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## The peasant party members' fight for the agrarian reform in the Sejm Ustawodawczy in 1919

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**Henryk Cimek**

**THE PEASANT PARTY MEMBERS' FIGHT  
FOR THE AGRARIAN REFORM  
IN THE SEJM USTAWODAWCZY IN 1919**

The Sejm Ustawodawczy [Legislative Sejm] (SU) (1919–1922) gave priority to an implementation of the agrarian reform, the Constitution enactment and borderline settlement. Members of peasant parties, in contrast with the deputies of the Right, believed that the agrarian reform required a swift resolution. As early as in the February of 1919 the deputies' clubs of the peasant parties – the PSL Piast, PSL-Lewica and PSL Wyzwolenie<sup>1</sup> – were the first to present to the Sejm a motion with regard to the agrarian thought, with the PSL-Lewica demanding the most radical changes. The demand for the agrarian reform was put forward mainly because of the widespread scarcity of arable land and poverty in rural areas. Moreover, 70% of the peasant deputies were themselves farmers, with an even larger percentage of them being of peasant family background.

Almost every one in three voters in the election to the Sejm Ustawodawczy on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1919 cast their vote for the peasant parties' lists which won the following number of seats: the PSL Wyzwolenie – 57, PSL Piast – 38 and PSL-Lewica – 12. The deputies' club of the PSL Wyzwolenie was initially the second largest following the club of the Związek Sejmowy Ludowo-Narodowy [Popular-National Sejm Association] (109 deputies). The deputies of the peasant parties were generally poorly educated, aged between 31 and 50. Only 12 peasant deputies elected in January 1919 had some previous parliamentary

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<sup>1</sup> Sejm Ustawodawczy RP (further cited as SU), prints no. 10, 18 and 336; Sprawozdanie stenograficzne (further cited as sprawozd. stenogr.) of 4. pos. SU, 22 II 1919 r., column 110 and ff.; „Wyzwolenie” 2 III 1919, no. 9, p. 121–122.

experience. Personal reshuffling in the deputy clubs, including the peasant parties, began almost immediately after the January election to the SU. Co-optation of the ex-members of the parliaments of the partitioning powers as well as commissioning by-elections in seven constituencies between February 16<sup>th</sup> and June 15<sup>th</sup> 1919 were the main factors which contributed to a shift in the balance of forces in the Sejm. What is more, according to the data from May 15<sup>th</sup> 1919, an issue of 88 mandates whose legitimacy had been questioned or negated was examined by the Sąd Najwyższy [Supreme Court]. Consequently, the Sejm Ustawodawczy acknowledged legitimacy of only 219 mandates at the time<sup>2</sup>. Those were some of the reasons responsible for the changing number of deputies who participated in the sittings. Compared to 305 deputies who partook in the inaugural session of the SU on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1919, 363–365 deputies took part in the decisive voting on the agrarian reform bill between 4 and 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1919.

The peasant activists neither succeeded in forming a single deputies' club nor in unifying the peasant parties, even though they made much effort to attain the objectives between March and June of 1919. On the other hand, on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1919 a federation called Związek Sejmowy Posłów Ludowych [Sejm Association of Popular Deputies] was founded, including the PSL Wyzwolenie and PSL Piast; the PSL-Lewica did not become part of the federation. The three parliamentary clubs of the peasant parties, although holding different opinions on the agrarian reform, which manifested itself, *inter alia*, during the Sejm debate, acted jointly during voting that was decisive in this matter.

The motions with regard to the agrarian reform were put forward not only by the peasant parties but also by the Związek Sejmowy Ludowo-Narodowy and Polskie Zjednoczenie Ludowe [Polish Popular Union]. The concept of the agrarian reform was so much a universal issue in Poland that no political formation in the Sejm opposed it openly. Nonetheless, the right-wing parties only pretended to agree to alter the agrarian relationships. In reality, they wanted to have the land portioned out under the supervision of the state acting on common law principles, typical of land transactions. Thus, landowners' interests would not be threatened. Stances taken by these parties, the Związek Ludowo-Narodowy in particular, differed from the peasant parties'

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<sup>2</sup> Sprawozd. stenogr. of 38. pos. SU, 15 V 1919, column 4; SU, print no. 429 with annexes; Miklaszewski 1931: 79.

views. Most importantly, unlike the latter, they did not allow for compulsory expropriation of landowners and fixing an admissible maximum of land that could be retained by landowners.

There was no unanimity among the peasant parties with regard to the issue of the agrarian reform. Their programmes, although similar in some respects, differed in others. For the purpose of the reform, the peasant movements' members advocated in unison the allocation of the state-owned, donated, manor and church landed estates as well as property obtained by means of usurious profit during the WWI and estates that belonged to former Polish ruling dynasties. Forests, excluding peasant-owned ones, were to become state property. Peasant movements demanded also a mandatory expropriation of landowners' estates. However, only the PSL-Lewica was consistently in favour of expropriation without compensation as of June 1919 onwards. The PSL Piast proposed that a maximum holding of land, with regard to the landowners, be fixed at 100 or at the most 200 *morgs*, whereas the PSL-Lewica – at up to 100 *morgs* only. The PSL Wyzwolenie assumed expropriation of large landed property and partial expropriation of medium landed property, initially without defining maximum holding limits.

Peasant movements, just like Związek Sejmowy Ludowo-Narodowy and Polskie Zjednoczenie Ludowe, wished to preserve private ownership of peasant farms. Their size was, however, not specified with the exception of the PSL Wyzwolenie's programme according to which a maximum holding of arable land should not exceed 20 hectares in the case of existing farms, while newly formed farms – should be limited to 10 hectares only. The other parties did not, at the time, include in their programmes the top size limit of the peasant farms. Nevertheless, the PSL-Lewica advocated medium-size farms, whereas the PSL Piast was in favour of much larger ones, even up to 40 hectares. The fundamental differences between the particular peasant parties' programmes were mainly related to the following issues: whether the expropriation of landowners should or should not entail compensation, what a maximum holding of land allowed to a gentry household should be and what is a maximum size of peasant-owned farms to be (Program PSL Wyzwolenie z 2 listopada 1918 r. [in:] Lato, Stankiewicz 1969: 148–149; Ziemiński 1969: 308 and ff.; Cimek 1989: 135–136).

The parties submitted the discussed motions for reviewing to the Komisja Rolna [Sejm Agrarian Committee]. The Committee originally

consisted of 27 deputies while there were 30 of them in the second half of 1919. Some deputies were replaced by others. Wincenty Witos of the PSL Piast was the first chairperson of the Committee. Błażej Stolarski of the PSL Wyzwolenie was his deputy while Witold Staniszkis of the Związek Sejmowy Ludowo-Narodowy – a secretary. The Committee included 10 deputies of the peasant parties (Skład Komisji Rolnej, see: Stankiewicz 1961: 51; Rzepecki 1920: 278; Lange 1919: 119).

Between 19<sup>th</sup> March and 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1919 the Agrarian Committee debated the submitted motions with regard to the agrarian reform, convening sixteen sessions altogether. The outcome of its work involved a report and a bill of „Uchwała Sejmu Ustawodawczego w przedmiocie zasad reformy rolnej” [The Legislative Sejm’s Resolution on the Principles of the Agrarian Reform] of 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1919, elaborated mainly by Juliusz Poniatowski of the PSL Wyzwolenie<sup>3</sup>. This was a consequence of the fact that a majority of the Committee members did not approve of the proposed bill. The Agrarian Committee also passed four resolutions. Six minority motions were annexed to the bill, out of which two were the most important. Namely, deputy Witold Staniszkis of Związek Sejmowy Ludowo-Narodowy demanded that clause 6 of the „Uchwała...” bill be crossed out, in which a maximum holding of land for individuals in all territorial units was set at 60–300 *morgs*. On the other hand, Poniatowski supported a motion according to which the size of existing farms as well as newly created ones should not exceed 25 *morgs*, whereas the bill set the size at 40 *morgs*<sup>4</sup>.

Since some members of the Committee voiced their objections regarding three clauses of „Uchwała...” (6–7 and 13), this meant that they would maintain the same stance during the plenary sitting of the Sejm. What must be stressed is the fact that all members of the Agrarian Committee, regardless of their club membership, were in favour of carrying out the agrarian reform. The shape of the reform was what was at issue. A majority of the Committee members endorsed the stance of its speaker (Jan Dąbski of the PSL Piast), introducing more or less significant amendments and supplements to particular clauses. Certain

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<sup>3</sup> SU, print no. 530; *Praca Klubu PSL w Sejmie*, „Wyzwolenie” 13 VII 1919, no. 28, p. 346. The PSL Piast positively evaluated the results of the proceedings of Komisja Rolna. Zob. *Ludu polski!*, „Piast” 15 VI 1919, no. 24, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Sprawozd. Komisji Rolnej, projekt uchwały SU w przedmiocie zasad reformy rolnej, wnioski mniejszości i rezolucje – see SU, print no. 530 with annexes.

issues were formulated in a general manner because of a discord in the Committee, followed by difficulties in reaching a compromise.

Two most controversial issues proved to be related to reaching an agreement on the maximum holding of land which would not undergo expropriation and forest nationalisation. Initially a minority of the Committee members altogether negated the need to include in the bill an entry on mandatory expropriation of the bigger landed estates. However, ultimately – after some discussion – all members, but one, concurred with the clause. On the other hand, the minority of the Committee members objected to the introduction of a clause designating a maximum holding of land, exceeding which expropriation was obligatory. The compromise in this matter was not reached. The proposal by Jan Dąbski was rejected in the voting (11 for, 16 against). According to his motion, the maximum holding was to be set at 100–200 *morgs*, depending primarily on the soil quality, with 60 *morgs* allowed in the suburban areas. Moreover, an owner with a family could possess one farm only. The radical amendment by Norbert Barlicki from the PPS [Polish Socialist Party] was not passed either. Barlicki demanded that farms larger than 100 *morgs* should undergo expropriation without compensation. On the contrary, a proposal by J. Poniatowski from the PSL Wyzwolenie won the majority vote (16 in favour). It suggested that the maximum holding of land should be maintained between 60 and 300 *morgs*, with the bottom limit applied to suburban and industrial areas. Thus, the Committee fixed the maximum holding of land at 300 *morgs*. Clause 7, concerning forest nationalisation as proposed by Dąbski, was accepted owing to a one-voice majority. All forest areas, apart from the ones that belonged to local communities and „petty” private forests were to become state property. The postulate by Barlicki who advocated forest nationalisation without compensation was rejected<sup>5</sup>. The course of discussions and voting in the Agrarian Committee spelt a struggle over the shape of the agrarian reform during the plenary sittings in the Sejm.

After the Agrarian Committee’s proceedings regarding the agrarian reform bill were completed, the peasant deputies, unlike the right-wing

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<sup>5</sup> Poniatowski’s motion was supported by the PSL Wyzwolenie, PSL Piast, PSL-Lewica, PPS and NZR deputies. Cf.: *Reforma rolna. Dziedzice sprawę przegrali*, „Gazeta Ludowa” 25 V 1919, no. 21, p. 1; Sanojca 1919: 8; *Reforma rolna*, „Piast” 8 VI 1919, no. 23, p. 2; *Sprawozd. stenogr. of 44. pos. SU*, 3 VI 1919, column 39 and ff.

ones, wanted the Sejm to consider it promptly. Nevertheless, during the 41<sup>st</sup> session of the Sejm Ustawodawczy, on 23<sup>rd</sup> May, a proposal by Błażej Stolarski, which advocated the beginning of the agrarian debate during the coming session of the chamber on 27<sup>th</sup> May, was rejected by deputies<sup>6</sup> (97 votes for, 105 against). The Sejm session dedicated to this issue, deemed to be both most important and difficult to resolve, was only initiated after some backstage talks on 3<sup>rd</sup> June – first as a general debate and subsequently as a working one. All in all, during the 21 sessions of the chamber, 85 deputies took the floor 143 times, leaving aside formal addresses. Stanisław Janicki, the Minister of Agriculture made a speech as well<sup>7</sup>.

Deputies from Związek Sejmowy Ludowo-Narodowy were the ones to take the floor most frequently. However, their exact number is difficult to determine due to by-elections in four constituencies of the former Prussian partition held on 1st June as well as in the constituencies numbered 33 (Białystok) and 34 (Bielsk Podlaski) – held on 15<sup>th</sup> June. Consequently, the number of the Związek Sejmowy Ludowo-Narodowy deputies increased from 109 at the beginning of March 1919 to 121 in the second half of June 1919 (Rzepecki 1920: 283). The peasant deputies ranked second in the number of 29, which included 13 deputies of the PSL Piast, 12 of the PSL Wyzwolenie and 4 of the PSL--Lewica. They were at the despatch box 46 times altogether, with Jan Dąbski of the PSL Piast, Jan Smoła and Juliusz Poniatowski of the PSL Wyzwolenie taking the floor most often – seven times each<sup>8</sup>.

The agrarian debate saw a partial shift in the balance of forces in the Sejm, especially after the elections in the former Prussian partition where the right-wingers and parties of the centre won. There were eight priests among the 42 deputies elected at the time, with their number in the SU rising to 34. Furthermore, twenty amongst the deputies in the Sejm regarded themselves as landowners. At the time they belonged to two clubs: the ZSLN – 13 and Klub Pracy Konstytucyjnej (the Club of Constitutional Labour) – 7. The majority of priests were members of the

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<sup>6</sup> Sprawozd. stenogr. of 41. pos. SU, 23 V 1919, column 92. According to Władysław Seyda of ZSLN, the decision concerning the Agrarian reform should be taken by representatives of the whole country in as much as it was possible. In particular, he advocated waiting for the deputies from the former Prussian partition; Sprawozd. stenogr. of 44. pos. SU, 3 VI 1919, column 89–90.

<sup>7</sup> My own calculations, basing on stenograms of the SU sessions.

<sup>8</sup> My own calculations.

ZSLN – 17 and the Polskie Zjednoczenie Ludowe – 6. However, two of them were of different party membership, belonging to the peasant clubs (June 1919): Kazimierz Kotula to the PSL Piast and Eugeniusz Okoń to the PSL Wyzwolenie<sup>9</sup>. The number of landowner-deputies and priest-deputies in the SU was of utmost importance in the agrarian debate. The latter ones were, as a matter of fact, with the exception of rev. Okoń against the inclusion of the Church goods into the agrarian reform without a prior consent of the Vatican. In a similar vein, the landowners were reluctant to admit projects which were to reduce the size of their estates, although they did not oppose officially the necessity of carrying out the land reform while speaking in the Sejm. They did attempt, though, to delay the process, limit its extent, giving the reform an evolutionary and free-market flavour. They frequently talked not of the reform but of privatization. The proposal, which was a manifestation thereof, was presented in March 1919, stating that 1,5 mln *morgs* of land should be allocated to let increase peasant farms at the prices from before the WWI. The proposal was propagandist in nature and testified to lacking sense of political realism on the part of its promoters. It could not have mounted enough support in the Sejm. The majority of landowners viewed the intended agrarian reform as an onslaught on the property right and believed that its implementation would make agricultural production decrease. The Związek Ziemian [Landowners' Union] newspaper sometimes mentioned the so-called agrarian reform, whereas the bill passed by the Sejm („Uchwała...”) on 10th July 1919 was described as „a disabled, ill and retarded child” (Janota-Bzowski 1919: 33; Ryx 1919: 19; Gałka 2000: 25).

An address by the speaker of the Agrarian Committee's majority – Jan Dąbski of the PSL Piast – initiated the agrarian debate on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1919 during the 44<sup>th</sup> session of the SU. It served as a good opportunity for a more extensive presentation of the particular clubs' standpoints. Heated disputes were a common occurrence. The landowners and priests in the Sejm were, as I have already mentioned, the main opponents to the Agrarian Reform bill passed by the majority of the Agrarian Committee and advocated by the members of the peasant parties, especially by the deputies of the PSL Wyzwolenie and PSL Piast. The PSL-Lewica demanded in turn that the expropriation of the manorial and Church estates exceeding 100 *morgs* be carried out without compensation.

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<sup>9</sup> See more in: Piela 1994: 185–187; Gałka 2000: 23; SU, print no. 1551, p. 5 and ff.

The following 15 clauses of the bill were discussed in detail during the working debate. Voting on the particular amendments and clauses began on 4<sup>th</sup> July. Clause 4, point g as well as clause 6, concerning the maximum holding of land, proved to be the most perturbing issues to be considered. Many motions were submitted already after the debate had been initiated, which caused dissatisfaction on the part of the left-wing deputies, involving procedural controversies, leading to new discussions. This was an expression of the tactics intended by the Right. Wojciech Trąpczyński – the Speaker of the Sejm happened to fail to control the situation at certain moments, which made the left-wing deputies suspect him of being partial. The motion by rev. Kazimierz Sobolewski was passed in the vote. It specified that Church landed estates could only be allocated to the purposes of the land reform after the Vatican had been consulted. This clashed with the stance of the peasant activists. Clause 7, regarding forest nationalization, was passed in the shape proposed by the Agrarian Committee<sup>10</sup>. However, on 4<sup>th</sup> July Clause 6 was sent back to the Committee despite protests on the part of the Left, including the peasant activists, who believed the clause to be of ultimate importance. The clause was put to the vote on 7<sup>th</sup> July, but it was rejected (178 votes for, 182 against, 3 abstained from the vote)<sup>11</sup>. Likewise, the motion submitted by deputies Feliks Staszyński and Józefat Błyskosz from the Koło Niezależnych Posłów Ludowych [Club of Independent Popular Deputies] (181 votes for, 181 against, one abstained from the vote and one void vote)<sup>12</sup>. As the Speaker of the Sejm did not want to run the vote again, which was demanded, *inter alia*, by Dąbski, the peasant deputies left the Chamber, singing „O cześć wam, panowie magnaci” („Salute Sirs magnates”). On 8<sup>th</sup> July the remaining clauses

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<sup>10</sup> While voting clause 7 there were 203 votes for, 158 against. Sprawozd. stenogr. of 65. pos. SU, 8 VII 1919, column 17.

<sup>11</sup> Apart from others, all landowner-deputies (18), who were present, and 27 out of the 32 priest-deputies, who were present, voted against clause 6. Sprawozd. stenogr. of 64. pos. SU, 7 VII 1919, column 33 and ff.

<sup>12</sup> All landowner-deputies (18), who were present, and 27 out of the 32 priest-deputies, who were present, voted against Staszyński and Błyskosz's motion. Sprawozd. stenogr. of 64. pos. SU, 7 VII 1919, column 26, 36 and ff. Staszyński's motion, changed by Błyskosz, proposed a maximum of up to 300 *morgs*, in suburban industrial districts up to 100 *morgs*, while in some other areas up to 500 *morgs*. SU, print no. 765, p. 17.

of the bill (7–15) were put to vote and an additional one – clause 16 was passed as well<sup>13</sup>.

The final part of the working debate over Clause 6, decisive with regard to the ultimate shape of the Agrarian Reform bill, took place on 10<sup>th</sup> July. Eventually, the proposal which was advocated e.g. by the peasant parties' members was passed by the Sejm. It specified that the maximum holding of land should be fixed at between 60 and 180 hectares, depending on the region. Thus, the maximum holding of land allowed in part of the former Prussian partition and in the Eastern borderland could be increased up to 400 hectares. Mismanaged estates were to be obligatorily bought out. The motion thereof was supported by 183 deputies, with 182 voting against the proposal<sup>14</sup>. At the end the Sejm decided upon the title of the adopted statute, labelling it „Uchwała Sejmu Ustawodawczego z dnia 10 lipca 1919 r. w przedmiocie zasad reformy rolnej” [„The Resolution of the Legislative Sejm of 10<sup>th</sup> July 1919 on the principles of the Agrarian Reform”]<sup>15</sup>. Its implementation was the responsibility of the Główny Urząd Ziemski [Central Land Registry] founded under statutory authority of the Sejm act of 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1919.

The results of the vote on the final text of the Agrarian Reform bill testified to the balance of forces in the SU with regard to the issue. Despite the rapprochement of the standpoints, a satisfying compromise was not reached on many important issues such as the question of the maximum holding of land. This foreshadowed difficulties in the implementation of the law. The peasant parties were more content with the passing of the bill, whereas the right-wing parties deemed it to be their defeat. The peasant activists strived for a substantial reduction of the size of landowners' estates, with the PSL-Lewica being in favour of the abolition of this class. The agrarian peasant movements believed that latifundia and manorial estates were a medieval anachronism. They wanted to base the agrarian system on self-reliant peasant farms. However, they were not unanimous as far as their size was concerned, which stemmed from the fact that the resources (land) that could be allocated to the purposes of the

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<sup>13</sup> Sprawozd. stenogr. of 65. pos. SU, 8 VII 1919, column 3 and ff.

<sup>14</sup> Among others, 17 landowner-deputies were against – all that were present as well as 29 out of the 32 priests who were present; K. Kotula, E. Okoń and S. Starkiewicz were for. The results of individual voting, see: sprawozd. stenogr. of 67. pos. SU, 10 VII 1919, column 59 and ff.

<sup>15</sup> „Uchwała...” including the 11 resolutions that were passed, see SU, print no. 839.

Agrarian Reform were limited. The peasant parties – apart from the PSL-Lewica – advocated private ownership of farms, acquired as a result of a payment for the land. They also favoured paying compensation to landowners.

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