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The Polish State's Policy regarding the War Invalid 1918–1939

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**THE POLISH STATE'S POLICY REGARDING
THE WAR INVALID 1918–1939**

The II Republic's social policy focussed on a few basic issues. Those included problems in the area of legislation concerning employment, social security, employment and unemployment, health care, social assistance, migration, social pathologies and assistance to war invalid persons. As much as the most important of those areas (social security, problems of work and unemployment) became in the post-war period a subject of scientific research, separate analyses were not devoted to the less pronounced elements of the social policy. The state policy regarding war disabled combatants belongs to those groups of problems that have not been so far elaborated in the scientific literature. By contrast, it is worthwhile looking at this problem both because of the significance of that social group in the inter-war Poland and because of the fact that those programmes may be perceived as the first in the Polish conditions attempts to implement an organised and pre-planned state policy regarding the disabled.

Regaining independence, struggling for establishing the state's borderlines and the ultimate victory in the Polish-Bolshevik war produced at the beginning of the II Republic's not only joy and pride stimulated by the re-creation of the Polish state but also an important and complicated problem of care for living conditions of persons who not only actively fought but also suffered because of those struggles and whose health became less or more seriously harmed. Finding a solution to the problem of satisfying needs of the war invalid was recognised as an unquestionable duty of the Polish Republic and a form of repaying a debt of gratitude contracted from them. However, on the other hand, a big number of persons that had suffered as a result of military action combined with an extremely difficult fiscal situation of the state during the first years of independence made it very difficult to satisfy those commonly recognised obligations.

The living conditions and rehabilitation of the war disabled combatants as well as providing for widows and orphans bereft by the killed soldiers became a subject of interest to Naczelný Wódz [Chief Commander], government and parliamentarians practically from the beginning of the autonomous functioning of the state institutions. Already in 1918, within the Ministry of Military Affairs a unit was set up to tackle the care for the invalid. In January of 1919, Naczelný Wódz established committees for the care of the invalid. However, what dominated in the first months of independence were *ad hoc* actions, while benefits for the war invalid combatants took mainly the form of temporary hand-outs that were increased in parallel with rising inflation (*Protokoły...* 1919: 181; Deleżyński, Niewiadomski 1937: 724; *Polityka...* 1935: 325–326).

In 1919, in the framework of broadly understood state's provisions for those who had fought for freedom and their families, some assistance for widows and orphans of the killed soldiers as well as guarantees of permanent pensions for participants in the national uprisings of 1830 and 1863 were sanctioned by law. The debate over provisions for widows and orphans of the killed soldiers had a great impact on subsequent solutions of the issue of assistance to the war disabled. During the first reading, deputy Herman Liebermann proposed that the scope of programmes envisaged in the discussed bill should be extended to widows and children of those fighting as soldiers in the occupation armies as well as those in the Polish military units taking part in the Great War. During the second reading, Wincenty Witos raised the problem of the fate of the Polish war disabled combatants that had fought in the partitioning powers' armies (the government's project restricted the scope of beneficiaries to persons bereft by those killed or dead in the years following 1 November of 1918). The „Law concerning temporary provisions for widows and orphans bereft by the military men of the Polish Army” was ultimately passed on 27 May in 1919 and it pertained also families of killed soldiers that had fought in the Polish military units inclusive of the period before 1 November of 1918; it left the issue of provisions for Poles fighting in the partitioning armies for a later, more comprehensive resolution to the problem (*Sprawozd. stenogr. ...* 18 III 1919, łam 828; 6 V 1919, łam 35–37; 27 V 1919, łam 19–27; 2 VIII 1919, łam 8–12).

The resolutions, adopted the very same day by the Sejm, urging government to prepare within the following two weeks a bill regulating the issue of provisions for the war invalid did not find any quick

implementation. Nonetheless, an attempt to solve the problem at least partially was indeed articulated at the beginning of 1919 by means of the state's will to guarantee opportunities of salaried labour for the war disabled combatants and members of their families in order to secure adequate sources of income for them. This was to be done through granting such persons the right of the first choice to be employed while staffing public offices, granting them state commercial licenses and enabling their participation in the military settlement in Kresy Wschodnie (eastern borderlands) that had been inscribed in the law as of

17 December in 1920 (DzU 1921: 4/18; Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 28 II 1919, łam 352; 7 V 1919, łam 17–18; SU druk 111: 1; Stobniak-Smogorzewska 2003: 22–30).

Since government had not prepared an adequate bill, Sejm Ustawodawczy [Constitutional Parliament] established on 8 January in 1920 its own Komisja Inwalidzka [Committee for the Invalid] tasking it with regulating this more and more serious problem. Still, the elaboration of the bill took much time (according to Komisja this resulted from „government's inertia and even light-hearted treatment of the invalids' demands"); it was put back on the plenary agenda of the Parliament only in March of 1921. The bill was ultimately passed on 18 March in 1921. The contents of the law pertained the war disabled combatants who enjoyed rights stemming from the Polish citizenship and who had served in the Polish army, the Polish military units during the war and in the armies of the Partitioning Powers after 1 August of 1914, as well as members of families of those disabled and those left by the killed combatants (Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 8 I 1920, łam 30–32; 18 III 1921, łam 53–66; SU, druk 2599: 1).

The benefits envisaged on the basis of that law were to include a basic invalid pension that was determined depending on the degree in which their ability to undertake salaried labour had been lost, supplemented with a funeral benefit, a pension for the remaining dependents, for medical treatment, provisions for orthopedic equipment, re-training and social assistance. The state assistance was to be granted to those injured that had lost at least 15% of their ability to work. Apart from the benefits, it was to include programmes aimed at professional and vocational re-training of those war disabled persons that were still able to work. Those latter provisions included both so called capitalization of the pension carried by the entitlement (*kapitalizacja należnej renty*), owing to which the entitled could buy work equipment adequate to their

means of living, as well as facilitated access to jobs in state and self-governmental administration, priority to obtain licenses allowing for trade in goods produced by state monopolies, the right to obtain land from the state. In addition, employers were obliged to employ at least one disabled person in 50 employees (DzU 1921: 32/195).

The new law was to come into force as of 1 May in 1921. However, it quickly turned out that its implementation was impossible in the then existing budget conditions. Government not only deferred its implementation, which provoked a big and ruthlessly suppressed by the police manifestation of Związek Inwalidów [Union of the Disabled] on 9 November in 1921. At the beginning of 1922, it attempted to amend the law in order to limit the scope of the persons entitled to the state assistance to those that had lost at least 25% of their ability to undertake salaried labour. Given the pressure of Związek Inwalidów, that proposal, motivated by the saving plans of the Minister for Treasury, Jerzy Michalski, was withdrawn. The amendment to the law introduced on 4 August in 1922 created an opportunity to criticise thoroughly the behaviour of the state administration in this respect. The amendment resulted in some reduction of the costs of the law's implementation (by lowering the level of income that caused the suspension of the payment of the pension, liberating the Treasury from the obligation to finance contributions to health care institutions (*kasy chorych*) on behalf of the disabled, limiting the scope of guaranteed medical assistance) even though many of the Treasury's postulates had been rejected (DzU 1922: 67/608; *Los inwalidów...*: 83–84; *Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 3 VIII 1922*, łam 43–57; *4 VIII 1922*, łam 7–41; *SU druk 3115*: 1).

In practice, only in 1923 the partially modified law of 18 March 1921 was implemented after a joint directive by the Minister for Military Affairs, Minister for Treasury and Minister for Labour and Social Assistance had been issued on 10 January, subsequently supplemented with a directive issued as of 22 March that concerned extraordinary high-living-cost-benefits [*dotatki drożyźniane*] provided for the disabled. In 1925, the invalid law was extended to the area of the autonomous Silesian voivodship where it supplanted the previously obtaining regulations that were less advantageous for the beneficiaries of the German law adopted as of 12 May in 1920. The directive of the President regarding some revision of licenses for trading goods under the Treasury monopoly, that was issued as of 27 December in 1924 aiming at transferring all state-granted commercial licenses to the hands of the privileged persons, primarily the war disabled combatants and their

families, also constituted an important supplement to the system of social security for the war invalid that was being created in the first half of the 1920s. Also, this solution was to reduce significantly the burden carried by the Treasury as regards the provisions for the invalid (DzU 1923: 32/206; 1924: 114/1022; 1925: 30/209; 74/520; *Przepisy...* 1925: 27–76).

On the basis of such principles, support and assistance for those who had suffered when fighting for independence of the citizens of the Polish Republic were organised until 1932, when, in the conditions of the economic crisis and mounting budgetary constraints, the expenses earmarked for this purpose were significantly reduced. However, before it came to this, together with normalization of foreign exchange relations, the situation in this area had been much stabilised. In mid-1920s, the number of those taking advantage of the entitlements was relatively stable, counting ca. 90–95 thous out of the little less than 140 thous registered war disabled persons who had been organised in more than 500 local circles and groups of *Związek Inwalidów*. By contrast, a constant rising tendency was visible in the category of widows, orphans and parents bereft by the disabled combatants – the number of those taking advantage of the entitlements increased from about 125 thous in the mid-decade to nearly 180 thous in 1929. By the end of the 1920s, the rate of increase in the number of the main beneficiaries of the system also accelerated, which was due both to natural factors (deteriorated health conditions of the already registered disabled) and the provisions of the law passed as of 7 March in 1929 that opened a possibility for additional registration of those persons who had not managed to register within the time frame envisaged in the law of 1921 (DzU 1929: 23/229; *Inwalida...*: 18–33; *Książka...*: 206; MRS 1931: 117; SKB 1928/29: 3–4; 1930/31: 3; *Sprawozd. stenogr. ...* 15 I 1929, łam 32).

Together with the increase in the number of beneficiaries, the financial costs of the system of care for the invalid and their families had been growing. From the level of about 100 milion zloties in 1925, they surged up to 140 mln in 1928/1929 and to more than 150 mln in 1930/1931. At the beginning of the 1930s, the number of the invalid taking advantage of the pension benefits exceeded the level of 100 thous, in 1933 approaching as many as 120 thous. By contrast, the group of orphans entitled to the benefits clearly diminished when the children were growing up: the number of 112 thous in 1929 fell to 40 thous in 1933. Apart from the expenses for pensions, simultaneously

several million zloties were devoted each year to further assistance to the disabled that was covered out of funds for social assistance: about 10 thousand of disabled persons took advantage of various forms of medical treatment that was financed by the state; in Płock (later in Lvov) a stationary unit for the care of the invalid operated, called Dom Inwalidów. The whole policy was complemented with instruments to activate the disabled veterans in the labour market, including: monopoly licenses that they could take advantage of, jobs in administration and the army that were earmarked for them as well Inwalidzki Kredytowy Fundusz Gospodarczy [The Economic Loan Fund for the Disabled] established in 1927 that offered loans for economic activities (Grata 2009: 257, 263–264, 269; MRS 1936: 201, 207; *Polityka...* 1935: 328–331; SKB 1928/29: 4).¹

The necessity to revise the principles of provisioning for the war disabled combatants that had been already articulated in the second half of the 1920s, ultimately materialised in 1932, when in the situation of ever more difficult situation of the budget, the authorities prepared a comprehensive amendment. Motivated mainly by the need to make savings, the law adopted on 17 March in 1932 was to produce a significant reduction in the costs incurred by the system's functioning. Its main aim was to revise all previously granted disability entitlements and implement a rule that adjusted the level of the benefits to territorially differentiated costs of living. That law divided the area of the Polish Republic into three categories of population settlements. Only in the case of those qualified as A category that were characterised by the highest costs of living the so far existing levels of the disability pensions and benefits were to be maintained. In places qualified as B category, they were to be lowered by 12%, while in those in the so called C areas, including primarily rural areas, the rates of the benefits

¹ Ultimately, only a small number of little more than 2, 3 thousand of less disabled combatants took part in the action aimed at military settlement in the East (Bocian 1934: 272). Nonetheless, it seems strange that authors of two extensive analyses dedicated to settlement processes in Kresy Wschodnie, while describing their social structure ignored altogether that group of disabled settlers, even though provisions included in the law of 17 December 1920, listed those disabled as a group prioritised as far as land allotment was concerned. One of such settlers, Dezydery Smoczkiwicz, was in the second half of the 1930s a member of Zarząd Główny Związku Osadników [Main Council of the Union of the Settlers] (Gralak 2006: 110–119; Stobniak-Smogorzewska 2003: 118–129, 326).

were to be diminished by as much as 32% (DzU 1932: 26/238; Sejm III, druk 532: 4; Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 12 III 1932, łam 6–9).

The next step on the road to further reclamation of support for the war invalid and their families involved the issuing on 28 October in 1933 a presidential directive regarding the change of the law stipulating disability provisions. It introduced a differentiation of the disability status of those persons who had served in the Polish military units and those who had lost health in the Partitioning Powers' armies. The former, constituting merely several percent out of all entitled persons, retained their benefits at the existing level, while in the case of the remaining ones not only the threshold entitling them to provisions justified by the loss of ability to work was increased (from 15% to a minimum of 25%), but also the benefits that they received were lowered by 10% (*Protokoły...* 1933; 339–349; DzU 1933: 86/669; MRS 1939: 293).

The restrictions introduced then resulted in a pronounced reduction of the number of people entitled to take advantage of the system of disability provisions. Because of the increase in the level defining the disability status, since 1 April in 1934 about 40 thous lost their entitlements. Further, the process of verifying the causal connection between the disability status and war operations that had been gradually implemented over a few years resulted in negative decisions for the next more than 10 thous of the beneficiaries. Coupled with a further decrease in the number of orphans, this meant a very welcome in the crisis conditions reduction of the budget expenses for the disability benefits. After the law of 1932 came into force, they were diminished by 20% already in 1932/1933 (from 157 mln to 126 mln), while in 1934/1935, following the exclusion out of the group of the entitled a number of those persons who had been less seriously injured, the expenses were only 98,4 mln zloties. What is more, the next presidential directive of 22 November in 1935, lowered the level of all disability benefits by 10% for the next two years, which brought further reduction in the Treasury's expenses for this purpose, lowering them to slightly more than 90 mln zloties (DzU 1935: 85/522; MRS 1939: 93–94; SKB 1934/35: 3–4; 1936/37: 5).

Even though producing savings for the budget, that reduction of entitlements was drastic from the point of view of the disabled. It provoked many protests and caused a real deterioration in the standard of living for tens of thousands of people who had distinguished themselves in the struggle for the state's independence. That is why,

already in November of 1934, those restrictive regulations were loosened for the first time. Government returned to the previous rate of benefits for those of the persons that had been injured while serving in the partitioning armies and who subsequently, sooner or later, fought in the Polish units. In the spring of 1937, the benefits for the invalid of the partitioning armies that were older than 55 were reintroduced. A year later, as of 31 March in 1938, the benefits were again extended to cover the invalid whose loss of health had been calculated at a lower percentage (*inwalidzi niskoprocentowi*) but who had served in the partitioning armies and now were more than 50 years old (this was done, however, at the expense of the level of the benefits that had been lowered in 1936 and returned to the previous level only after half a year of delay) (*Protokoły...* 1934: 241–244; DzU 1937: 30/225; 1938: 22/192; Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 16 III 1937, łam 93–100; Sejm IV, druk 693: 1–4).

The most important and most real effect of the changes introduced in the second half of the 1930s in the legislation regarding the disability provisions was the reintroduction of entitlements to the benefits for about 10 thous of those persons that had been deprived of them – in their majority those were people who lived in the countryside for whom the pension of ten to up to more than twenty zloties a month was often the only stable source of cash income. Generally, the number of people entitled to the disability benefits, which was in the first half of the 1930s drastically diminished (from 275 thous to 175 thous), in the second half of that decade, owing to the subsequent liberalization of the rules on the basis of which such state assistance was granted, reached again the level of about 200 thous people. In 1939, that number included nearly 91 thous of the war disabled combatants, 61 thous of widows and 24–25 thous of orphans and parents who used to be supported by the now dead invalid combatants (the annual rate of mortality in this group approached the level of 2 thous). The benefits were thus paid to about 60% of the 150 thous registered living war disabled persons. The remaining ones did not fulfill the criterion of the level of disability (about 1/5 of the population) or else they received an income that freed the state from the obligation to support them. The most of the invalid had served in the Austrian and German armies (jointly 110 thous). As far as the nationality structure, Poles were visibly predominating (128,5 thous). The Ukrainians were the second largest group (23 thous), among which a handful of several tens of veterans had participated in the struggles for independent Ukraine serving in the units

that in 1919 fought against the Polish army (they had been granted the benefits basing on the war disability law of 1932) (SKB 1937/38: 4–5; 1938/39: 2; MRS 1939: 93–94; Sprawozd. stenogr. ... 3 III 1938, łam 98–104; the author's own calculations).

To a large degree, the law of 31 March 1938 that ultimately completed the process of giving shape to the system of provisions for the war invalid in the II Republic, meant a return to the basic principles inscribed in the originally introduced law of 1921. The very evolution of the social policy of the state in this area makes it clear that it was dominated by the impact of fiscal and economic considerations instead of so readily articulated patriotic and social ones. Although the commonly mentioned debt of gratitude to the people who had lost their lives or health fighting for the state's independence, did produce in the 1920s a law stipulating provisions that were beneficial for the war invalid, it was not implemented for a long time because of financial reasons. The Great Crisis and difficulties generated by that crisis resulted in serious limitations in the access to so interpreted „gratitude” on part of the Republic, and they led to permanent reduction of outlays on assistance for the war disabled and their families. That testified to the fact that the Polish state had limited means to shoulder obligations that it had undertaken regarding that group of citizens whose contribution to the state's independence was otherwise so much appreciated.

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