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The Polish-Czechoslovakian Conflict over Cieszyn Silesia, Spiš and Orava in the years 1938-1939 as Reported by the Polish Provincial Press published in Siedlce

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Abstract: *The paper touches upon the theme of how the provincial press in Poland commented on the Polish-Czechoslovakian conflict over Cieszyn Silesia, Spiš and Orava. The timespan covers a few months in 1938 and 1939 - from the time Hitler made his claims towards Czechoslovakia until the moment the state was dismantled. The author has focused on presenting the Polish-Czechoslovakian relations as reported by the press published in Siedlce, a district town located in the centre of pre-war Poland. At that time four periodicals were published there. The analysis of these publications has allowed the author to determine that the editors informed their readers about the situation of the disputed territories on a regular basis. The editors tried to make their message more attractive by posting photos or accounts by special correspondents. They built among its readers a negative image of the Czechoslovakian state, which was presented as an artificial creation where the rights of national minorities were not respected. The incorporation of these lands into Poland was presented as a symbol of historical justice. The press also played an important part in mobilising the local community to act for fellow countrymen from the lands being the object of the Polish-Czechoslovakian dispute. However, it did not recognise the growth of Slovakian independence activities, which were important for the internal affairs of Poland's southern neighbour.*

Key words: Zaolzie, Spiš, Orava, the Polish-Czechoslovakian conflict, periodicals, Siedlce

Introduction

The Polish-Czechoslovakian border issue over Cieszyn Silesia, Spiš and Orava in the years 1938-1939 attracted attention of the Polish society. It also had serious consequences for the interstate relations in the region. It was an important stage in peaceful conquests carried out by Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. The events of that period had an effect on the Polish-Slovakian and Polish-Czech relations later on, in September 1939 during the Second World War, and thereafter.

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The aim of this scientific paper is to show the issue of the Polish-Czechoslovakian relations during a few months in 1938 and 1939, as it was presented in the provincial press in Poland, the attitude of the local people to the issue of national affiliation of Cieszyn Silesia, Spiš and Orava, as well as the significance of the editorial staff of periodicals in shaping the local people's attitudes and behaviour. This subject matter shall be presented based on the information circulated by the press published in Siedlce – at that time a district town in the central part of the then Poland, located one hundred kilometres south-east from Warsaw. This focus is directed at the matters related not to the history of the Polish-Czechoslovakian conflict over those lands itself, but the communication of the content by editors of the press published in a provincial town. The paper focuses on what they informed their readers about, and how they influenced the readers' attitude towards the actions of the Polish government and the Czechoslovakian state.

At the beginning, the issue of the names used in the paper shall be precisely determined. The term Zaolzie Silesia (alternately Zaolzie) refers herein to the western part of Cieszyn Silesia – a territory forming part of Czechoslovakia since 1919, taken over by Poland in October 1938, and Spiš, is a historical-geographical land whose larger part currently belongs to Slovakia (in the years 1918-1939 it belonged to Czechoslovakia). Its northern areas are located within the Polish borders. Orava, in turn, is a historical-geographical land located in the Orava's estuary. Similar to Spiš, most of its territory belongs to Slovakia (before 1939 to Czechoslovakia), whereas its northern part to Poland. And finally Čadca in this article is understood as a town and region that belonged to Czechoslovakia (currently Slovakia) with places where Polish people resided. Poland annexed small strips of this territory on 1st December 1938, and Slovakia regained these lands in the autumn of 1939, when the Polish state was devastated by the Third Reich.

The subject matter of the situation of the Czechoslovakian state, and the problem of a conflict over its borders with Poland in 1938-1939, has been taken up by Polish historians several times so far. Only in the last two decades have a few publications taking up this matter been published. It is worth mentioning the publications of Karol Jonca¹, Michał Jarnecki², Marek Kazimierz Kamiński³, Piotr Majewski⁴ and Sebastian Pilarski⁵. However, the said publications discuss these issues of interstate relations in the Polish-wide perspective. So far there has been a lack of research into the Polish-Czechoslovakian issue from the local perspective. An exception is a publication by Elżbieta Lesiewicz⁶, which describes the attitude

¹ JONCA 2005.

² JARNECKI 2009.

³ KAMIŃSKI 2014.

⁴ MAJEWSKI 2004.

⁵ PILARSKI 2008.

⁶ LESIEWICZ 2000.

of residents of Greater Poland. However, it is a special region of Poland. As early as in the times when these lands belonged to the Second German Reich, i.e. before 1918, Poles from Greater Poland maintained lively contacts with the Czechs. So far the issue of the attitude of Poles from small local communities to the border dispute with Czechoslovakia has not been investigated in the Polish historiography⁷.

The article is based on materials published in the press published in Siedlce in 1938 and 1939. At that time, readers in the town had access to four press publications owned by influential and opinion-making circles i.e. the Catholic Church and the ruling party (the sanation camp). Two of them were controlled by the Diocesan Curia in Siedlce. These publications comprised a monthly *Wiadomości Diecezjalne Podlaskie* (Podlasie Diocese News; hereinafter *WDP*) and a weekly *Głos Podlaski* (The Voice of Podlasie; hereinafter *GP*). The other two titles were published by groups connected with the political party ruling Poland at that time – a weekly titled *Życie Podlasia* (The Life of Podlasie; hereinafter *ŻP*) and *Ziemia Siedlecka* (Podlasie Land; hereinafter *ZS*). The activity of these periodicals has already been subject to historical research⁸.

The presence of the problem subject matter in the Siedlce press, forms of communication

The Czechoslovakian issue found its reflection in the press published in Siedlce in the years 1938-1939. The first information appeared in the summer of 1938, when the German started to raise the issue of Sudety region. And the last references were placed in the press a year later, and they related to the dismantling of Czechoslovakia, creating the separate Slovakian state and the Protectorate of Czech and Moravia, strictly subordinated to The Third Reich. A pivotal moment in which the Siedlce periodicals published the largest amount of information fell on autumn months – from September to November 1938 including. It was connected with incorporating disputed territories of Cieszyn Silesia, and then Spiš, Orava and Čadca into the boundaries of Poland.

Among Siedlce periodicals, and it must be stated – on a current basis, the matters of the southern neighbour were described by the editors of *GP*, less often by *ŻP* and *ZS*, and the least often by *WDP*. When it comes to the last one, it stemmed from the periodical's specific nature – which was a press organ of the Diocesan Curia in Siedlce. It mostly focused on church matters. Therefore, in *WDP* only occasionally did information on Czechoslovakian matters appear. The first one noted by me referred to a conference of 19th October 1938 held by Podlasie Bishop Henryk Przeździecki,

⁷ It's only a contributory publication by Tomasz Sysik (SYSIK 2015).

⁸ WINTER 2015.

during which its participants – dean priests and representatives of lay people, said a thankful prayer on the account of “regaining Zaolzie Silesia by Poland”⁹.

In accounts of the conflict by the analysed periodicals only the Czechoslovakian state appears as a party, and the Czechs as a ruling nation. It almost did not mention the Slovaks and their seeking for independence. At best, the Slovaks are mentioned among the German, the Polish, the Hungarian and the Ruthenians, as a minority suppressed by the Czechs and subjected to czechization. It was not noted in Siedlce newspapers that in the case of annexing parts of Szpysz, Orava and Čadca by Poland, representatives of the Slovakian autonomy acted as a party in negotiations with representatives of the Polish authorities. We can ask ourselves the question about the reasons for such narration. It seems that it was easier to justify to the readers Poland’s claims to the lands forming part of Czechoslovakia, whose authorities were not popular among most of the Polish people.

In the accounts related to the Czechoslovakian matters by the Siedlce press there could be seen the influence of impulses coming directly from the central authorities, as well as through the then media, i.e. the press, or most of all, the radio. An example of the first one is a reprint of an announcement signed by President of Siedlce Sławomir Łaguna, and containing an acknowledgement expressed to Siedlce inhabitants by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland Józef Beck. A representative of the government stated: “I kindly thank you citizens and organisations of Siedlce for your wishes, sent at the moment of Zaolzie Silesia’s returning to Poland. These wishes were a precious token of a uniform attitude of the society towards events important for the Republic of Poland”¹⁰.

The impact of radio broadcasts on the attitude of the society expressed by a numerous participation of the town inhabitants in demonstrations for support of incorporating Zaolzie into Poland was described by an editor of *ŻP*. The message, in his opinion, contributed to awakening patriotic feelings, especially among the youth. They expressed it by taking part in a manifestation. The participants made cries against the Czechs, as well as they declared their support for the activities of the Polish state authorities. And the behaviour of the youth was approved of by older participants of the gathering¹¹.

A unique thing in the work of Siedlce periodicals at that time was taking advantage of reports of a special correspondent. Such form was used by the editorial staff of *ZS*, who in order to give account of incorporating Zaolzie Silesia to Poland sent Michał Godlewski to Cieszyn. He sent two accounts from his stay there, which were published in the newspaper. In the former one, he included a description of the town on the last day of September 1938. He stated that on both sides of the Olza river there

⁹ *WDP* 1938, 10-11.

¹⁰ *ZS* 1938, 27: 2.

¹¹ *ŻP* 1938, 29: 2.

was the atmosphere of expectation. The border pass, lively up to that time, almost came to a standstill¹².

In November 1938, *ZS* published another, this time more detailed, account of its correspondent from Cieszyn. He passed on information on abolishing the border on the Olza and the first days of the Polish presence in the 'united' Cieszyn. The message pertained, among others, to the attitude of the local people to the undergoing changes – the Poles' enthusiasm and the Czechs' depression. The accounts emanated with peace and satisfaction of the latter. The correspondent presented an idyllic image of people sitting in cafés. A dominant group among them were people in uniforms. The author of these accounts noticed the activities Upper Silesia insurgents present there, who as the first ones changed the name of one of the streets. He underlined that they were looking for name plates *Czech Cieszyn* and wiping out or scraping away the old affiliation of Zaolzie Cieszyn¹³.

From the accounts presented we learn about the attitude of majority towards the Czechs remaining in the town. A special correspondent stated that a few Czech soldiers and officers with machine guns and side arms were seen. In his opinion, they walk peacefully and nobody pays attention to them. Most inhabitants treat the Czechs very tactfully, and only in the café 'Polonia', Czech member of Parliament Jung – who, as the author of the account emphasized – was known from his public appearances against Poles, was slapped in the face¹⁴.

A similar form of communication in informing readers on the Czechoslovakian matters was used by the editorial staff of *GP*. In Issue 22 of 29th May 1938 *A Letter from Czechoslovakia* dated 5th April was published¹⁵, i.e. very late, when we compare it with the publication date. Nevertheless, this form of communication adds credibility among recipients, since it draws from the source.

A novel and attractive form of communicating content related to disputed territories of Zaolzie Silesia, Spiš, Orava and Čadca was utilised by the editorial staff of *GP* who posted photos with short comments in its newspaper. The photos usually were not part of articles, but contained a separate, brief note. However, they could build the image of relations existing there and the readers' attitude to Czechoslovakia and the Czechs. And for instance, in Issue 40 of 2nd October 1938 two photographs were placed in which there were civilians surrounded by members of uniformed forces, as we can guess – Czech forces. Under the photos there was a comment which says that the conflict of Sudety Germans with the Czechoslovakian government is increasing, and their demonstration met with the authorities' severe repressions. Due to that, most of them left the country, looking for help in Germany¹⁶.

¹² *ZS* 1938, 26: 4.

¹³ *ZS* 1938, 28: 9-10.

¹⁴ *ZS* 1938, 28: 10.

¹⁵ *GP* 1938, 22: 269-270.

¹⁶ *GP* 1938, 40: 494.

Further photographs related to Zaolzie pertain already to the Polish presence there. And in Issue 41 of 9th October 1938 there was a photograph of the bridge over the Olza connecting Polish and Czech Cieszyn, for the current readers the symbol of conflict. The photo was accompanied by a caption stating that the bridge dividing the town in recent times became deserted due to the halt of cross-border traffic¹⁷.

In the same issue of *GP*, another photo illustrated the information on taking the territory of Zaolzie Silesia by the Polish army. From a short press note it stemmed that the Polish side took control over two districts and there were talks being held with the Czechs. The photo placed there had a comment saying that representatives of the Polish Army were discussing the conditions of leaving Zaolzie Cieszyn by the Czech army¹⁸.

In subsequent issues of *GP*, photos were published showing the crossing of the border bridge on the Olza¹⁹, or welcoming soldiers by Silesian childrens²⁰.

Photo captions showing residents of Zaolzie, were presented generally in an emotional tone. It was the case with a photo showing a Polish woman welcoming General Bortnowski a commander of Polish soldiers taking over control of the disputed territory. A caption under the photo was as follows: “Such enthusiasm with which the Poles behind the Olza are welcoming the Polish army cannot be created ad hoc. It could only be invoked by a great longing for Motherland and pride when looking at its might. Here a Silesian woman, a mother of sons being brought up in the Polish culture and language, without hiding tears, with a son-like hug is being welcomed by General Bortnowski”²¹.

In *GP* we find two photographs, one next to the other, showing the so-called ‘growing together’ of Zaolzie Silesia with Poland. In the photo placed above, President Ignacy Mościcki is presented, coming in an open car to the parade organised in Cieszyn to mark the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of regaining independence by Poland²². The second photo illustrates residents of Zaolzie in traditional folk clothes participating in a parade in Warsaw in which General Commander Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły took part²³.

The image of the Czechoslovakian state and the assessment of its leaders

The Siedlce press presented the image of the Czechoslovakian state and its leaders mostly in a negative light. Particular attention was drawn to the fact that the rights of Polish population were not observed. Already, in one of the first press

¹⁷ *GP* 1938, 41: 506.

¹⁸ *GP* 1938, 41: 511.

¹⁹ *GP* 1938, 42: 517.

²⁰ *GP* 1938, 43: 525.

²¹ *GP* 1938, 43: 525.

²² *GP* 1938, 47: 572.

²³ *GP* 1938, 48: 594.

news noted by me, and published in *GP*, it was indicated that Polish people were making demands in the area of culture, education and economy towards the government in Prague. The editorial team highlights that fellow countrymen in Czechoslovakia demand that their rights be observed, but despite assurances made by the authorities of the state, repressions towards the Polish population are going on²⁴.

From the very start, the Siedlce newspapers also stressed a difficult position of the Czechoslovakian state due to its ethnic variety. Most of all, the presence of the German minority, made up of about 3 million people, as well as numerous Slovaks, Hungarians, Poles and Ruthenians. This fact was pointed out by the editorial team of *GP* already at the beginning of April 1938. They also mentioned about the demands of the German requesting autonomy. The reader could also learn about potential making similar requests by other national groups specified above. The editors of the newspaper accurately assessed the situation of the Czechoslovakian state pinpointing that if its authorities did not fulfil Germans' expectations, it would have the same consequences as in Austria, annexed by The Third Reich²⁵.

Among its readers, the Siedlce newspapers built a negative image of Czechoslovakian authorities, which violated the rights of national minorities; especially limitations imposed on Poles were pinpointed. Therefore, it is no surprise that when The Third Reich raised the issue of Sudety Germans, *GP* published on its pages detailed information on the actions of its fellow countrymen. It indicated that the Poles experiencing discrimination in Czechoslovakia, having first established an association, submitted a memorial to the government, in which they demanded autonomy, restoration of their rights which they had held until 1920²⁶.

A week later, *GP* published a small note with the situation of fellow countrymen in Czechoslovakia. It stated that the Poles are persecuted there, similar to the Slovaks. Oppression by the Czechs towards minorities persists. Only Germans – as it is stated in newspapers – gained substantial freedoms, along with the possibility to post flags with the swastika on their houses²⁷.

In the same issue, the editorial team of *GP* in the section *From the Country and the World*²⁸ referred to the current situation of the Czechoslovakian state, which in their estimation, was doomed to destruction on the hands of neighbouring Germany. It indicated that in such a tense situation in the region, Poland's military strengthening shall be taken into account. It also raised the issue of relations with Czechoslovakia. The editors indicated treacherous, in their estimation, actions of the authorities of the neighbouring state. It reminded the readers that Czechoslovakia ultimately took hold of the western part of Cieszyn Silesia and a few communes of Spiš and Orava

²⁴ *GP* 1938, 11: 128.

²⁵ *GP* 1938, 14: 163.

²⁶ *GP* 1938, 15: 177.

²⁷ *GP* 1938, 16: 189.

²⁸ *GP* 1938, 16: 191-192.

in 1920 during the Bolsheviks' invasion. It underlined that in the light of the provisions of the peace conference and due to the national composition of the inhabitants, Poland had the right to those lands.

GP editors, subsequently in the article, stressed out that Poles inhabiting the Czech state were persecuted and subjected to uprooted in respect of their national identity. The attitude of the authorities in Prague did not change even at the moment when Sudety Germans voiced their claims against them. A positive aspect, in the editors' opinion, was the uniting of all Polish organisations in Czechoslovakia, apart from socialists, in the fight to ensure themselves national rights.

GP provided accounts not only the development of the situation in Czechoslovakia, but also, and probably most of all, the issue of bilateral Polish-Czech relations. The readers could learn about the contacts at the governmental level. It was indicated that a conflict with the German caused that the Czechoslovakian authorities were inclined to keep closer contacts with the Polish ones. The evidence of the above – as estimated by the editors – was the presence of Czech economic circles in Poland, probing the possibility of exporting goods through the harbour in Gdynia, as well as the arrival to Warsaw of an envoy delegated by the government in Prague²⁹.

The image of the Czechoslovakian state in the Siedlce press not always was expressly negative. We can notice attempts at understanding the motives of the Czechs' actions towards the German minority. We come across an interesting message from the previously mentioned *A Letter from Czechoslovakia*. Its author recalled the statement he heard from a Prague inhabitant that “whenever the power of Germany rises, the security of independent existence of Czech is decreased”³⁰. He underlined that the current situation in Czechoslovakia in the face of an open conflict with the German, despite the society's mobilisation, is hopeless. Further, the author developed the issue of the Czech-German conflict. He presented the Czechs' historical reasons, indicating that Germans in the territory of their state are a colonising factor, and a non-native force. And since they found themselves in it, they should adjust to its legal regime. The author of the article did not question these reasons. He then presented the position of the other party, i.e. the German who raised a charge against the Prague authorities concerning too limited a number of schools, lack of access to official positions or leaving out local entrepreneurs from the areas with mixed nationalities in the process of awarding public contracts in favour of Czechs from the central provinces of the state. Referring to the last charge, the author of the correspondence recognised the justifiability of the authorities' decision in selecting trusted companies, since these investments related to defensive structures, and then the governmental circles could not allow themselves to let in groups which were not uncertain in terms of their national identity on these issues.

²⁹ *GP* 1938, 20: 239.

³⁰ *GP* 1938, 22: 269.

To find balance in presenting internal matters of Czechoslovakia, the author of the publication in question, quoted an opinion of a German, a member of parliament, however, he did not give his name. The speaker when asked by a *GP* correspondent about the possibility of separating part of the lands from Czechoslovakia and their incorporation into The Third Reich, and potential benefits for the region of Sudety, stated that such possibility was not taken into account. He pinpointed that local entrepreneurs would lose on such incorporation, since they would not be able to compete with better developed factories from The Reich. He also touched upon the issue of treating Germans by the Czechoslovakian state. He said that it was not the worst thing. Whereas, he boiled down the German-Czech relations to prestigious and historical ones. Since he underlined that the German had ruled the country for centuries. Upon creating of Czechoslovakia, they lost their privileged position. It will not be solved by granting autonomy to Sudety Germans since they will not be satisfied to be masters of only one province, whereas in the past they were masters of the whole country. The readers of *GP* received then an express message that the Czechoslovakian state is doomed to destruction since the German are treating this issue in terms of prestige as an issue of ‘Germanic superiority’. This message was able to create positive feelings of the readers towards the Czechs resulting from their belonging to Slavs.

Further, the author of the news tried to analyse the defensive potential of the Czechoslovakian state and the attitude of its authorities towards Poland. When referring to the first issue, he pointed out that the Czechs did not show chivalry in the past, but currently they are declaring their readiness to defend. He underlined their persistence and effectiveness in holding back the Germanic oppression. They are however – as a correspondent of *GP* assessed – aware that they are not able to oppose the German colossus. Although they have a well-developed armaments industry and an extensive network of fortifications, they have a fatal geographical location. At that difficult moment for the authorities in Prague, the author of the news noticed a change of their attitude towards Poland. In his view, it is one of the means of looking for help for Czechoslovakia. He then underlined that the government in Prague “now the only point is that to find support, find something, which in the case of an outbreak, will allow us to stop them for the first three, four weeks until Europa wakes up from its slumber! Maybe at last the sound of cannons will make it. This is the last hope on which Prague counts”³¹.

In the next weeks the tone of reports and assessments of the Czechoslovakian state presented in *GP* became expressly more aggressive. A territorial shape of the country was pinpointed, a charge that the Czechs oppressed national minorities many times or hostility towards Poland and the Poles. And then in Issue 39 of 1938 in the column *From the Country and the World* information was published on internal

³¹ *GP* 1938, 22: 270.

problems of Czechoslovakia resulting from the country's territorial shape and an ethnic variety of its citizens. The title of the article itself, *Czechoslovakia in Flames*, suggested to the readers the scale of threats to the safety of the state. The author of the text compared its area to a fish, where its head covers native Czech, they narrowing down to the east. In the second part mostly other nations reside. The Czechs, in the article author's opinion, forming around the half of its citizens "suppress other nations and not long ago did not want to even listen to the suggestions that these nations [Germans, Poles, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Hungarians] be given rights, although had obliged themselves while creating their own state"³². In the statement on non-observance of obligations there is a clear suggestion to the Pittsburg agreement signed on 31st May 1918, in which Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk undertook to ensure autonomy to Slovaks in the common Czechoslovakian state.

In the further part of the discussed article the author pinpointed the surrounding of the native part of the Czechoslovakian state by Germany when Austria had been annexed by them. He also mentioned the increased activities of Sudety Germans. He predicted that they would take an armed action in the future³³.

In a more acerbic form the attitude to the Czechoslovakian state was expressed in another text published in the same issue of *GP*. The title *An Artificial Patchwork* itself was meaningful. The Czechoslovakian state was named with this expression referring to Hitler's speeches and Mussolini's public appearances. The form of expression indicates that the author of the text accepted the position of the leaders mentioned above, expressed in the statement: "Czechoslovakia forms an artificial patchwork of nations which do not have and do not want to have anything to do with the Czechs. Seven hundred thousand Hungarians, half a million Ruthenians, more than one hundred thousand Poles and three million Germans are living on the lands of their ancestors, where there is no native Czech population, since the Czechoslovakian state is represented there by an official, a teacher and a policeman. The Czechs, until not long ago sure of the support of France and England, warm friends and followers of Bolshevik Russia, as it was the case with Tsar Russia, did not respect their own minorities"³⁴.

The author of the article described the present situation of the Czechoslovakian state as hopeless. To defend the Czechs against the oppression of Germany, neither England nor France or the United States will stand, since they will not risk the outbreak of a world conflict. In this situation the Czechoslovakian authorities pressed by Germany will agree to a plebiscite as a result of which Sudety will be incorporated into the Reich. Since there will be concession to one of the minorities, further ones will follow and will demand incorporation to their national states.

³² *GP* 1938, 39: 478.

³³ *GP* 1938, 39: 478.

³⁴ *GP* 1938, 39: 478.

Czechoslovakia carved out in this manner will remain a creation gathering only the Czechs, insufficient in terms of economy. It will fall – as the author of the text envisaged – into complete dependence from Germany. He described this scenario for the coming months. He was not mistaken much, especially when it comes to the issue of dependence on Germany.

In a further text from the same issue of *GP*, entitled *What is Poland's interest?*, reflections on the safety of Poland in respect of Czechoslovakian matters were published. The author perceived the threat resulting from the fact of Germans' strengthening their position on the territory of the southern neighbour and predicted carving out of its territory. He underlined that the Poles could not contribute to a complete victory of Germany since each strengthening of the former makes Poland weaker. However, in this tragic situation, we cannot leave the minority oppressed by the Czech authorities in Zaolzie Silesia to their own devices. The Czechs close Polish schools, Poles are fired from work, their means of living are taking away. The author of the article returned to the often brought charge by the Polish side on treacherous taking over of Zaolzie by the Czechs in the difficult period of 1919-1920 for Poland and the oppression of the Polish population residing there³⁵.

In the Siedlce press we find critical assessments of the activities of Czechoslovakian politicians. An example is a text published in *ZS*. In the article we find a negative opinion referring to actions of President Edvarda Beneš. The author of the article with a significant title *Learning History*, devoted to discussing the current situation in Poland and neighbouring states, focused the attention on the political activities of the above mentioned leader starting from the world war and ending at modern times. He pinpointed, most of all, to dexterity of this politician and his ability to play around, which could be seen in obtaining by his of an expert status in the Central Europe's matters. In these matters he became, in some ways, a person of trust in England and France. Without giving any specific charges, the editor of the Siedlce newspaper pointed out that Beneš: "he forgot about one thing that one of the basis of the operation of states shall be justice (*iustitia fundamentum regnorum* – justice is the basis of ruling), is one of the greatest moral values. He forgot about this morality completely and what is more – he ignored it outrageously very often. And it backfired. After honours and distinctions (presidency of the Republic!) – nowadays cursed by his own country fellows and foreign people, had to hide somewhere in the countryside. Condemned by history, spat on and ignored even by his past followers"³⁶. It was an allusive comment to Beneš's situation after the Munich conference.

A negative image of the Czechoslovakian state and its leaders was strengthened in the Siedlce newspapers still after the annexation of the Czech by

³⁵ *GP* 1938, 39: 478.

³⁶ *ZS* 1938, 28: 3.

Germany and establishing the Slovakian state dependant on the Germans. An example is the contents of a review of Stanisław Kolbuszewski's book (*Poland vs. Czech*, Poznań 1939), and published in *WDP*. On the occasion of the description of the above publication, its author expressed his regret about the dismantling of the neighbouring state by Germany. He underlined that Hitler's actions shook the international opinion. Moreover, as he noted "the fact of annexing Czechs and Moravia and a gradual incorporation of Slovakia goes down into history"³⁷.

However, the author's positive attitude to the Czechs boils down to the above mentioned statements only. In the further part of the book review, he underlined that it was necessary to look at reasons that caused "the nation armed to the teeth, called an arsenal of Europe, without a single shot gives its greatest good – freedom to its long-standing enemy"³⁸. This opinion does not find confirmation in the latest research of Polish historians which show that the Czechoslovakian army was not in a better condition than the Polish army in 1939, and could not provide an affective defence against the German³⁹.

In further part of the review, its author referring to the content of the publication discussed, portraying one thousand years of the neighbourhood of Poland and Czechs, emphasised the events which presented the Czech state in a negative light. And for the world war period he stated that it gained its independent existence, not as a result of decisions in battlefields, but in the comfort of diplomatic offices. He quoted the then common opinions in Poland about a traitorous behaviour of the Czechs during the Bolsheviks' offensive on Warsaw, expressed by a perfidious seizure of part of Cieszyn Silesia during the time when Poles were fighting fiercely against the aggressor from the east. Through the whole 20-year long period until the war was over, the Czechoslovakian authorities acted to the detriment of Poland. Closing the period of existence of Czechoslovakia, he stressed out that the Czechs could not free themselves from foreign influences, most of all German ones. And that was, in his opinion, worse than the loss of independence itself. In a summary the author stated that the Czechs must in the present situation "fight and work tirelessly. They shall understand at last that getting out of the influences of and dependence on Germans may achieve based on Poland; it is Poland's interest to defend the last fortress of Slavonic moved the furthest to the west, it is the Czechs' interest not to yield to this pressure, but to persist and strengthen spirit"⁴⁰.

A memoir on priest Andrej Hlinka, an outstanding Slovak politician, who died in August 1938, diverges from the negative image of the Czechoslovakian leaders. The information on his death was published by *GP* in Issue 35 of 28th August 1938.

³⁷ *WDP* 1939, 7-8: 336.

³⁸ *WDP* 1939, 7-8: 336.

³⁹ MAJEWSKI 2004: 259-260.

⁴⁰ *WDP* 1939, 7-8: 339-340.

In a short press note, it was underlined that in the funeral of this outstanding leader of Slovakia (the editors' opinion), representatives of Polish authorities participated⁴¹.

In the same issue of the periodical, an extensive article devoted to priest A. Hlinka entitled *Death of the Slovak spiritual leader* was published. A biography of the priest and politician was briefly described therein. It was indicated that he devoted his life to serve the nation that he loved. For his attachment to the Slovaks and his service for them, he suffered a lot on the hands of Hungarians and Czechs. He was held in prison by the former, whereas by the latter he was accused of state treason. In the newspaper editors' opinion, repressions that fell on Hlinka from the Czechs resulted from the fact that he demanded that the above mentioned Pittsburg agreement be adhered to. It was also highlighted that the deceased had special ties with Poland and Poles. In Poland he had – in the newspaper's opinion – many friends. He last visited Poland a year before his death. He was also a chevalier of the Order of Polonia Restituta⁴².

The appearance of a positive opinion on priest Hlinka stemmed, on the one hand, from acclaim he enjoyed in church circles, and the other hand that during that time the Polish authorities with attention and positive feelings treated the activities of Slovak Folk Party, whose leader was the already mentioned priest⁴³.

On the reactions of the local society

The Siedlce press during the Polish-Czechoslovakian conflict in the years 1938-1939 served a double role. In the first place, it informed about the society's feelings, the attitude of the town and region inhabitants to the issue of incorporating the disputed lands into Poland. Moreover, in the Siedlce newspapers some incentives appeared to express solidarity with fellow countrymen from Cieszyn Silesia, Spiš and Orava by participating in manifestations and organisation of material help and military help. Besides war rhetoric dominated, pinpointing the need to preserve unity, bringing help to fellow countrymen, maintaining combat readiness in case of an external aggression.

Based on the press accounts, we can learn about the organisation in Siedlce of a demonstration of support to the Poles in the territories of Cieszyn Silesia. And then in *GP* in Issue 40 of 2nd October 1938 informed about two meetings of the town inhabitants. They took place on 20th and 21st September under a common slogan 'Zaolzie Silesia must belong to Poland'. When it comes to the first demonstration, the information about that is not precise and we do not know exactly where the demonstration took place. There a statement that "the whole Polish residents

⁴¹ *GP* 1938, 35: 425.

⁴² *GP* 1938, 35: 424-425.

⁴³ KAMIŃSKI 2014: 323-233.

of Siedlce” appeared in it. We only know that it took place on 20th September. From the press account it results that the manifestation “gathered all organisations, associations and craftsmen, the town inhabitants took place in it in large numbers”. The people present at the demonstration were addressed by professor of gimnazjum Ignacy Wojewódzki, who repeated the then common opinion among the Poles on ‘traitorous’ attitude of the Czechs towards Poland at the time of a threat from the Bolsheviks in 1920. From the accounts of *GP* it results that participants of the demonstration adopted a resolution unanimously “demanding the incorporation of fellow countrymen behind the Olza into Poland”⁴⁴.

A day later a support campaign for fellow countrymen from Zaolzie was organised in Siedlce by members of the local structures of *Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego*. First they met at a gathering in front of the Monument of Independence. The further part of the gathering, constituted an extraordinary meeting of members of *Oddział Pocztowy Przystosobienia Wojskowego*. It was presided over by the Chairman of the organisation Władysław Zembruski. The meeting took place under the slogan ‘For Brothers Behind Olza’⁴⁵.

From the Siedlce press accounts we learn about the tokens of support to the Polish authorities in their activities aiming at obtaining Spiš, Orava and Čadca district. And then *ŽP* published an extensive account from the demonstration that took place at a municipal sports stadium on 23rd October 1938. The organiser of the meeting was the Presidium and the Board of the District of the Camp of National Unity in Siedlce. The demonstration was held under the slogan: “incorporating Spiš, Orava and Čadca into Motherland and obtaining a common border with Hungary”. The demonstrated was attended “thousand-strong crowds”, who with their attitude wanted to express their “love and attachment to brothers, who until this very day lived under the Czech yoke”⁴⁶. The participants adopted a resolution in which they appealed “the Government of the Republic of Poland to use all possible means for Orava, Spiš and Čadca – for our lands under the historical and ethnographic law to return to Motherland and to restore our common, through many centuries, border with traditionally friendly to us Hungarians”⁴⁷. Upon adoption of the resolution, the people gathered went to the district office to submit it to the district head as a representative of national authorities. The Siedlce District Head Stanisław Guliński by adopting the document underlined that “the will of the gathered people goes along the lines of the Government who will make all efforts so that our long-standing rights to Spiš, Orava and Čadca, as well as the will of the Republic of Poland to obtain a common border with Hungary to be honoured”⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ *GP* 1938, 40: 493.

⁴⁵ *GP* 1938, 40: 493.

⁴⁶ *ŽP* 1938, 34: 3.

⁴⁷ *ŽP* 1938, 34: 3.

⁴⁸ *ŽP* 1938, 34: 3.

In respect of the support campaign for incorporating Spiš, Orava and Čadca into Poland, in the Siedlce press there was an open discussion and presentation of differing views in this issue. It was initiated by professor of gimnazjum Józef Mikulski, who during the demonstration on 23rd October 1938, presented statistical summaries and historical justification for the Polish claims towards Spiš, Orava and Čadca. The contents of the report were commented in *ZS* doctor Stanisław Wąsowski, a well-known Siedlce social activist, connected with sanation left-wing. In his statement we find an appeal to be moderate in the relations with Czechoslovakia. It pertained especially to territorial claims supported with statistical data. With reference to J. Mikulski's public appearance: he stated that "knows him to be a man of Benedictine work, precise and careful researcher and writer". Wąsowski made a question mark over the statement that Mikulski acted on orders. In further part of the text he developed the idea by suggesting that the decisions are made in the ruling circles at the central level. It has significance to local communities, since it teaches them not to think about general matters, as well as improves various campaigns for which a public or local government official is responsible in the field, implementing guidelines 'from above'⁴⁹. In the description then S. Wąsowski included a critical review of the functioning of a centralised state, as well as the actions of *Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego*, being behind the organisation of a manifestation of support for Polish territorial claims towards Czechoslovakia.

It is no surprise that the above mentioned J. Mikulski in *ZS* reacted to the charges brought forward. He presented a review of publications of Polish and foreign authors justifying on their basis pretensions to Spiš, Orava and Čadca. He charged S. Wąsowski of "marginalising in essays" of the Polish rationale. He indicated potential harm to the society caused by this approach. He then underlined that "a reader who is almost not critical may get a false impression that somewhere far away, over the mountains, Poland is reaching out its mean hands for something we are not entitled to, and it unnecessarily starts reclaiming activities". And then, summarising these issues he stated that the demands, as he justified it, do not mean reaching for someone else's property, but demand one's own property. By addressing the emotional sphere, he asked rhetorically: "Are we to say to our fellow countrymen behind the cordon waiting for our help, just to have piece of mind: we do not know you and do not want to know you?" However, he answered straightforwardly and positively: "No! We must help them according to our skills and capacity. But most of all we must gather information about them, and then inform our public about them"⁵⁰.

⁴⁹ *ZS* 1938, 29: 7.

⁵⁰ *ZS* 1938, 31: 6.

Both parties' argumentation in the dispute over Polish claims to Spiš, Orava and Čadca reflected the discussions being held at that time in the ruling camp in Poland. These issues were undertaken by S. Pilarski in his publication⁵¹.

The Siedlce press reports also raised the issue of the significance of the incorporated lands to Poland, and over which – as he underlined – there had been a conflict with the southern neighbour since the end of the world war. And then the editorial team of *ZS* on the title page of the issue of 10th October 1938, that is in the first issue, which was published after taking over Zaolzie, posted an editorial comment, in which they expressed satisfaction from the fact of incorporating the said territory into Poland. In the text it was underlined straightforwardly that “you cannot call yourself a Pole, you do not feel in Polish terms and you do not have a Polish heart and blood in your veins if you do not feel joy from the fact that the old-time part of Poland is being joined with Motherland”⁵².

The issue of Zaolzie led the author to reflect on the need to stand up for the old Polish lands being under the foreign rule, most of all, the German rule. The author of the said comment emphasized the need to return into the Poland's boundaries, among others, Opole Silesia, Wrocław or Mazury. All these lands “moan under the German yoke”. He also expressed a conviction that at the moment of joining of these lands with Poland “the German element shall pass, brutal Germanic culture shall pass – shall feel Poles again”⁵³.

The issue of potential reclaiming other Polish lands in respect of the seizure of Zaolzie was also referred to by *GP*. By noting down a positive territorial gain from the Polish perspective in the form of Zaolzie Silesia it was underlined that the Poles constitute in their own country 69.1% of the residents. Outside the country – as it was estimated – eight and a half million fellow countrymen reside. It became the basis for undertaking criticism in the said text of the Versailles Treaty. It was stated straight that as a result of post-war regulations a large part of Pomerania, Greater Poland and also a few historically Polish lands remained within the boundaries of Germany. In conclusion: “all these losses and carvings we owe to England and America, which such boundaries established and from the beginning did not want to let Poland become powerful”⁵⁴.

In the Siedlce press, the attention was directed on the meaning of the incorporated lands of Zaolzie for the Polish economy. Deliberations of this kind were undertaken by the author of the text published in *GP*, and entitled *Economic Significance of Zaolzie*⁵⁵. In the introduction, he stated that incorporation of the new territory will be positive to the economy of the state. But most of all he indicated

⁵¹ PILARSKI 2008: 153-155.

⁵² *ZS* 1938, 25: 1.

⁵³ *ZS* 1938, 25: 1

⁵⁴ *GP* 1938, 43: 526.

⁵⁵ *GP* 1938, 43: 525.

mining and melting industries. He mentioned that in Zaolzie there are beds of the highest quality coking coal, as well as metallurgical plants operating in an exemplary manner. He expressed his conviction that the lands being incorporated would have a stimulating influence on other regions in Poland, among others on the Central Industrial District, and also counted on an increased transfer of goods through the harbours in Gdynia and Gdańsk. In the case of the former one, this optimism is not understandable, since this city remained outside the current Poland and was dominated by the Germanic element.

From the discussed text, the reader was able to learn that development of the new territorial gain is connected with the possibility to take over plants and houses after leaving Czechs. The author also indicated that the level of economic development of the area taken over from the Czechoslovakian state, which in the author's opinion placed itself higher than Poland in terms of economy. He described it using a conversion ratio of trade in goods in both countries when converted into one inhabitant: in Czechoslovakia 277.00 zloty, and in Poland only 71.00 zloty.

In the Siedlce press, initiatives undertaken in other regions of Poland were reflected, and aiming at preparing military forces to potential fight for the lands of Zaolzie, Spiš and Orava. And then e.g. ZS informed its readers about establishing of the Zaolzie Corps. The organisational meeting of this formation took place in Siedlce on 24th September 1938 in the premises of The Federation of the Polish Associations of Motherland Defenders. At that time, an office and a recruitment commission were established. As it can be seen from earlier accounts of ZS until 29th September, i.e. within five days to the Voluntary Corps 494 people, including 24 officers, 67 deputy officers, 7 women and four Jews enrolled. However, it was pinpointed that the last mentioned ones, even participants of the Polish-Bolshevik War were not accepted⁵⁶.

Also in the same issue of the newspaper we find information about further forming of the Zaolzie Corps. It shows that the battalion headquarters was created. Its briefing took place on 27th September. On summons of the headquarters, volunteers from Siedlce and neighbourhoods appeared on the garrison pitch at 7.30 pm. From there, in a military array with signing Patriotic songs and cries of support for 'Zaolzie Brothers' the procession set out to the Monument of Independence. As press reports show: "public gathered in large numbers witnessed a serious manifestation for Zaolzie. After the demonstration, the Battalion Headquarters informed the volunteers about the need to be on alert"⁵⁷.

After initial swagger-like announcements, the issue of the Zaolzie Corps failed. The issue of organising material help for fellow countrymen residing in the discussed lands took a real shape. ZS published brief information about the sum of 3,192.01 zloty raised in Siedlce for fellow countrymen from Zaolzie. The amount was sent to the bank

⁵⁶ ZS 1938, 24: 4.

⁵⁷ ZS 1938, 24: 4.

account of *Polska Kasa Oszczędności* in Warsaw for *Towarzystwo Pomocy Polonii Zagranicznej Ekspozytura Komitetu Walki o Śląsk za Olzą*⁵⁸. The same information was published by *GP*⁵⁹. The information showed that the campaign had the Polish-wide reach.

We receive more precise data on the fund-raising for Poles from Zaolzie owing to notes in *ŻP*, where the list of donors and amounts they donated was published⁶⁰. The message was structured in such a manner so that the reader gets the impression of mass participation in the campaign of employees of institutions working in town.

The issue of organisation of the Zaolzie Corps in Siedlce and fund-raising for Poles in Zaolzie, Spiš and Orava was presented by A. Winter in his publication⁶¹.

Conclusion

The issue of incorporating the territories of Zaolzie, Orava and Čadca which are subject of a dispute of Poland with Czechoslovakia was reflected in the press published in provincial Siedlce. The reader of periodicals published in the district town, located in the centre of the country, was informed on the situation in the states subject to conflict, national minorities with special focus on the Polish community on a current basis.

The message of the editorial teams of Siedlce periodicals was generally simple, and at the same time explicit. They did not have any doubts as to the rightness of Polish claims to the disputed lands. An exceptional was voice of S. Wąsowski in a discussion over the affiliation of Spiš, Orava and Čadca. In most of the texts, however, there were such doubts as the above author raised.

In the periodicals subject to analysis, the takeover by Poland of disputed territories of Zaolzie and parts of Spiš, Orava and Čadca was presented a sign of historical justice. The need of uniting all Polish people to bring help to fellow countrymen from the incorporated lands was indicated. It became an opportunity for mobilising pro-government organisations which was expressed by gatherings and manifestations, as well as a fund-raising event for fellow countrymen in need.

The press had a significant contribution in activating the local society to campaign for annexing the disputed territories through ongoing press coverage, but sometimes also an emotional tone of reports and appeals. Editorial teams contributed to awakening patriotic attitudes as well as nationalistic ones expressed in the society's mobilisation. The expression of the latter ones was the manner of portraying the Czechoslovakian state blamed for the conflict with Poland. An extreme example of aversion to the southern neighbour was calling it 'an artificial creation'.

⁵⁸ *ZS* 1938, 29: 3.

⁵⁹ *GP* 1938, 48: 594.

⁶⁰ *ŻP* 1938, 37: 3.

⁶¹ WINTER 2015: 40-41.

It is also worth mentioning that the Siedlce press did not notice independence aspirations of the Slovaks. A special article devoted to outstanding politician and priest Andrej Hlinka was exceptional in this area. When presenting the Czechoslovakian state, it was who the Czechs were recognised as its main host.

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