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The Peasantry's Stance on Education in the Russian-Polish Kingdom during the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Postawy chłopów wobec edukacji w Królestwie Polskim na przełomie XIX i XX w.

ABSTRACT

Acquiring elementary education by peasants in the Kingdom of Poland in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries was determined by many factors. The most important of these was the policy of the Russian state towards education which treated the school as a tool for inculcating loyalty to the state. On the other hand, the school was not always perceived by the peasants themselves as a necessary institution. This was caused, among other things, by a lack of understanding for educational needs, poverty, or the Russification character of the education system. Representatives of the rural population acquired reading and writing skills not only in schools, but very often through extracurricular education, including secret teaching activities. Gradually, among the rural population, the awareness of the benefits of education began to grow. This was influenced by the conduct of secret schooling, as well as the activities of Polish organizations and social activists who set themselves the goal of raising the level of education in the countryside.

Key words: Kingdom of Poland, Russification, education 19th–20th centuries, peasants 19th–20th centuries

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SUMMARY

Zdobywanie wykształcenia na poziomie elementarnym przez chłopów w Królestwie Polskim w drugiej połowie XIX i na początku XX w. uwarunkowane było przez wiele czynników. Do najważniejszych z nich należała polityka państwa rosyjskiego wobec oświaty, które traktowało szkołę jako narzędzie do wpajania lojalności wobec państwa. Z drugiej strony szkoła nie zawsze była postrzegana przez samych chłopów, jako instytucja niezbędna. Spowodowano to było m.in.: brakiem zrozumienia dla potrzeb edukacyjnych, biedą, czy rasyfikacyjnym charakterem oświaty. Przedstawiciele ludności wiejskiej, nabywali umiejętności czytania i pisania nie tylko w szkołach, ale bardzo często dzięki edukacji pozaszkolnej w tym działalności tajnego nauczania. Stopniowo wśród ludności wiejskiej zaczęła wzrastać świadomość korzyści płynących z edukacji. Wpływ na to miało prowadzenie nielegalnego nauczania oraz działalność polskich organizacji i działaczy społecznych stawiających sobie za cel podniesienie poziomu oświaty na wsi.

Słowa kluczowe: Królestwo Polskie, rasyfikacja, oświata XIX–XX wiek, chłopci XIX–XX wiek

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring elementary-level education in the Kingdom of Poland in the second half of the 19th and early 20th century was dependent on several significant factors. The most important of these was the policy of the Russian state. Representatives of the Russian authorities, after the fall of the January Uprising, considered it necessary to garner the support of the peasant population of the Polish Kingdom, which they considered ready for cooperation with the Russian Empire. An advocate of such thinking was Nikolai Milyutin, who believed that the peasants in the Kingdom of Poland, grateful for their liberation from serfdom and land ownership grant by the ukase of March 2, 1864, would form a pillar of support for the tsar's power over these lands. The Russian state was to become their protector and guarantor of beneficial property changes. The reforms in education proposed by him were intended to serve: firstly, subjecting education in the Kingdom to the direct control of the Russian central authorities; secondly, removing the influence of the nobility and the Catholic clergy on the school, so that they would not hinder the upbringing of peasant children in the spirit of loyalty to the Russian state¹.

¹ R. Wroczyński, *Myśl pedagogiczna i programy oświatowe w Królestwie Polskim na przełomie XIX i XX wieku*, Warszawa 1963, pp. 40–41.

RESEARCH AND RESULTS

Milyutin's proposals regarding the new organization of school administration in the Kingdom of Poland and the reform of elementary education were initiated as early as 1864. Their effect was the establishment of educational directorates headed by Chief Directors, which were to supervise the activities of elementary and secondary schools as well as the teachers working in them². At the same time, a new law was introduced concerning primary schools in the Kingdom of Poland³, which were to be organized according to religious criteria, and the teaching of individual subjects conducted in the native language of the students. Elementary schools were divided into one-class schools with a 4-year teaching cycle and two-class schools in which education lasted 5 years⁴.

These actions were considered insufficient, and in 1867, the Government Commission for Public Enlightenment was replaced by the Warsaw Educational District, directly subordinate to the Ministry of Public Enlightenment in St. Petersburg⁵, thereby eliminating the semblance of educational autonomy in the Kingdom. The curator of the district, along with the directors of the directorates subordinate to him and the inspector of schools in the city of Warsaw, were granted authority in the area of governing educational institutions similar to that in other educational districts of the Russian Empire⁶. Soon afterward, the educational authorities ceased to respect the right guaranteed by the ukase on elementary schools for communal and rural societies to select teachers, and decisions related to the assignment of teaching positions fell under the competence of the Chief Directors⁷. In addition to education confirmed by an appro-

² The Kingdom of Poland was divided into ten directorates, and for the city of Warsaw, a school inspector was appointed with the powers of a director of the educational directorate. *Dziennik Praw Królestwa Polskiego* [hereinafter: DPKP], t. 62, [Warszawa] 1864, pp. 391–397.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 335–359; P. Korotyński, *Losy szkolnictwa w Królestwie Polskim*, Warszawa 1906, pp. 22–23.

⁴ The curriculum of elementary schools is presented more extensively in: R. Kucha, *Oświata elementarna w Królestwie Polskim w latach 1864–1914*, Lublin 1982, pp. 109–110.

⁵ DPKP, vol. 67, [Warszawa] 1867, pp. 65–75.

⁶ T. Manteuffel, *Centralne władze oświatowe na terenie b. Królestwa Kongresowego (1807–1915)*, Warszawa 1929, pp. 46–48; E. Staszyński, *Polityka oświatowa caratu w Królestwie Polskim. Od powstania styczniowego do I wojny światowej*, Warszawa 1968, pp. 16–17.

⁷ H. Brodowska, *Ruch chłopski po uwłaszczeniu w Królestwie Polskim 1864–1904*, Warszawa 1967, pp. 194–195; D. Szewczuk, *Chełmska Dyrekcja Naukowa*, Lublin 2012, pp. 65–66.

priate certificate, the basic condition allowing one to obtain a job in an elementary school became loyalty to the ruling dynasty⁸.

Despite the guaranteed right to use the native language in elementary schools, the initial measures aimed at the Russification of elementary education were implemented as early as the late 1860s in the Podlasie region and the Lublin Governorate⁹. In 1871, a decree was issued on the introduction of Russian as a compulsory subject into the elementary school curriculum, effective from the new school year¹⁰. Soon, the authorities decided to go further, striving to mandate the teaching of all subjects in elementary schools in the Russian language¹¹. Ultimately, in 1885, Russian became the language of instruction in schools, with Polish permitted only for native language and Roman Catholic religion lessons. The exception was the eastern tsarist provinces of the Kingdom of Poland, where the teaching of the Polish language was entirely eliminated from the curriculum in most schools. Along with this solution, restrictions were imposed on religious education conducted by Roman Catholic clergy, and the authority of local governments over schools was restricted¹². It is worth noting that gendarmerie reports from the 1870s, cited the discontent of local communities with the exclusion of Catholic priests from education as one of the reasons for the poor progress in developing rural elementary schools. At the same time, these clergymen were blamed for fostering the peasants' reluctant attitude toward elementary school¹³. The second significant reason for the failures in school development noticed by the Russian authorities was the exclusion of village and communal assemblies from influence on the selection of teachers¹⁴.

The introduction of teaching in the Russian language was one of the most important factors influencing the attitudes of representatives of the peasant population toward the school. The first attempts at resistance against Russification actions appeared already in the late 1860s in the Podlasie region and the Lublin Governorate¹⁵. Peasants repeatedly demonstrated their dissatisfaction, even declaring that their children were

⁸ R. Kucha, *Oświata*, p. 75.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 110–111.

¹⁰ *Zbiór Praw: postanowienia i rozporządzenia rządu, w guberniach Królestwa Polskiego obowiązujące, wydane po zniesieniu w 1871 roku urzędowego wydania Dziennika Praw Królestwa Polskiego*, vol. 1, 1871, Warszawa 1875, p. 355.

¹¹ *Циркуляр по Варшавскому учебному округу*, 1873, no. 12, pp. 10–28.

¹² E. Staszyński, *op. cit.*, p. 21; R. Kucha, *Oświata*, pp. 113–114.

¹³ S. Wiech, *Spółeczeństwo Królestwa polskiego w oczach carskiej policji politycznej (1866–1896)*, Kielce 2010, pp. 277–278, 285.

¹⁴ W. Korotyński, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–34.

¹⁵ R. Kucha, *Oświata*, pp. 110–111.

not Russians, so there was no need to teach them in Russian. The Russian authorities observed the attempts at protests with concern, and some representatives of the police authorities considered the forced Russification of rural schools a mistake¹⁶. Local landowners were often accused of inciting peasants to protests, they were also said to exert influence on peasants in the matter of adopting resolutions at communal assemblies demanding the removal of the Russian language from schools and offices. This can be evidenced by, for example, the actions of Marcei Wydźga, the owner of the Woźuczyn estate in the Tomaszów County, whom the gendarmerie accused in 1879 of urging peasants to submit a demand to remove the Russian language from schools, or the landowner Madaliński from the Wieluń County, who was said to have convinced peasants to adopt a resolution ordering the exclusive use of the Polish language in the communal office and school. Similar cases of inciting peasants by landowners against the use of the language were also recorded in the Płock Governorate¹⁷.

The dissatisfaction of the peasants is also visible in letters sent to "Gazeta Świąteczna". One of the readers of this newspaper, from the Siedlce Governorate, wrote that as long as the teacher taught in Polish in school, the children attending it expanded their educational vocabulary with new words in their native language, but under the influence of teaching in Russian, they began to use Russian names for activities and objects that they did not use in everyday life¹⁸. Learning the Russian language, incomprehensible to most children who used Polish at home, also caused them enormous difficulties¹⁹.

One of the residents of the Puławy County, born in 1880, who learned to read and write in Russian as well as the basics of arithmetic in the local school, described his education as follows: "They taught very little in Polish, all books were Russian, even the prayer was in Russian, they instilled Muscovite ways in us so much that if it weren't for the church and Polish priests, they would have turned us into Muscovites"²⁰. He completed elementary school with an exam, for which he was prepared by a local teacher; this was particularly important because the certificate of completion

¹⁶ S. Wiech, *Spółeczeństwo*, pp. 284–285.

¹⁷ S. Wiech, *Wież Królestwa Polskiego w kręgu oddziaływań dworu i plebanii w latach 1864–1904 (na przykładzie guberni radomskiej i kieleckiej)*, *Wież między Wisłą i Pilicą w XIX wieku. Wieś – dwór – plebania w kręgu wzajemnych oddziaływań*, "Biuletyn Kwartalny Radomskiego Towarzystwa Naukowego" 2002, 37, 1–4. pp. 101–102.

¹⁸ M. Kriśań, *Chłopi wobec zmian cywilizacyjnych w Królestwie Polskim w drugiej połowie XIX – początku XX wieku*, Warszawa 2008, p. 20.

¹⁹ *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja druga*, Warszawa 1936, p. 114.

²⁰ *Pamiętniki chłopów Nr. 1–51*, Warszawa 1935, p. 408.

gave him the right to shorten his military service by one year. He developed his ability to read in Polish thanks to borrowed books, reading newspapers subscribed to by his father, and illegal brochures²¹.

Concerns that the school would serve Russification are visible even in the situations where attempts to establish a school were initiated by representatives of the local community. One of the prominent community activists from the Łuków County, who, along with a group of several people, convinced the village head of the need to propose a resolution at the commune meeting for the establishment of schools in the commune, described the course of such an assembly, which ended in a vote. The majority objected to building a school despite the promise of support from state funds, and in the presence of officials and land guards, they loudly expressed their opinion: 'We don't want a school! We don't want it! Because the Muscovites will Russify our children in this school. We don't want it! No!'²².

The year 1905 saw the implementation of certain changes in the Russification policy, and, under the influence of revolutionary events, the Russian authorities temporarily departed from the conducted Russification strategy, allowing teaching in the Polish language while maintaining the obligation to learn Russian. However, this solution was not fully executed throughout the entire Kingdom of Poland, as in the areas of the Siedlce and Lublin Governorates, in their so-called Russian parts with a significant Orthodox population, elementary schools still conducted instruction in Russian²³. The demand for introducing instruction in the Polish language met with great support from Polish peasants in the years 1905–1907²⁴. An important factor enabling the development of education in the countryside during this period was the more frequent granting of permissions by school authorities for the establishment of educational institutions operated by private individuals and associations. Nevertheless, already in 1907, the Russian authorities began to tighten their policy, among other things, by liquidating the Polish School Matrix, which on a large scale created elementary schools with Polish as the language of instruction and *ochronki* (*ochronki* – plural form; an *ochronka* was a 19th-century Polish village day nursery providing care and early education for children from poor families) in the territory of the Kingdom of Poland. The activities of these facilities were generally well received

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Wiejscy działacze społeczni*, vol. 1, *Życiorysy włościan*, Warszawa 1937, p. 105.

²³ R. Kucha, *Oświata*, pp. 113–114.

²⁴ S. Wiech, *Spółeczeństwo*, pp. 290–291; Z. Kmiecik, *Ruch oświatowy na wsi. Królestwo Polskie 1905–1914*, Warszawa 1963, pp. 18–21.

by the rural population, who sent their children to them, yet they aroused great concern among the Russian authorities, who saw in them a threat to the interests of the Russian state²⁵.

One of the most frequently raised arguments in the countryside against establishing schools, but also against improving the material conditions of the existing institutions, was the issue of their maintenance. Establishing a school contribution allowing for financing their activities, repairs, and the construction of new school buildings required its approval by communal or village assemblies, depending on whether the school was maintained by the commune or the village²⁶. The rural community was usually reluctant to new taxes, as it meant increasing the financial burdens on peasant farms. In addition, the population noticed that they would not have much influence on the functioning of the school. On the other hand, part of the rural population realized that educating children was necessary, so that they could in the future leave the overpopulated villages in search of a better life²⁷.

Among representatives of the Russian administrative authorities in the Kingdom of Poland, proposals were occasionally made to address the peasants' reluctance to contribute to school financing by extending the obligation to pay the school fund contribution also to industrial establishments located in the commune's territory or directly supporting their establishment and subsequent maintenance from state funds. However, the idea of fully maintaining schools from the state budget did not find support in the Russian government. Furthermore, among the arguments against financing schools from the state budget, there was also one that peasants claimed that they could not afford to maintain schools, yet at the same time they were paying secret teachers provided to them by local priests, as evidenced by a substantial number of discovered illegal schools²⁸.

The peasants' reluctance to pay the school contribution is perfectly visible in the transformation of village schools to communal ones initiated in the 1880s. This process encountered difficulties from some residents uninterested in maintaining the school, for another reason – its remote location meant that it was impossible for children from neighboring villages

²⁵ Z. Romanowski, *Z dziejów szkoły i oświaty elementarnej na Lubelszczyźnie w początkach XX wieku*, Lublin 1970, pp. 85–90.

²⁶ M. Biernacka, *Oświata w rozwoju kulturowym polskiej wsi*, Wrocław 1984, p. 15; W. Korotyński, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–27.

²⁷ *Listy z nad Narwi pisał Łomżyński*, Lwów 1903, pp. 18–21.

²⁸ S. Wiech, *Spółeczeństwo*, pp. 269–270.

to attend it²⁹. Difficulties also occurred when making decisions on the necessity of increasing the school contribution, for example, to raise teachers' salaries. During campaigns to increase contributions for this purpose, some communal assemblies refused to make such a decision. The rise in charges was only achieved through the influence of the local Russian administration which exerted pressure on the communal self-government³⁰.

The resistance of the rural population is noticeable, for example, in the Siedlce Governorate, where after the dissolution of the Union and compelling Greek Catholics to convert to Orthodoxy, the local population reluctantly agreed to the establishment of Orthodox government schools. For instance, the assemblies in the Lisia Wólka commune on multiple occasions between 1875 and 1885 failed to approve a resolution on establishing a school in Bezwola. Only when the school authorities committed to maintaining it at their own expense was the resolution adopted. The financial support provided by the school authorities for both the establishment and subsequent maintenance of schools, especially in the eastern provinces of the Kingdom, was a fairly common phenomenon intended to promote Orthodox Christianity following the dissolution of the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church. The necessity of the support also stemmed from the indifference of the local population towards educational needs, not only at the stage of establishing new educational institutions but also in maintaining the existing ones. A common phenomenon was the poor condition of school buildings, arrears in paying teachers' salaries, and neglect by communal authorities in collecting the school contribution³¹.

The peasants' resistance to collecting the school contribution sometimes took drastic forms. In some areas of the Lublin Governorate, in order to collect arrears, the authorities sent administration representatives, land guards, and sometimes military units. There were also arrests of actual and alleged instigators of protests to break the resistance of the population³². Similar events occurred in the Siedlce, Radom, and Kielce Governorates. Refusing to pay the school contribution became an almost widespread phenomenon in the Kingdom during the school strike in 1905–1906. The school associations made it a prerequisite for renewed financial support that instruction be conducted in Polish³³.

²⁹ Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie [hereinafter: APL], Kancelaria Gubernatora Lubelskiego, ref. no. 8146; ref. no. 10572; ref. no. 10181, fols. 61, 65–67; ref. no. 10672, *passim*.

³⁰ R. Kucha, *Oświata*, pp. 52–53.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 49–51, 65–67; D. Szewczuk, *Chełmska*, pp. 115–117.

³² D. Szewczuk, *Chełmska*, pp. 107–108.

³³ R. Kucha, *Oświata*, pp. 54–55, 58; J. Miąso, *Walka o narodową szkołę w Królestwie Polskim w latach 1905–1907: w stulecie strajku szkolnego*, "Rozprawy z Dziejów Oświaty" 2005, 4,

Resistance to the reorganization of rural schools into local government schools was also encountered. Transforming a school into a communal one could theoretically serve to lower the school contribution, which was distributed among a larger number of residents, nevertheless, for some families, this savings was illusory, as their children were precluded from attending the facility due to its remoteness and limited capacity. However, such a solution was often supported by estate owners, as it allowed them to avoid fulfilling material and financial obligations to which they committed when establishing the village school. They could prove before administrative authorities or the court that their obligations concerned bearing the costs of maintaining a village school, not a communal one³⁴.

One of the reasons for reluctance to pay the school contribution, which hindered promoting education in rural areas, was poverty. The need to improve the material conditions of the rural population, as a factor necessary for the widespread adoption of Russian state schools, was indicated in gendarmerie reports. Reports from the Kielce and Radom Governorates in the 1880s identified a lack of clothing and footwear, which prevented parents from sending their children to school, as one of the reasons for the poor progress in Russian language acquisition among students in rural existing schools. Additionally, they pointed to the short duration of education in the school year, which was 4.5 months, the peasants' reluctance to the Russian language considered by them as not very useful, and the common attitude of some parents that children's help with farm work was more beneficial than their time spent in school³⁵.

The issue of lack of appropriate clothing and footwear, as one of the factors influencing a hindrance to regular school attendance, as well as poverty prevailing in the countryside or problems with malnutrition, often appears in peasants' memoirs³⁶. One of the peasant memoirists describes in his recollections that although he caught the teacher's attention with his diligence in learning and the teacher encouraged his father to continue his son's education, it was not possible due to financial reasons. About his education, he writes that until the age of fourteen, he attended school in winter and tended to grazing cattle in summer³⁷. Attending school was also extremely difficult due to the distance and the necessity of combining education with helping on the farm, particularly in the summer months, when the younger ones were tasked with grazing

pp. 90–91; *Wiejscy działacze społeczni*, vol. 2, *Życiorysy inteligentów*, Warszawa 1938, p. 144.

³⁴ R. Kucha, *Oświata*, p. 53.

³⁵ S. Wiech, *Spółeczeństwo*, pp. 283–284.

³⁶ *Pamiętniki chłopów* Nr. 1–51, p. 284.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

the cattle whereas their elder siblings were needed for other kinds of farm work³⁸. The abovementioned problems also concerned the people who acquired the basics of reading and writing outside of school through secret teaching³⁹.

Teacher Władysław Dzikiewicz described the attitude of peasants towards sending children to elementary school in Czechowice, Pruszków commune (now the village no longer exists, absorbed by adjacent villages of Włochy and Raków): 'How sorry I was that Polish peasants did not understand the power of education and so lightly disregarded sending children to school'⁴⁰. He contrasted their attitude with the behavior of German colonists, who willingly paid for their children to attend school. In addition, the children of German colonists attended school throughout the entire school year from the beginning of September to the end of June, whereas children from Polish families most often attended from November 1st (All Saints' Day) to Easter. Polish parents prioritized farm needs: during the grazing season, children's labor was indispensable for tending the livestock⁴¹.

The aforementioned problem of attending school only during a few winter months was a common issue in the countryside. In theory, the school year lasted from September to June, however in September and October only a small number of students attended school. Attendance increased only in the November–January period, was maintained during the winter months, depending on weather conditions, only to sharply decrease during the spring fieldwork season. In some communal and village institutions, the school year actually started at the end of September and lasted until March or April; in May and June, only those preparing for the final elementary school examination attended⁴². Therefore, the teaching period was largely confined to the fall and winter months, which, due to variable weather conditions, made it difficult for students to attend classes⁴³.

Peasants also displayed a marked reluctance to send their children to school, largely because they failed to see the value in education. They believed that acquiring reading and writing skills would not change their

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 204, 229, 382; 393; *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja*, pp. 113–114.

³⁹ *Pamiętniki chłopów* Nr. 1–51, p. 271.

⁴⁰ W. Dzikiewicz, *Wspomnienia nauczyciela z Żyrardowa (1862–1940)*, Warszawa–Żyrardów 2006, p. 53.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 53–54.

⁴² R. Kucha, *Oświata*, p.131

⁴³ *Pamiętniki chłopów* Nr. 1–51, pp. 204, 229, 382, 393; *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja*, pp. 113–114.

economic or social situation⁴⁴. In the eyes of a significant part of the rural community, attending school was considered a waste of time, which the child could spend more usefully helping parents at home or with field work. Additionally, there was a belief that people who acquired basic education began to feel superior⁴⁵. One self-taught activist mentions in his memoirs the lack of understanding from the neighbors for his desire to gain knowledge: 'There were indeed those who tried to bully and mock me, but I just tuned them out, kept on my path, and felt sorry for them because of their ignorance and shortsightedness and did not judge them too harshly'⁴⁶.

The reluctance of parents or their lack of interest in sending children to school are well documented in the published reminiscences of rural residents⁴⁷. A peasant from the Łuków County, born in 1884, a half-orphan raised by his mother, describes his experience as follows: 'We didn't have much, but I never went hungry, though no one cared about my education, no one was interested in that aspect of my upbringing, and truth be told, there was no one to take care of it'⁴⁸. Another memoirist attributed his father's neglect of his education to the parent's religiosity. The father claimed that the priest at church preached that prayer and work were the only path to salvation. As a consequence of his parents' lack of interest, he learned only the alphabet and counting to one hundred during his time in school⁴⁹.

On the other hand, there were also parents who took a precisely opposite stance, encouraged their children to study hard and were pleased that they were gaining knowledge⁵⁰. They also supported their children in learning to read and write, buying them necessary school supplies or 'The ABC Book', and independently teaching them the alphabet and reading using prayer books⁵¹. One of the memoirists recalled that he attended a school located three kilometers away. His completion of school was greatly influenced by his mother, who herself could read and write and helped her son to acquire these skills⁵². The influence of parents is also evident in the case of the peasants who acquired

⁴⁴ J. Bystroń, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce XVI–XVIII w.*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1994, p. 376.

⁴⁵ M. Krisań, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–30.

⁴⁶ *Wiejscy*, vol. 1, pp. 36–37.

⁴⁷ *Pamiętniki chłopów Nr. 1–51*, pp. 63–64.

⁴⁸ *Wiejscy*, vol. 1, p. 81.

⁴⁹ *Pamiętniki chłopów Nr. 1–51*, p. 284.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 132; *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja*, pp. 113, 453, 813–814, 818–819.

⁵¹ *Pamiętniki chłopów Nr. 1–51*, pp. 204, 356.

⁵² *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja*, p. 710.

reading and writing skills outside of school. One resident of the Garwolin County recalls that he learned to read and write thanks to his uncle, who, being self-taught, offered reading and writing lessons for a small fee, both to willing individuals and village youths forced to learn by their fathers⁵³. Another one from the village of Kiełczewice describes that his father arranged with a teacher to enable his son to have private lessons in reading and writing at the home of one of the village residents, making it clear that failure to study would result in punishment. The results of this education were not impressive, as he writes: 'I went there all winter and picked up some basic reading and writing skills, but I didn't get much practice in writing'⁵⁴. Nevertheless, it gave him the foundations to further develop these skills through independent reading of books⁵⁵.

The influence on the willingness to send children to school and the readiness to bear the costs of its maintenance also came from the rural community's opinion about the teacher working there. Attention was paid to the teacher's attitude toward children, his moral stance, and religiosity. A teacher who treated his students poorly, insulted and humiliated them, did not enjoy respect in the rural environment. In contrast, one who was regarded as religious and hardworking earned the respect of parents and had authority among the children⁵⁶. In the memoirs of Polish peasants, one can encounter descriptions of frequent brutal treatment of students by teachers. One peasant, describing his time at school, did not hide his aversion to the teacher, who insulted students in Russian and applied corporal punishment, often very painful, for lack of progress in the Russian language or for not learning the prayer offered for Emperor Nicholas and his family⁵⁷.

The teacher's conduct influenced the positive attitude of the rural population towards the school if he was able to convince them of the benefits of acquiring knowledge. Teachers who, in addition to pedagogical work, undertook activities consisting, among other things, of instructing farmers how to graft fruit trees, establishing libraries that the local population could use, promoting newspaper subscriptions, or distributing calendars containing advice on planning field work, gained recognition from the local population, which facilitated their pedagogical work⁵⁸. The Russian educational authorities were aware of the necessity of such an approach,

⁵³ *Pamiętniki chłopów* Nr. 1–51, p. 355.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 323.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 329.

⁵⁶ M. Krisań, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–29.

⁵⁷ *Pamiętniki chłopów* Nr. 1–51, pp. 63–64.

⁵⁸ W. Dzikiewicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–55.

where the teacher was a carrier of civilizational advancement as well as the dissemination of culture. For this reason, when training teachers, attention was paid to equipping them with practical knowledge on horticulture, additional courses were organized for active teachers, and they were encouraged to establish school libraries that would be open to the local population⁵⁹.

The influence exerted by the landed nobility on the emergence and growth of cultural and educational establishments during the second half of the 19th century, and the resultant impact on the formation of peasant mentality, remains a challenging phenomenon to evaluate. The restrictions imposed on the estate owners and clergy regarding their legal support of educational institutions in rural areas⁶⁰ led some members of these groups to become involved in establishing secret schools. The interest in the development of education stemmed from the dissemination of Positivist thought among representatives of the landed gentry, clergy, and intelligentsia, who began to see the need to bridge the chasm between manor houses and village communities, and importantly, to the necessity for these strata to take the initiative in awakening national awareness among the rural populace. This phenomenon was closely observed by the Russian authorities, and representatives of the gendarmerie in their reports noted that the landowners and intellectual elite conceded that they lacked the capacity to fight for the defense of Polish national interests, hence their striving for reconciliation with the peasants⁶¹. As noted in his 1884 report by Governor-General J. Hurko, for Poland's educated elites, the intelligentsia and landowning class, the ultimate objective was the implementation of a motto formulated in Galicia: 'Through an enlightened populace to a sovereign Poland'⁶².

One of the landowners presented the way to overcome the reluctance of the rural population as follows: 'The unenlightened and ignorant population, to whom the Muscovites closed education, needed to be enlightened. This task could only be undertaken by the rural intelligentsia, as the one best knowing the rural people. The first and most difficult stage was to break the long-standing distrust and gain trust and obedience. The way to this led through good neighborly coexistence between

⁵⁹ D. Szewczuk, *Chełmska*, pp. 74–75, 133–135; idem, *Seminaria nauczycielskie w Królestwie Polskim (1866–1915)*, Lublin 2015, pp. 189–190.

⁶⁰ This concerned not only schools, but also Christian inns liquidated in the mid-1880s by the Russian authorities. See: S. Wiech, *Wieś*, pp. 97–98.

⁶¹ S. Wiech, *Spółeczeństwo*, p. 270.

⁶² S. Wiech, *Wieś*, p. 98.

the manor and the cottage, providing economic advice, fair treatment of workers, etc.’⁶³

One of the elements of the landowners’ activities for the education of the rural people became the establishment of rural nursery school *ochronki*. This activity was legal and accepted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, initially not arousing greater interest from the Russian administration in controlling such facilities which were intended to provide care for the children of estate workers and the local rural population. This initiative unquestionably contributed to mitigating the social tensions between rural communities and the manor house. However, it is worth noting that in 1883, only 13 such rural facilities⁶⁴ operated in the territory of the Kingdom of Poland. The activity of *ochronki* gained momentum in the years 1905–1907, when they became a substitute for Polish schools⁶⁵.

The Tsarist authorities viewed the growth of Polish childcare centers (*ochronki*) as an obstacle to their Russification policies and therefore they were subjected to intensified control by the Russian authorities searching for evidence of illegal activities. The authorities suspected the conduct of secret teaching of the Polish language, Polish history, or basic mathematics⁶⁶ in these facilities. The police, school supervisory bodies, and administrative authorities at the county and communal levels were involved in gathering information regarding this matter⁶⁷. The head of the Chełm educational directorate explicitly regarded the activity of *ochronki* created by Polish landowners, clergy, and intelligentsia as hostile to the Russian state. In his opinion, their organization in the areas with religiously mixed populations provided an opportunity to expand and strengthen the Polish language. He emphasized that children attending *ochronki* in communities inhabited by the Ruthenian population were subjected to strong influence of Polish culture, raised in the spirit of the Catholic religion and love for Catholicism. He attributed this phenomenon to a profound shift in the Chełm region, a territory that he characterized as inherently Ruthenian, where, over the preceding decade and a half, entire villages

⁶³ *Wiejscy*, vol. 2, p. 142.

⁶⁴ S. Wiech, *Oddziaływanie ziemiaństwa na społeczność wiejską w Królestwie Polskim w 2. Połowie XIX wieku w ocenie władz rosyjskich*, in: *Dwór a społeczności lokalne na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, eds. W. Caban, M.B. Markowski, M. Przeniosło, Kielce 2008, p. 139.

⁶⁵ D. Szewczuk, *Ochronki w guberni lubelskiej w latach 1853–1914*, “*Res Historica*” 2004, 14, pp. 43–45.

⁶⁶ *Wiejscy*, vol. 2, pp. 129–130.

⁶⁷ For a broader discussion on this topic: R. Kucha, *Z dziejów tajnego nauczania w guberni lubelskiej i siedleckiej w latach 1905–1914*, “*Rocznik Lubelski*” 1972, 15, pp. 120–121; D. Szewczuk, *Chełmska*, pp. 156–161.

had abandoned their native tongue for Polish, and renounced Orthodoxy for the Catholic faith⁶⁸.

The educational authorities, accusing Polish *ochronki* of illegal activities, considered it necessary on the one hand to combat these facilities, and on the other to create similar institutions under the patronage of Russian authorities in areas with mixed religious and ethnic populations. Consequently, he perceived the provision of care for pre-school children as a strategic tool for reinforcing Orthodoxy and fostering Russian national identity. These initiatives gained particular momentum in the territory of Chełm after 1912. Plans were made to establish courses for pre-school educators at the women's monastery in Radechnica. *Ochronki* established by the authorities with appropriately educated staff were to become a counterweight to the facilities operating in the Chełm Governorate opened by Poles⁶⁹.

Landowners, establishing *ochronki* in their estates, introduced the obligation for the children of estate workers to attend them, while peasant children attended voluntarily. The daycare facilities were predominantly charitable and did not levy any fees, but sometimes it occurred that local peasants were very reluctant to send their children to the 'ochronka' at the manor house, perhaps considering the free education worthless. However, introducing a symbolic fee was enough for peasants to more willingly send their offspring to the facility⁷⁰.

Establishing *ochronki* did not always meet with automatic acceptance from the rural community for other reasons as well. One of the female landowners, owning a small farm near Mińsk Mazowiecki, describing the tribulations related to establishing this kind of facility, noted that the challenge proved to be the superstitions prevailing in the countryside. For example, cutting the matted hair of the pupils for hygienic reasons caused outrage in the local rural community. Some of the local population held the belief that this procedure would cause twisting of bones, deafness, or blindness in children. Only when the expected illnesses did not occur did parents start sending their children to 'ochronka' again⁷¹.

It is also worth noting that initiatives to establish *ochronki* were undertaken by the peasants themselves. However, these attempts were not always successful. One rural social activist describes in his memoirs the launch of this facility before World War I. It was established following

⁶⁸ APL Chełmska Dyrekcja Szkolna Akta ogólne, ref. no. 1/262, fols. 15–17.

⁶⁹ APL Chełmska Dyrekcja Szkolna Akta ogólne, ref. no. 1/240, fols. 6–7; ref. no. 1/262, fols. 1–2, 6, 9–13, 28, 31.

⁷⁰ *Wiejscy*, vol. 1, pp. 129–130.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

his persuasion, and during a village assembly the local population committed to paying 50 kopecks monthly for its maintenance. The initiator of the venture provided free premises for the facility and a small room for the caregiver. However, ensuring the financing of the institution proved to be a problem, as after some time many peasants began to pay the contribution irregularly or completely ceased contributing to the facility. The institution's financial troubles stemmed mainly from poverty, which prevented village residents from making payments⁷².

Alongside the legally existing institutions, such as elementary schools or *ochronki*, secret educational activities developed in the countryside. The development of illegal forms of teaching in the Polish countryside was an attempt to counteract the restriction of teaching in the Polish language in government elementary schools and preventing the local population from establishing schools with Polish as the language of instruction. The phenomenon of secret teaching appeared already after the January Uprising in the Siedlce and Lublin Governorates and gradually encompassed the remaining territories of the Kingdom. These secret schools were typically held in peasant cottages, parish buildings, and, less frequently, in the manorial estates⁷³.

The scale of secret teaching is difficult to grasp, nevertheless, data from the Russian gendarmerie indicate that in the years 1881–1883, in the territory of 10 governorates of the Kingdom of Poland, nearly 300 secret schools were exposed, in which over 4.500 students were supposed to be receiving education. For conducting illegal teaching, 195 people were arrested, of whom the vast majority – 143 persons were of peasant or urban middle-class descent. According to representatives of the gendarmerie, the creation of these schools in the countryside was supported by the landowning class, intelligentsia, and clergy⁷⁴. However, it is worth noting that representatives of these groups constituted a small percentage of those caught by the police in illegal activities, while the vast majority were individuals of peasant origin and urban middle class.

Peasants began setting up secret schools on their own initiative as early as the 1870s. A common phenomenon in the countryside was the organization of reading and writing lessons for a few children, conducted by individuals who usually had no formal qualifications, only the willingness to teach. The classes were held in peasant cottages by those who had acquired reading and writing skills from elementary school, through

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 54.

⁷³ R. Kucha, *Oświata*, pp. 139–140.

⁷⁴ S. Wiech, *Oddziaływanie*, p. 140.

home teaching, or were entirely self-taught⁷⁵. This type of teaching rarely yielded spectacular results, but it often ensured that at least a few people in every village could sign their names, read a newspaper, write a letter, or gained basic mathematical skills⁷⁶.

A striking phenomenon was classes taught by young teenagers who had themselves only recently finished elementary school. One resident of a village in the Ostrów County, who completed elementary school in his locality, conducted secret teaching at the age of 11, at the request of his neighbors. To help him maintain discipline, the parents of his students gave permission to the host of the house used for teaching purposes to punish the disobedient with beating or kneeling on buckwheat in the corner if they disrupted the classes. The parents' attitude stemmed from the conviction that punishment was necessary because: 'In the mindset of the older generation at that time, a student, if he was to study well, should tremble at the mere sight of the teacher, citing their own experience'⁷⁷. Yet another case involved a twelve-year-old resident of Sieradz County who had learned to read and write in Russian, and do arithmetic at school, and later began tutoring other children in both Polish and Russian in his home⁷⁸.

Some of the rural population acquired reading and writing skills thanks to the help of family members or outsiders, or even studied on their own⁷⁹. One resident of the Łuków County recalls that he was taught to read, write, and do arithmetic by the neighbors, who in their youth had acquired such skills through teaching conducted by the owners of the local manor house. He further developed his abilities by reading various newspapers and books that were within reach⁸⁰. Another from the Garwolin County received instruction from his uncle, who was self-taught, thanks to which he learned to write, although without adhering to the rules and principles of Polish spelling⁸¹. As a teenager, a self-taught farmer from the Błonie County would read newspapers and borrowed books, including the literary works of Poland's national poets, to his peers during winter evenings. As he grew older, he carried these pursuits into

⁷⁵ H. Brodowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 263–264, 308; S. Wiech, *Spółeczeństwo*, p. 286; M. Kriśań, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23.

⁷⁶ *Wiejscy*, vol. 1, pp. 104–105.

⁷⁷ *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja*, pp. 459–460

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 820–821.

⁷⁹ *Wiejscy*, vol. 1, p. 37; *Wiejscy*, vol. 2, pp. 283–284; B. Malanowski, *Wspomnienia wiejskiego pedagoga*, Warszawa 1930, pp. 35–37.

⁸⁰ *Wiejscy*, vol. 1, p. 81.

⁸¹ *Pamiętniki chłopów Nr. 1–51*, pp. 355–356.

adulthood, devoting his spare time to teaching the neighborhood children how to read and write⁸².

Sometimes the drive to acquire knowledge required the interested party to first earn money to fulfill the dream of learning to read and write. A villager from the Błonie County, born in 1864, describes in his memoirs that he used the money from the gloves that he made to pay for private lessons with the altar boy who agreed to teach him. Due to the help of a tutor who was only slightly older than him, and following his advice, he set aside every ruble that he earned to buy a primer, and mastered the skills of reading and writing as well as the basics of arithmetic. Unfortunately, after a year, his tutor died, but he did not stop learning and, using books and newspapers, learned to read fluently and mastered the four basic mathematical operations. The local priest also had a significant influence on his education, subscribing to "Gazeta Świąteczna" for him, giving him various books to read, and lending him books for learning Latin and German. He independently mastered the basics of German and Russian to the extent that he could communicate in these languages⁸³.

Among the people engaged in teaching rural children were also retired teachers, itinerant craftsmen, university and high school students, as well as women living in the manor house – wives, daughters, or cousins of the local landowner or estate administrator. Great popularity among the rural population was enjoyed by the itinerant 'winter teachers' who traveled from village to village, educating children in exchange for food and housing⁸⁴. A common phenomenon was the use of prayer books, calendars, books of canticles, or prophecies for learning; however, over time, primers were increasingly utilized⁸⁵.

The functioning of secret schools was protected by the local rural community to prevent representatives of the authorities from interfering in such activities. Residents often warned those conducting secret teaching about rural guard inspections⁸⁶. Individuals conducting secret teaching were fully aware that, in the event of being caught, only their own resourcefulness or help from the local community could save them. To avoid responsibility, they tried to convince representatives of the authorities of their ignorance that they were doing something illegal or that

⁸² *Wiejscy*, vol. 1, p. 37.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, pp. 33–36.

⁸⁴ R. Kucha, *Oświata*, pp. 141–142

⁸⁵ *Pamiętniki chłopów* Nr. 1–51, pp. 204, 356; *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja*, pp. 459–460; *Wiejscy*, vol. 1, pp. 33–36.

⁸⁶ *Pamiętniki chłopów* Nr. 1–51, p. 346; *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja*, pp. 459–460.

they were only teaching the Russian language⁸⁷. Caught in the act, they not infrequently attempted, with considerable success, to bribe the rural guards⁸⁸. Despite the threat of consequences in the form of financial penalties, beatings, or even arrest, those conducting secret teaching were proud of their activities⁸⁹.

The dissemination of reading and writing skills in Polish in the countryside through actions independent of the school managed by the Russian authorities was also the goal of secret organizations, including Koło Oświaty Ludowej (Circle of People's Education) and Towarzystwo Oświaty Narodowej (Society for National Education)⁹⁰. An important role was also played by the primers authored by Konrad Prószyński, which at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries were widely used for learning to read and write in Polish, both in the framework of secret education and by self-taught individuals. Newspapers also had a significant influence on the fight against illiteracy, including "Gazeta Świąteczna", published from 1881 and edited by Prószyński, as well as "Zorza" and "Polak"⁹¹, along with the development of libraries and readership in the Polish countryside⁹².

The issue of attaining elementary-level education by the rural population in the Kingdom of Poland in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century was to a great extent dependent on the policy pursued by the Russian state. The use of schooling to implement state policy was not an exceptional phenomenon. Instilling loyalty towards the state and authority through the tool of the rural school was a widespread practice, and Russia was no exception in this regard⁹³. One of the primary tasks set before the elementary school was to educate students to be faithful and obedient subjects convinced of the immutability of the prevailing system and the permanence of tsarist power⁹⁴. It was assumed that government elementary schools, through their influence on the inhabitants of the Kingdom, would serve the transformation

⁸⁷ *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja*, pp. 820–821.

⁸⁸ *Wiejscy*, vol. 2, p. 288.

⁸⁹ *Wiejscy*, vol. 1, pp. 37, 104–105.

⁹⁰ For a broader discussion on the activities of these organizations: J. Miąso, *Tajne nauczanie w Królestwie Polskim w świetle dokumentów władz rosyjskich*, in: *Studia z dziejów edukacji*, prep. J. Miąso, Warszawa 1994, pp. 204–214.

⁹¹ *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja*, p. 464; K. Groniowski, *Uwłaszczenie chłopów w Polsce*, Warszawa 1976, p. 127

⁹² A. Karczewska, *Upowszechnienie czytelnictwa wśród chłopów w Królestwie Polskim. Zarys problematyki*, in: *Ludzie i książki*, ed. J. Kostecki, Warszawa 2006, p. 127.

⁹³ E Staszyński, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

of social awareness and the shaping of an attitude of loyalty towards the state⁹⁵. Turning peasants into faithful subjects of the Russian state required increasing the number of schools in the rural areas of the Kingdom of Poland. Despite the efforts of the authorities, the development of schools did not correspond to the population growth, and illiteracy remained a serious problem. It is estimated that the illiteracy rate in the Kingdom was 90% in 1862 and 70% in 1897. Changes in this area occurred slowly, and despite a significant increase in the number of schools, the problem of illiteracy, especially in rural areas, was not resolved before World War I⁹⁶. Despite the Russian government actions to promote its own state education and eliminate teaching that fostered Polish identity, a new generation of peasants emerged around the turn of the 20th century. For them, the Tsar's 'benefit' of emancipation had lost its significance⁹⁷.

CONCLUSIONS

The rural population's stance on the necessity of acquiring education is not, however, a simple issue. For part of the rural population, acquiring reading and writing skills was perceived as an opportunity to find work not related to agriculture. On the other hand, peasants did not necessarily see education as useful for everyday life, apart from some basic practical skills like reading and arithmetic, because a person who could read and count was harder to be deceived in financial matters. The usefulness of literacy for conducting correspondence with relatives who had left the village was also recognized. Among some peasants, the practical approach to learning the Russian language stemmed from the fact that it was useful when dealing with matters in offices and during military service. For girls, the ability to read was considered sufficient if it allowed them to follow prayer books, which were issued in Polish, during religious services. The study of Russian, on the other hand, was regarded as an unnecessary burden in this context⁹⁸.

The school was not always perceived by the peasants themselves as an institution necessary for the functioning of the village. The path to education for those who acquired reading and writing skills was often tortuous, resulting not only from the lack of schools in the countryside

⁹⁵ For a broader discussion on the policy of the Russian authorities towards elementary education: R. Kucha, *Oświata*, pp. 29–39.

⁹⁶ Z. Kmiecik, *op. cit.*, p. 82; E. Staszyński, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁹⁷ *Listy*, pp. 7–8, 12–17.

⁹⁸ M. Kriśań, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–26, 29–30.

but also from the failure to recognize or even denial of the need to attain reading and writing skills. Village residents who undertook the effort of learning often did so to develop their own interests in the surrounding world, which for them was not limited only to the immediate vicinity. They realized that literacy would facilitate, for example, handling matters in offices, help during military service, or make it easier to find employment outside the village.

Over time, an important factor influencing educational development in rural areas became the activity of Polish organizations that aimed to both improve education standards and generate interest among the rural population in the cause of Poland's independence. Positivist ideas of organic work and the development of political groups in Polish lands, which perceived education not only as an important tool that could serve to expand the base of their supporters, played a prominent role in this regard. The activities of legally functioning organizations, secret teaching, publishing periodicals intended for the common people, and the availability of primers for learning the Polish language caused a significant part of the peasants to acquire reading and writing skills outside the state school. The abovementioned factors also influenced changes in the attitudes of the rural population who began to recognize the need for the development of schools and the education of their children.

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NOTA O AUTORZE

Dariusz Szewczuk – dr hab., adiunkt w Katedrze Historii Społecznej i Edukacji Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie. Jego zainteresowania badawcze dotyczą historii oświaty w Królestwie Polskim XIX i początków XX w., współczesnej szkolnej i pozaszkolnej edukacji historycznej, problematyki kształcenia przyszłych nauczycieli historii. Autor i współautor ponad 40 publikacji naukowych, w tym 2 monografii: *Chełmska Dyrekcja Naukowa* (Lublin 2012) oraz *Seminaria nauczycielskie w Królestwie Polskim (1866–1915)* (Lublin 2015).

