

'The Next Netherlands' or Natural Fortress? The Question of Draining the Polesie Swamps in Interwar Poland.

In 1928, the President of the Republic of Poland issued a decree establishing the Bureau of Amélioration of Polesie. Its task was to prepare a technical plan for reclaiming c. 1.5 million hectares of swamps in eastern Poland, the so-called Pinsk marshes. It was one of the most ambitious engineering schemes ever contemplated in interwar Poland. By its contemporaries, it was sometimes compared to the construction of Poland's sea port in Gdynia, a flagship investment and symbol of Poland's return to the Baltic Sea. The comparison to Gdynia was justified both by the scale of the investment and by the resulting potential boost to the economy. The government's intention was to make Polesie a breadbasket for the whole country, and an agricultural base for the Central Industrial District. It was hoped that reclamation of the swamps would become a stimulus for economic recovery throughout the Polish *Kresy* – Borderlands. The slogan "The next Netherlands", referring to the transformation of the Dutch wetlands into flourishing farmlands was coined by the press, and perfectly express the hopes associated with this great modernisation project.

Meanwhile, other headlines, such as "Peru or Polesie?", aptly reflected yet another aspect of the plan, namely the intention to make Polesie an alternative to external emigration. Indeed, it was assumed that the it would create enough arable land to accommodate around 200,000 peasant families, or about a million people, taking into account the contemporary family model. Significantly, the settlers were to be exclusively ethnic Poles, moved from the most seriously overpopulated central and western provinces. This plan was in compliance with official ethnic policy to change the ethnic structure of the eastern borderlands. Polesie, after melioration and 're-Polonization' was supposed to form a so-called Polish wedge between territories populated in the majority by Belarusians and Ukrainians. One of the assumptions of this policy was the conviction that in the event of Soviet aggression, ethnic Poles were more likely to take up arms to defend the country than the minorities.

The Bureau, headed by Dr. Józef Próchnik, a hydraulic engineer, expert in amelioration and former Minister of Public Works, undertook vigorous preparatory work on, amongst other things, studies of the geology and hydrology of Polesie. For lack of sufficient maps, they began by making their own. To speed up this process they adopted a technical marvel in geodesy at the time – aerial photography. Agricultural experimental stations were set up to work out the best ways of cultivating the peat soil covering most of the areas to be drained. In order to avoid possibly irreversible mistakes, they drew on foreign experience, especially in regard to draining and cultivating peat. Finally, the natural and cultural environments were studied, and in the case of the most valuable natural sanctuaries, the establishment of reserves and national parks was proposed.

Ultimately though, in the mid-1930, the Bureau's activity practically ceased. This happened amidst an atmosphere of scandal, and largely by the hand of the Polish counterintelligence services who suspected that Soviet agents had infiltrated the Bureau's staff. Próchnik was stigmatized for being "too lenient" toward the minorities (because he employed in his Bureau more Belarusians, Ukrainians and Jews than Poles), and for revealing state secrets (because he published too widely on the Bureau's research activities). He was officially charged with failing to ensure the secrecy of tender data and for financial mismanagement. He was then sent to prison, but was eventually freed under amnesty. The Bureau's affiliation repeatedly shifted from one ministry to another, which only deepened the chaotic nature of its operation. As a result, the general plan to reclaim Polesie was never completed. Until the world war II broke out in 1939, only very few local and small scale amelioration projects were actually carried out in Polesie, each time under the strict supervision of the Ministry of Military Affairs, which often blocked such works entirely on the assumption that they would reduce the natural defensive properties of the Pinsk marshes. According to the army – and such views had been expressed since the inception of the Bureau – in the face of Soviet aggression, retaining this region as an impenetrable wetlands border was a strategic necessity.

Polesie's reclamation was eventually carried out by the Soviets after the war, when the Polish part of the marshes was incorporated into the Belarusian Soviet Republic. This resulted in an ecological disaster – instead of fertile farmland, the Soviets created a large areas of dunes following uncontrolled desertification of the previously swampy lands. Would that have been the fate of the Polish project, too? We can only guess. Although there is a quite substantial bibliography documenting the history of the Polish borderlands in the interwar period, it fails to tell the story of the planned reclamation of the Polesie swamps. Meanwhile, the project sparked an extremely lively public debate at the time. This discourse involved the economic and military spheres, as well as early naturalists and representatives of ethnic minorities. Reconstructing and analysing this discourse, as well as determining the roles of its actors, and finally analysis of the Bureau's activities, are the key objectives of this research project. Such a comprehensive study of the planned project will not only complement our understanding of the complex history of Poland's eastern borderlands in the interwar period, but will also offer a look from a different angle at various already-known issues, such as ethnic and economic policy towards the north-eastern provinces, the role of the army in interwar Poland, and the rise of environmental awareness in the country.