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## The peasant movement vis-à-vis the idea of Polish Parliament in the period 1918–1919

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Polityka i Społeczeństwo nr 2, 36-45

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2005

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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**Henryk Cimek**

**THE PEASANT MOVEMENT VIS-À-VIS THE IDEA  
OF POLISH PARLIAMENT IN THE PERIOD 1918–1919**

As the WW I was approaching its end, members of the Polish peasant movement became ever more intensely involved in discussions concerning the territorial shape of the recreated Polish state and the nature of its political regime, including issues of Parliament and elections. Members of the peasant movement from Galicja [Galicia] and Królestwo Polskie [the Polish Kingdom] were not always converging on those issues. The differences originated not only from the fact that the former had had parliamentary traditions and the latter had not but also from the fact that the former acted in the conditions of autonomy while the latter in a situation marred by repressions and foreign occupation. Also, the divergency was modified by co-operation with other partners, which was a tendency characteristic of PSL<sup>1</sup> Piast, PSL-Lewica, PSL Wyzwolenie and Zjednoczenie Ludowe [Folk Union] during the occupation of Królestwo Polskie by Germany and Austro-Hungary, in the period when the Polish statehood was being recreated as well as in the ensuing periods. Simultaneously however, they postulated unification of the peasant movement. The stances held by the peasant parties were also influenced by animosities between their leaders, their personal ambitions and, at times, their labile attitudes. Those were the same or similar factors that came to the fore when Ignacy Daszyński (7–11 November 1918) and Jędrzej Moraczewski (18 November 1918–16 January 1919) tried to unite the peasant movement and establish a peasant party based government.

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<sup>1</sup> PSL stands throughout the paper for Polish Peasant Party – the translator’s note.

One of the differences related to the parliamentary issue concerned the fact that e.g. PSL Wyzwolenie was in favour of direct elections to Parliament. The convent of the PSL Council, held between 1 and 2 of July 1917, already postulated that parliamentary elections to the “Polish Sejm” based on democratic electoral law should be carried out as soon as possible<sup>2</sup>. PSL Piast wanted in turn to establish a national council first – which was primarily the objective of Narodowa Demokracja [National Democracy], a very much desired ally of PSL Piast, especially coveted by some of its leaders, predominantly Wincenty Witos and Włodzimierz Tetmajer.

In Galicja, the establishment of a national council was promulgated mainly by „Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny” and „Piast” in September and October 1918. The „Piast” publications argued for a “necessity” to establish a representative institution having wider competences than Polskie Koło Sejmowe [Polish Sejm Circle]<sup>3</sup>, which would constitute the highest national authority. The necessity resulted mainly from the fact that Koło Sejmowe, even though it had passed a bill on the independence of Poland at a sitting in Kraków on 28 May 1917, was not able to implement it because of internal controversies. Therefore, the national council – comprising both MPs, university representatives, representatives of liberal professions, writers etc. was to undertake the task. On 4 October 1918, at a sitting of the peasant MPs club in Vienna, a unanimous decision was taken to establish the national council. Tetmajer and Witos were given a mandate to negotiate the issue with the other parties. The negotiations, initiated by the peasant party members, were held between 6 and 7 October in Kraków, including representatives of PSL Piast, Polska Partia Socjalno-Demokratyczna [Polish Social-Democratic Party] and Stronnictwo Demokratyczno-Narodowe [Democratic-National Party]. They were continued in Vienna on 8 October. Conservatives were not invited to take part in the negoti-

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<sup>2</sup> *Zjazd Rady PSL „Wyzwolenie” 22 VII 1919, no 29, p. 301.*

<sup>3</sup> Polskie Koło Sejmowe included MPs from the Galician Sejm Krajowy and MPs from Koło Polskie of the Vienna Parliament, i.e. members of the Izba Panów [Chamber of Lords] as well as MPs from Izba Poselska [Chamber of Commons]. Cf. S. Grodziski, *Sejm Krajowy galicyjski 1861–1914*, Warszawa 1993; J. Buszko, *Polacy w parlamencie wiedeńskim 1848–1918*, Warszawa 1996; *Dzieje Sejmu Polskiego*, Warszawa 1997, p. 121 and ff.

ations due to their “anti-national” politics during WW I. It was decided that the sitting constitutive of the national council would take place on 10 October in Kraków<sup>4</sup>.

Debates within „Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny” were in turn focused on two separate projects to establish the national council. The first of them envisaged the establishment of a national council in Warsaw to encompass the three partitions. The council was to comprise members of Rada Stanu [Council of the State], representatives of the left, MPs from Koło Polskie in Vienna and MPs from Koło Polskie in Berlin, including an adequate number of trustees from Wielkopolska [Greater Poland]. The second project entailed establishing separate national councils in each of the three partitions. Representatives of the councils were to be included in a general national council residing in Warsaw, which was to be their executive body<sup>5</sup>.

Zjednoczenie Ludowe, established in Królestwo Polskie on 19 February 1917, was also in favour of a national council. The council was to comprise several or more people representing every political option from the three provinces. Its task was to design a parliamentary electoral law. Zjednoczenie Ludowe was of the opinion that the council would act for a short period of time and then parliamentary elections would be held in November 1918. Therefore, it decided to take part in the implementation of the postulate issued by Rada Regencyjna [Regent Council], which in an *exposé* to the Polish nation on 7 October 1918, supported the establishment of the independent Polish state in accordance with the idea of the 14-point President Woodrow Thomas Wilson’s Programme of 8 January 1918. Rada Regencyjna dissolved Rada Stanu announcing the establishing of government whose task was e.g. to prepare a democratic ordinance for parliamentary elections<sup>6</sup>. Zjednoczenie Ludowe was in favour of one-chamber parliament covering all Polish lands; the quick convent of the parliament was believed to be the most important issue. The party pressed to create Polska Ludowa [People’s Poland] urging peasants to vote for peasants in the elections and not to vote for landlords. The government was to function tempo-

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<sup>4</sup> *Dziś albo nigdy!*, „Piast” 15 IX 1918, no 37, p. 1–2; *Rada Narodowa w Galicji, ibidem*, 13 X 1918, no 41, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Dwa projekty utworzenia rady narodowej*, IKC 19 X 1918, no 195, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Orędzie Rady Regencyjnej do narodu polskiego 7 X 1918*, [in:] *Powstanie II Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa 1984, p. 415–416.

rarily until a new cabinet was appointed by the national council. In turn, the cabinet was to be replaced by government elected in the course of parliamentary elections. According to *Zjednoczenie Ludowe*, the government was to be established on the peasant-democratic political basis; its main task was to introduce serious reforms. To carry out the plans concerning government and the Sejm, *Zjednoczenie Ludowe* co-operated primarily with *Narodowy Związek Robotniczy* [National Workers' Union], tending also to conclude an alliance with PSL Piast<sup>7</sup>.

The problem of government and the Sejm was discussed, among others, at a sitting of the Main Council of *Zjednoczenie Ludowe* on 12 October 1918. Members of *Rada Stanu*, Walenty Augustyniak, Feliks Starzyński, Franciszek Wojda and Henryk Wyrzykowski participated in the sitting as well. The bills that were passed then did not mention a national council any more; instead a national constituent assembly comprising representatives of all Polish provinces was named whose task was to prepare elections to a "constituent Sejm" and to function until the Sejm was convened. Electoral law was to be taken care of – within the span of only a few days – by the new cabinet with co-operation from the national constituent assembly. It was postulated that elections within the territory of *Królestwo Polskie* should be carried out within two weeks' time. Since it was not possible to carry out the elections in the other provinces, the constituent Sejm was to comprise all of the Polish MPs from the Vienna and the Berlin parliaments. The Main Board of *Zjednoczenie Ludowe* postulated that new Polish government should include in its programme e.g. a universal agrarian reform that would limit land ownership to 300 of *morgs* [a rough equivalent of acres – the translator's note]<sup>8</sup>.

*Rada Regencyjna* reacted to the attempts to create a national council claiming that the council should become a consulting body whose aim was to assist *Rada Regencyjna* in convening the constituent Sejm. The council was to have a tri-partite character and not be too numerous<sup>9</sup>. *Rada Regen-*

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<sup>7</sup> *Przed wyborami do Sejmu*, „*Gazeta Ludowa*” 20 X 1918, no 42, p. 1; A. Winnicki, *Pierwszy sejm musi być sejmem wszystkich ziem Polski*, *ibidem*, p. 2–3; *O utworzeniu rządu i zwołanie sejmu*, *ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Uchwały Zjednoczenia Ludowego*, „*Gazeta Ludowa*” 20 X 1918, no 42, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> „*Rada Narodowa*” *jako ciało doradcze*, *IKC* 21 X 1918, no 197, p. 2.

cyjna and Zjednoczenie Ludowe did not entirely agree in their views on the issue of the national council.

Rada Regencyjna invited political parties to negotiations concerning, among others, the creation of government, between 16–17 October. However, Rada was no longer a partner for the left. In the discussed period negotiations between the peasant parties from Galicja and Królestwo Polskie were also staged. They were mainly dedicated to the issue of unification of the peasant movement and the creation of government whereas the establishing of a national council was no longer an issue<sup>10</sup>. The proclamation adopted on 19 of October, announced by Witos, stated that immediate creation of government, publication of electoral law and election of one-chamber parliament by the end of 1918 at the latest were considered the most important issues. The piece of the proclamation stressing that the convenors were against “establishing any political body that would separate us from the Sejm”<sup>11</sup>, was visibly directed against the conception to create a national council. “IKC” noticed it stating that it was more important for peasant activists to constitute government than a national council<sup>12</sup>. In the circumstances, the committee established to establish the national council stated a few days later that the establishment of the council not supported by the representatives of the left would be harmful and thus the idea was recognized as “failed”<sup>13</sup>. The committee supported establishing a “liquidation commission to clarify the relations with the occupants” in stead of the council<sup>14</sup>. According to the opinion of „Piast”, which was issued a little later, the course of development, especially the collapse of the

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<sup>10</sup> Members of the peasant parties from Galicja and Królestwo Polskie met between 17 and 19 October 1918 in Warsaw, at the premises of the „Gazeta Ludowa” editorial board at Świętokrzyska Street no 17. „Gazeta Ludowa” was a press organ of Zjednoczenie Ludowe. In separate meetings there participated representatives of PSL from Królestwo Polskie, Zjednoczenie Ludowe, PSL-Lewica and PSL Piast. J. Molen-da, *PSL w Królestwie Polskim 1915–1918*, Warszawa 1965, p. 263–264.

<sup>11</sup> *Materiały źródłowe do historii polskiego ruchu ludowego*, t. I, Warszawa 1966, p. 486; *O rząd w Warszawie*, „Czas” 22 X 1918, no 470, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Z działalności posłów galicyjskich*, IKC 21 X 1918, no 197, p. 2; *Z państwa polskiego*, „Piast” 20 X 1918, no 42, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> The conception to establish a national council was as a matter of fact mentioned in the press as early as the beginning of January 1919, but the idea was not implemented. Cf. „Piast” 12 I 1919, no 2, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Rada Narodowa pogrzebana?* IKC 24 X 1918, no 200, p. 2.

Austro-Hungarian monarchy, was also the reason why it was necessary to “create a temporary governing institution, namely Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna before a national council was created”<sup>15</sup>.

The principle expressed in the already quoted proclamation by the peasant parties was particularly strongly supported by PSL from Królestwo Polskie. In „Wyzwolenie” the rightist parties gathered at Koło Międzypartyjne were criticized for delaying the date of elections to „Sejm Ustawodawczy [Constituent Sejm]”, embodied in the project to create a national council. According to „Wyzwolenie” the council was to recognize the Paris Komitet Narodowy Polski [Polish National Committee] headed by Roman Dmowski as Polish government, which was considered a threat to the interests of the peasant parties. This is why in the papers published in „Wyzwolenie”, the authors demanded that a Sejm committee to design electoral law and nominate the date of elections was created as soon as possible. They stipulated that “the Sejm should at present be convened even though it would be limited to Królestwo Polskie. The Sejm would invite MPs from the other parties and design the political regime and laws for the whole of the Polish state”<sup>16</sup>. The demands were thus similar to those issued by Zjednoczenie Ludowe<sup>17</sup>. The development of affairs confirmed the forecast. PSL Wyzwolenie, similarly as PSL Piast, demanded from the cabinet of Józef Świeżyński (23 October – 4 November 1918) that the Sejm be immediately convened<sup>18</sup>. The General Assembly of PSL Wyzwolenie (1–2 November 1918) in one of the bills demanded an “immediate convention of Sejm Ustawodawczy, in December of the current year, at the latest”<sup>19</sup>.

The issue of convening the Sejm was also tackled by other centers of power that formed in the Polish territory. Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna at the moment of its inception (28 October 1918) demanded that

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<sup>15</sup> *Przebieg Obrad Rady Naczelnej*, „Piast” 8 XII 1918, no 49, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> J. Młot [A. Bogusławski], *Co słyhać w naszej polityce?* „Wyzwolenie” 27 X 1918, no 43, p. 380.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Footnote 8.

<sup>18</sup> S. Thugutt, *Pańskie rządy*, „Wyzwolenie” 3 XI 1918, no 44, p. 387–388; *Pierwszy rząd zjednoczonej Polski*, „Piast” 3 XI 1918, no 44, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Until the Sejm was convened, the Assembly denied that Świeżyński’s cabinet had any „right to make any steps binding Poland in the future both in external relations and as concerns its internal regime”, „Wyzwolenie” 10 XI 1918, no 45, p. 400.

a “Polish constituent Sejm based on democratic principles” be convened within 10 days<sup>20</sup>. I. Daszyński’s cabinet in the “Manifesto” of 7 November proclaimed that Sejm Ustawodawczy would be convened already in 1918 and a democratic electoral law would be announced in a few days<sup>21</sup>, which the cabinet failed to achieve because of its rapid dismissal. The task was subsequently undertaken by the cabinet of J. Moraczewski. It adopted the amended bill of electoral law designed by Zygmunt Chrzanowski, Mieczysław Niedziałkowski and Włodzimierza Wakar, commissioned by the cabinet of Świeżyński which, because of its dismissal, had not announced it. The law was approved on 28 November by Józef Piłsudski, Tymczasowy Naczelnik Państwa [Temporary Head of State]. The same day it was published accompanied by a decree on elections to Sejm Ustawodawczy, stating its date as for 26 January 1919. Both documents were signed – apart from being signed by Piłsudski – by Jędrzej Moraczewski (President of Ministers) and Stanisław Thugutt (Minister of Home Affairs) who was responsible for the organization of elections<sup>22</sup>. The latter expressed his gladness to be so. In his opinion, the opposition had wanted the cabinet to collapse before it managed to prepare the electoral law and announce the date of elections to Sejm Ustawodawczy<sup>23</sup>.

The electoral law was democratic. It consisted of 6 chapters, counting 101 articles. It established five-adjective elections: general, equal, direct, proportional and secret. All citizens, their sex notwithstanding, enjoyed active and passive voting rights the day they completed 21 years of age. Voting rights were not granted to individuals who were deprived of citizenship rights by a court sentence. Military officers were not allowed to vote but could run for elections. State functionaries were not allowed to run for elections within constituencies where they worked.

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<sup>20</sup> *Zgromadzenie poselskie w Krakowie*, „Naprzód” 30 X 1918, no 242, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Manifest do ludu polskiego*, „Wyzwolenie” 13 XI 1918, no 46, p. 407–408.

<sup>22</sup> Cf the body of text of electoral law and a decree on elections in T. Rzepecki, *Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 1919 roku*, Poznań 1910, p. 9 and ff. A bit later, on 8 January, a decree was issued concerning application of criminal law in case elections were acted against, whereas the decree granting electoral rights to citizens who returned to the country after 5 December 1918, was dated as of 11 January 1919. *Ibidem*, p. 29 and ff.

<sup>23</sup> S. Thugutt, *Do ludu polskiego*, „Wyzwolenie” 1 XII 1918, no 48, p. 432–433.

The electoral law was supplemented with a list of 71 constituencies: 34 within Królestwo Polskie and the Białystok area, 24 in Galicja, 11 in the Prussian partition and 2 within Śląsk Cieszyński (Cieszyn Silesia)<sup>24</sup>. According to the electoral law, 526 MPs were to be elected. On 26 January 1919, elections were held in 44 constituencies; the territory of the remaining constituencies was still either under occupation or engaged in military conflicts.

Out of the peasant parties, PSL Piast declared reservations towards the electoral law. Its leaders were motivated both by personal ambitions and the contents of the debate on the attitude of the peasant activists towards the Moraczewski cabinet. Witos complained that during his and Andrzej Kędzior's 5-day stay in Warsaw – which occurred just at the time the electoral law was discussed by the cabinet – they were not notified about the timing of the session of the cabinet or its agenda. Moreover, in his memoirs, Witos writes that of his own accord, he took part in one session of the cabinet only<sup>25</sup>.

The issue of the electoral law was discussed at a session of Rada Naczelna [Main Council] of PSL Piast on 1 December 1918. The resolution adopted demanded that the electoral law should not be implemented until the Moraczewski cabinet was reconstructed according to another resolution adopted at the session of Rada. Furthermore, there was a demand that single-mandate constituencies should be created while active and passive voting rights be granted only to citizens who would make a vow of loyalty to the Polish state and consider themselves to be Polish<sup>26</sup>. The electoral law was criticized by „Piast” as “not duly considered”, edited “hastily” and what is more, without consulting representatives from the Poznańskie and Galicja, especially those linked to PSL Piast. Thugutt, Minister of Home Affairs, was the most frequent target for criticisms since hurrying to announce the date of elections he was thought to be wanting to avert the public opinion's attention from the problems experienced by the Moraczewski cabinet<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> The constituencies within Śląsk Cieszyński were numbered 35 and 35a. T. Rzepecki, *Sejm RP...*, p. 19–21, 184–186.

<sup>25</sup> *Przebieg obrad Rady Naczelnej*, „Piast” 8 XII 1918, no 49, p. 4; *Witos przeciw uchwale własnego stronnictwa*, „Naprzód” 11 XII 1918, no 277, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> W. Witos, *Dzieła wybrane*, t. II, Warszawa 1990, p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Ordynacja wyborcza do sejmu polskiego*, *ibidem*, p. 5; *Tragedya polska*, „Piast” 15 XII 1918, no 50, p. 8. *Ultimatum Polskiego Stronnictwa Ludowego*, IKC 4 XII

The debate at the session of Rada Naczelna PSL Piast, concerning the electoral law, was specially attacked by „Naprzód”, the press organ of PPSD. The debate was described as demagoguery, e.g. because of its criticism directed at granting voting rights to women, motivated by the fear that women would cast their votes under the influence of clergy. Moreover, the discussants at the session were criticized for formulating their reservations without being thoroughly acquainted with the contents of the electoral law which had not been officially published by then<sup>28</sup>.

Unlike in the case of „Piast”, the electoral law was received warmly by „Wyzwolenie”. The principles of the law were started to be publicized even before 28 November as seemingly identical with the opinion of the authorities of PSL Wyzwolenie. Tomasz Nocznicki wrote that active and passive voting rights should be granted to citizens their sex notwithstanding when they completed 21 year of age. According to the author, elections were necessarily to be: general, equal, secret, direct and proportional. Ca 50 thousands of entitled voters were to elect one deputy. Nocznicki argued that the elections would mark the beginning of “an era of rule by the people”<sup>29</sup>. Other authors publishing in „Wyzwolenie” also stipulated that the elections would decide whether peasants and workers would be ruling Poland, about the shape of the political regime and the future of the country. They stressed that participation of women in the elections was essential; they insisted Polish women were encouraged to vote<sup>30</sup>.

Reacting to rumours about changes planned in the electoral law, Thugutt stated publicly that he would not approve of any changes. Those who did not like the law were reportedly advised by him not to take part in the elections<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, there were no changes introduced to the electoral law before the elections, but a separate decree of 19 December 1918, prolonged by 10 days the period within which some of

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1918, no 241, p. 1; *Rada Naczelna PSL domaga się rekonstrukcji gabinetu i zmiany ustawy wyborczej*, *ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Obrady ludowców w Tarnowie*, „Naprzód” 3 XII 1918, no 270, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> T. Nocznicki, *O Sejmie Ustawodawczym i o wyborach do niego*, „Wyzwolenie” 10 XI 1918, no 45, p. 398; *ibidem*, 24 XI 1918, no 47, p. 421.

<sup>30</sup> *Wybory! Wybory! Wybory!*, „Wyzwolenie” 29 XII 1918, no 52, p. 490.

<sup>31</sup> *Gabinet czy p. Thugutt?*, IKC 9 XII 1918, no 246, p. 1.

the articles of the law (43, 47, 51 and 54) related to nominating candidates for elections could be enforceable<sup>32</sup>.

The opinions about the issue of the would be parliament in the recreated Polish state, which have been outlined above, embodied in the views and activities of the main political parties, differed not only because for some of them parliamentary elections were to be held as soon as possible and be direct and according to others first a national council should be created (its role was not agreed upon either). In reality, what was at stake was mainly the nature of the future political regime in Poland and the question which of the political parties would rule. Divergencies of the kind were also present within the peasant movement itself, for instance PSL Wyzwolenie and PSL Piast could not agree on those issues either.

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<sup>32</sup> See more in T. Rzepecki, *Sejm RP...*, p. 13–14; *Ważne zmiany w ordynacji wyborczej*, „Naprzód” 22 XII 1918, no 287, p. 1.