, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> G. Łyś, *Bzik kolonialny...*, p. 107.

there in Africa and form rifle regiments of African land out of negroes, on the model of the one he formed in the Sandomierz land.”<sup>49</sup> According to Marek Arpad Kowalski, citing historian Piotr Łossowski, in the early 1920s, another advocate of Poland obtaining a colonial mandate was Prince Janusz Radziwiłł, chairman of the Foreign Committee of the Sejm, and previously – before Poland regained independence head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the successive cabinets of the Regency Council (*Rada Regencyjna*).<sup>50</sup> However, as mentioned, these voices initially found little resonance in either public debate or government circles.

Nevertheless, this issue experienced a degree of renewed interest following a visit to Poland in May 1921 by the aforementioned Dybowski, who was investigating agricultural conditions in Poland on behalf of the French government. At that time, he was to propose, *inter alia*, that France was willing either to cede some of its colonies to Poland or to support Poland in taking over certain former German colonies, with a view to resettling surplus domestic population there – mainly peasants.<sup>51</sup> This was vehemently opposed by the aforementioned PSL Wyzwolenie MP Smoła, who, during a Sejm session on 10 June 1921 – in the context of a debate on the implementation of land reform – stated, among other things: “representatives of the French Ministry of Agriculture come and are to recruit peasants to Madagascar, or to other African localities, full of yellow fever and various diseases; these people come and speak with the President of the Ministers, speak with the Minister of Agriculture and other ministers in People’s Poland about transporting the peasants there like cattle to die out and be murdered by yellow fever, so that only the landed estates would remain, so that these Bolsheviks, who are hungry for the land, would disappear. For this I do not have enough words of condemnation on behalf of the whole people that such things are happening. If certain parties defend the big landowners, if there are groups of people who want to have the same large areas, then let them go to the yellow fever country themselves.”<sup>52</sup>

Eight years later, a columnist for *Lud Katolicki*, writing under the initials S.P., in an article with the telling title “How the ‘Liberators’ Deprived the Polish Peasants of Overseas Colonies,” accused Smoła – who, in his opinion, had a strong influence on the government in 1921 – of having instigated the rejection of Professor Dybowski’s project,<sup>53</sup> which was supposedly approved by the French authorities. According to the columnist, the plan was rejected because,

<sup>49</sup> J. Rychel, *Z ziemi tarnobrzeskiej*, “Piast,” April 13, 1919, no. 15, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> See M.A. Kowalski, *Dyskurs kolonialny...*, p. 10, 39, 99–100.

<sup>51</sup> See the report on this visit, which was presented to the Sejm by the Minister of Agriculture and State Property, Józef Raczynski: *Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne z 233 posiedzenia Sejmu Ustawodawczego z dnia 10 czerwca 1921 r.*, pp. 35–38.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 27–28. See also Smoła’s articles, published under the initials J.S.: *Zjazd Związku Ziemian*, “Wyzwolenie,” June 26, 1921, no. 26, p. 257 and *Odpowiedź powiatowym prezesom piastowcom*, “Wyzwolenie,” July 03, 1921, no. 27, p. 266.

<sup>53</sup> According to S.P.’s account, it concerned Cameroon or Togo, territories formerly belonging to Germany.



in Smoła's view, "the transfer of the colonial mandate to Poland would have harmed the agrarian reform (!)" S.P. commented: "And so the Polish peasant, who has such defenders, is still forced to serve foreigners, emigrating to Argentina and other countries that are not very hospitable, where he is often faced with poverty and misery. We could have created a new Poland across the ocean, but thanks to the various Smołas, we have lost our only opportunity to obtain a colony."<sup>54</sup> The columnist claimed that, thanks to colonies, Poland could have solved the problem of land shortage, while also pointing out that "an agrarian reform, even the most drastically carried out would not solve these difficulties, as there are areas where it would be completely inapplicable."<sup>55</sup>

At the time, however, when the columnist of *Lud Katolicki* was writing these words, some opportunities for organized overseas settler colonization did appear – at least according to the participants of a five-month expedition to Portuguese-controlled Angola in Africa, organized in 1929 by the Union of Colonial Pioneers and the Scientific Institute of Emigration.<sup>56</sup> Even greater hopes were raised among enthusiasts of Polish colonialism by state-supported attempts at Polish settler colonization in South American countries such as Brazil and Peru at the turn of 1920s and 1930s. Brazil had long been an area of mass, primarily peasant, emigration from Polish lands since around the second half of the 19th century, but the organized colonization of Peru by Poles was a novelty. The idea originated with the aforementioned Kazimierz Warchałowski, head of the Overseas Department of the Emigration Office from 1923, during his visit to South America in 1925 as government delegate. It was on his initiative that talks were held with the Peruvian authorities to grant Poles a concession in the Amazonian region of Montaña. To this end, in order to learn more about the land for future colonization, an expedition set out from Warsaw at the beginning of 1928, consisting, among others, of Warchałowski; Michał Pankiewicz, an emigration counsellor in South America; and "colonial pioneers" Mieczysław Lepecki and Apoloniusz Zarychta. After two years of heated discussions and preparations, the land was deemed suitable for colonization and, in April 1930, the first group of colonists set off from Poland to "conquer the Peruvian paradise."<sup>57</sup>

Right from the start, the peasant circles centered around PSL Piast and PSL Wyzwolenie – both parties then in opposition to the government – voiced

<sup>54</sup> S.P., *Jak "wyzwoleńcy" pozbawili Chłopów polskich zamorskich kolonji*, "Lud Katolicki", February 24, 1929, no. 8, p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>56</sup> See F.F. Łyp, *Wysoki płaskowyż Angoli: sprawozdanie kierownika ekspedycji polskiej do Angoli w roku 1929*, Naukowy Instytut Emigracyjny, Warszawa 1930. More on this expedition and the Angolan project, which was revisited in the second half of the 1930s, see G. Łyś, *Bzik kolonialny...*, pp. 164–188; P. Puchalski, *Poland ...*, pp. 84–99, 239–241; M. Skulimowska, *Polish colonial aspirations...*, pp. 113–161.

<sup>57</sup> More on this project, see M. Jarnecki, *Peruwiańska porażka i próba jej naprawy. Wokół polskich międzywojennych koncepcji emigracyjnych i kolonialnych*, "Sprawy Narodowościowe" 2014, vol. 44, pp. 102–132. G. Łyś, *Bzik kolonialny...*, pp. 132–163; J. Mazurek, *Kraj i emigracja...*, pp. 111–114; P. Puchalski, *Poland ...*, pp. 33–39.

sharp criticism of the entire undertaking as well as other overseas colonization projects, while they were strongly supported by the pro-government, clerical-conservative Catholic People's Party. In the article "New Poland in South America" published in June 1930, which appeared in *Lud Katolicki*, the party's press organ aimed at peasants, the author – writing under the initials St. T. – enthusiastically described the initiative, pointing to the goodwill of the Peruvian government, the favorable climate, and social conditions: the emigrants would not become alienated from their national identity. He summed up his arguments as follows: "This is a very interesting attempt to solve the problem of land hunger that troubles our small-scale peasantry and at the same time to help, through social cooperation, the thousands of our landless people find their own workshops for work on the land, to which they are bound by traditional ties and fate. The group of organizers of the 'Polish Colony' with the Marshal of the Senate, Prof. Szymański and senator Boguszewski at the head, well-known social activists, guarantees that the attempts undertaken will bring the most successful results."<sup>58</sup> Less than a year later, *Lud Katolicki* was no longer so enthusiastic about the Peruvian project. In an anonymous article "Peru – as a Colonization Area," the author began with the observation: "The attempt to direct emigration to colonization areas in Peru still raises objections in various circles of the press and society."<sup>59</sup>

Such objections were raised, *inter alia*, by the PSL Piast milieu. The very title of the anonymous text that appeared in *Piast* in April 1929 was telling: "The Expedition for Death." Its author began with the observation that "the more lazily the agrarian reform moves forward in the country, the more it is said about colonizing Peru."<sup>60</sup> He then noted that "the Sanacja magazines praise this undertaking, while others remain silent," and quoted extensive excerpts from an article that had appeared in the American Polish magazine *Dziennik Związkowy*. The author painted a grim picture of the climatic conditions prevailing in this subtropical country. Given that, the conclusion drawn in *Piast* – "Sending people under these conditions is tantamount to condemning them to perdition, to certain death" – should not come as a surprise.

A similar view, though in a more ironic tone, was expressed by an anonymous author of the short article "One Can Get Land – But in Brazil," which appeared on the front page of issue no. 33 of *Piast*, published in August 1929. While reporting on the recruitment of settlers in Kurpie region to go to the Aguia Branca (White Eagle) colony in the Brazilian state of Espírito Santo, the author commented: "The big landowners complain about the 'cursed' agrarian reform, and the peasants also complain about such a reform, in which they

<sup>58</sup> St. T., *Nowa Polska w Ameryce Południowej*, "Lud Katolicki," June 22, 1930, no. 25, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Peru – jako teren kolonizacyjny*, "Lud Katolicki," January 18, 1931, no. 3, p. 10. The author went on to conclude that: "There is no doubt that these areas are not easy to conquer. Working in the wilderness, having to conquer almost every inch of land while having to adapt to altered nutritional conditions and to unusual climatic conditions can discourage and even frighten weaker individuals, individuals unsuited to pioneer work."

<sup>60</sup> *Wyprawa po śmierć*, "Piast," April 28, 1929, no. 17, p. 4.

have to pay 300 to 400 dollars for 1 morgen. The Colonization Society in Warsaw, [No. 17 Ś-to Krzyska Street], has taken up a heroic task. The peasants will get land in Brazil – the landowners will stop cursing the land reform in Poland. The wolf will be full and the sheep whole – unless Brazil kills it.”<sup>61</sup>

Equally critical and sarcastic was a Piast correspondent, Władysław Piątek from Żarnówka, who, in the short article “Polish Land for the Polish Peasant,” remarked that “various benefactors of the peasants are trying to find for them the promised land, but unfortunately not in Poland [...], but across the ocean in America, in some country called Peru or Montanja, where the atmospheric conditions are such that the country has been called ‘the land of death.’”<sup>62</sup> He also referred in very negative terms to information appearing in the press (*Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny*), claiming “that gentlemen: Count Stadnicki, Łubieński, Lubomirski and others, while staying in Africa, have discovered for us peasants the sandy desert Algiers, from which only honey and wine would be poured down the throats of Polish peasants.” He concluded his article by stating: “We peasants thank you, gentlemen magnates, for the various benefits you wish to bestow upon us; we peasants do not desire a foreign land, but our own Polish land, which is rightfully ours and which, if necessary, we are able to defend and lay down our lives for.”<sup>63</sup>

However, by “Polish land,” the Piast circle also – or perhaps even primarily, as I have already pointed out – meant the land situated in the Eastern Borderlands. This view was expressed *expressis verbis* in a front-page article by Jan Brodacki, editor-in-chief of *Piast*, and a PSL Piast MP, who, during the debate around the Peruvian project, postulated: “**instead of sending the peasants to a deadly climate, one should think about the outflow of the excess population from central Poland to the Borderlands**, where space can accommodate several hundred thousand families. Here the interest of the peasant population is closely linked to the interest of the state, to its ‘to be or not to be’ as a power (*mocarstwo*).”<sup>64</sup>

This nationalist stance of *Piast* was voiced even more strongly by the newspaper’s regular correspondent in France, Andrzej Strojek, an émigré from Wadowice, in his article published in January 1929 under the telling title “Down with the Land of ‘Death,’ in which, by juxtaposing negatively perceived external colonization with positively valued internal one, he claimed that “the colonization area for every Pole should be **Poland** [...] and not France, Peru, Germany, etc.”<sup>65</sup> In speaking of Poland as a colonization area, he had in mind primarily – though not exclusively – the eastern territories: “Millions of morgens are waiting there for industrious peasant hands, hundreds of thousands of morgens are still in the hands of our enemies; Polesie and the whole of the Eastern Borderlands are the areas to which Poland’s surplus human hands should be directed.”<sup>66</sup> Openly

<sup>61</sup> *Można otrzymać ziemię – ale w Brazylii*, “Piast,” August 18, 1929, no. 33, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> W. Piątek, *Polska ziemia dla polskiego chłopca*, “Piast,” May 5, 1929, no. 18, p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>64</sup> J. Brodacki, *Pracy i chleba!*, “Piast,” April 14, 1929, no. 15, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> A. Strojek, *Precz z krainą „śmierci”*, “Piast,” January 13, 1929, no. 2, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

hostile toward minorities living in the Second Polish Republic, he also called for “not selling land to Germans, Jews, or Ruthenians, because there is as much Poland as Polish land.”<sup>67</sup> Such a nationalist – if not to say chauvinistic – point of view was not at all uncommon among PSL Piast supporters.<sup>68</sup> Quite the opposite stance was taken, as we have already seen, by members and followers of PSL Wyzwolenie, who, like Senator Aleksander Iżycki tirelessly called for agreement and unity between peasants of different nationalities in Poland.<sup>69</sup>

Ten months later, Strojek published the article in *Piast* “A Pole... Wipes Tears with His Sleeve,” in which he lamented: “In no other country is there such a large export of people from the country as in Poland. Not a week goes by without new transports of human cargo leaving abroad. People are sent without care and supplies, to wandering, which ends with death.”<sup>70</sup> In an allusion to the Peruvian project being debated at the time, he stated: “The relevant authorities are considering where to send these white, Polish negroes (*biali, polscy murzyni*).”<sup>71</sup> Noting also the “shrinking of Polishness in the Borderlands,” he was surprised that “citizens there in the country [in Poland] are so indifferent to the flight of Poles from the east to the west and to the mass deportation of Polish peasants abroad, with regrets that no more can go. Such a policy is not only short-sighted, but also downright criminal, as it brings irreparable harm to the nation and the state.”<sup>72</sup>

In the last issue of *Piast* in 1929, an anonymous author writing under the initials W.O. spoke equally strongly against overseas colonization in favor of internal colonization, writing in the article “What first?” that: “Enormous losses are incurred by the State when it gets rid of the best forces, the healthiest hands for work, when it condemns them almost to destruction, instead of strengthening and building up its own lands with them.”<sup>73</sup> The author further lamented that emigration was growing at an alarming rate, demonstrating how great the po-

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>68</sup> See, *inter alia*, J. Brodacki, *Ku czemu Polska idzie?*, “Piast,” September 29, 1929, no. 39, p. 1; A. Średniawski, *Na zatracenie!*, “Piast,” April 21, 1929, no. 16, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> See *O zgodę i jedność między chłopami różnych narodowości w Polsce (Przemówienie sen. Iżyckiego przy dyskusji nad budżetem Ministerstwa Spraw Wewnętrznych – w znacznym streszczeniu)*, “Wyzwolenie,” March 24, 1929, no. 13, p. 5. Iżycki after visiting in August 1929 the Eastern Borderlands reported – probably somewhat wishfully – that “the local population, without distinction of origin and religion, unites under the banner of ‘Wyzwolenie’ under the slogan: ‘Peasants of the whole country! unite to defend your interests’” (Al. Iz., *Kazimierek, pow. Kostopolski na Wołyniu*, “Wyzwolenie,” September 08, 1929, no. 39, p. 10).

<sup>70</sup> A. Strojek, *Polak... łzy rękawem ociera*, “Piast,” November 03, 1929, no. 44, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, p. 3. To get an idea of the scale of emigration (continental and overseas) from Poland in the first decade of her existence, it is worth giving some statistics. According to estimates, between 1919 and 1930, 1,063,559 people left for European countries, while 601,851 came back, and 627,053 emigrated overseas, while 143,736 returned. The migration balance was therefore negative, i.e. more people left Poland (1,690,612) in this period than returned (745,587). See A. Kicingier, *Polityka emigracyjna II Rzeczypospolitej*, “CEFMR Working Paper,” no. 4, 2005, p. 12, 18, [http://www.cefmr.pan.pl/docs/cefmr\\_wp\\_2005-04.pdf](http://www.cefmr.pan.pl/docs/cefmr_wp_2005-04.pdf) (access: 15.06.2025).

<sup>73</sup> W.O., *Co najpierw?*, “Piast,” 29.12.1929, no. 52, p. 3.

verty in the country is. However, the authorities are not taking “any steps to stop the wave of emigration for the benefit of the country, but on the contrary, they encourage and facilitate leaving it. Sanacja magazines conduct strong propaganda. Here, the president of the Agricultural Bank praises Peru, and the National Development Bank has purchased areas in the Congo; apparently, he knows nothing about the Polish Congo. Even institutions have been created which, out of ‘love for Poland’, will trade in peasants and export them to Africa.”<sup>74</sup>

The author went on to argue that overpopulation in the country was not particularly severe, especially in the eastern voivodships. In support of this claim, he provided data comparing population density in the western, central, and eastern voivodships. He commented that the eastern voivodships were two to three times less densely populated than the western or central ones, adding that these figures “gave a clear indication as to which direction the population of Kraków, Łódź, Kielce regions or elsewhere should go in search of a workshop on the land or employment as merchants or craftsman in the city. Poland does not need overseas emigration when it has areas much larger than those abroad in Peru or the Congo. The area of the four eastern provinces alone is 124,000 km<sup>2</sup>”<sup>75</sup> As one might guess, the reference to population density figures was also intended to dismiss the accusation – coming not only from Belarusian and Ukrainian circles, but also from Polish left-wing peasant activists – that colonization of the eastern lands by ethnic Poles meant taking land from the indigenous peasant population there. The author concluded his article with a statement, in which he firmly advocated for internal colonization and opposed overseas efforts: “The most vital interest of the State requires abandoning the current emigration policy. **Instead of sending peasants to the Congo or Peru, first populate the wastelands in the country with them, use their work for the security of the State, the good of the country and their own, first conduct propaganda in favor of emigration within Poland from some provinces to others, where there are no workers and there is an abundance of land.**”<sup>76</sup>

Despite many differences – including their attitude to the internal colonization of the Eastern Borderlands – the Liberators were just as skeptical as the Piasts about Peruvian and other colonial projects. The author of an article titled “Sending the Polish People to the World,” published in *Wyzwolenie* in August 1929 and signed with the initials J.S. (most likely Jan Smoła), even compared the recruitment of Poles to Peru to the recruitment of slaves. He also viewed the government-organized emigration to the Brazilian state of Espírito Santo just as negatively: “Where a Brazilian cannot or does not want to go – send a Pole there. While in Poland there is still plenty of wasteland... While in Poland, the lords still have thousands or tens of thousands of hectares of land. They breed horses on it or squander their income abroad. And you, peasant...

<sup>74</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>76</sup> Ibidem.

go to Espirito Santo. If you disappear from our sight, that is good; you will die there – well, it's hard, say those sending Polish peasants abroad...”<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Maksymilian Malinowski, chairman of the PSL Wyzwolenie and for many years editor-in-chief of *Wyzwolenie*, criticized the government in the article “We Will Not Let the Land Reform Drown,” writing that “to Peru, to the forests there, peasants are being sent,” thus “reassuring big landowners that there will be no deepening in the implementation of the land reform.”<sup>78</sup> In May 1930, after the first group of colonists had already set off for Peru, another prominent PSL Wyzwolenie activist, Tomasz Nocznicki, noting the halt in spontaneous labor emigration<sup>79</sup> and the difficult conditions in which the hungry masses lived – which, in his view, compromised Polish fantasies of power<sup>80</sup> – bitterly stated: “One is looking for a place on Earth where to send these hungry masses. Europe... there is not enough space here. So little-known countries, let's say Peru, which no one in the Polish countryside has heard of. Let them go there – they have nothing to lose. Yes, maybe by doing so they will build a superstrong Poland (*mocarna Polska*) in... Peru!”<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

Although peasants in the Second Polish Republic were formally recognized as having full political rights, they were still perceived by the elite as racialized, second-class citizens. However, ethnically Polish peasants were granted a form of “partial privilege”<sup>82</sup> by being encouraged to colonize the Eastern and Western Borderlands, a policy that was supported by some of them, especially those with nationalistic leanings. Particularly in the east, ethnic Polish peasants were supposed to play a key role in the Polish civilizing – or rather, to call it by its proper name – colonizing mission, whose slogan was “as much Poland as land in the hands of Poles.”<sup>83</sup> This kind of thinking later extended to organized overseas colonization. Here, we notice a certain ambivalence: the ethnic Polish peasant, treated paternalistically and with barely concealed contempt by the clerical-military-landowning elites in central Poland – this racialized “*cham*”, to use afore-mentioned Polish derogatory term of biblical origin – was to become, in

<sup>77</sup> J.S. [J. Smoła?], *Wysyłanie ludności polskiej w świat*, “Wyzwolenie,” August 25, 1929, no. 37, p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> M.M. [M. Malinowski], *Reformy rolnej utopić nie damy*, “Wyzwolenie,” December 08, 1929, no. 54, p. 4.

<sup>79</sup> “But now this hard, bloody work is over. We have been tightly jammed in the house of our poverty, they don't even need us as porters to carry the world's burdens.” T. Nocznicki, *Jestem głodny*, “Wyzwolenie,” May 25, 1930, no. 21, p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> “On the streets of our cities, poor people are dying of hunger and exhaustion, others, in despair, end up committing suicide, and we say that we are a ‘power.’ Yes, a power, because here there is a ‘hunger-power.” Ibidem.

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>82</sup> The term coined by I. Kalmar, *White But Not Quite. Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt*, Bristol University Press, Bristol 2022, pp. 11–15.

<sup>83</sup> B. Dobrzański, *Polska przegrywa Kresy*, “Piast,” September 22, 1929, no. 38, p. 3.



the eastern territories, a defender of Polishness, Polish statehood, and a culture seen as part of Western European civilization. Later, from roughly the late 1920s onward, this Polish peasant was also expected to carry out a civilizing mission in South America or Africa. And while the majority of peasant circles were not tempted by this dubious privilege in the context of overseas colonization, views diverged significantly on the question of internal colonization of the Eastern Borderlands. There was, however, broad agreement on the colonizing the Western Borderlands – the former lands of the Prussian partition. Here, there the consensus was reached: German large estates held by the Junkers, as well as the land formerly owned by the Prussian Settlement Commission, should be seized and distributed to Polish peasants.<sup>84</sup> As we have seen the Piasts, standing on a nationalist and power-oriented platform, believed that the eastern territories should be colonized primarily by Polish peasants, minimizing the fact that these lands were already inhabited by Ukrainian and Belorussian peasants who were also land-hungry. This reality was taken seriously by PSL Wyzwolenie, who maintained that the land seized from large landowners in the east should be distributed fairly among Polish, Belarussian, and Ukrainian peasants. Notwithstanding these differences, almost all peasant circles viewed overseas colonial projects in South America and Africa negatively, seeing them primarily as attempts to avoid implementing fundamental land reform in Poland and to preserve the privileged position of the dominant classes.

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<sup>84</sup> See, *inter alia*, *Prace nad reformą rolną idą naprzód*, "Piast," May 16, 1920, no. 20, p. 2–3; W.O., *Niemcom radość – Polsce ból. W sprawie układu likwidacyjnego polsko-niemieckiego*, "Piast," November 24, 1929, no. 47, p. 2; M.M. [M. Malinowski], *Dla polityki – przyznawanie ziemi obszarnikom niemcom*, "Wyzwolenie," September 08, 1929, no. 39, p. 2.

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