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Criminal offences as an element of anti-state activities in the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic from 1921-1925

Przestępczość kryminalna jako element działań antypaństwowych na ziemiach wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1921-1925

Summary: The purpose of this research is to illustrate the phenomenon of common crime in the eastern areas of Poland from 1921-1925. In the text, the author gives examples of this and its cause and effect on the functioning of the young Polish state. The timeline of the study covers the period from the signing of the Riga Treaty ending the Polish-Soviet War in 1921, to 1925 when the Bolsheviks temporarily gave up their aggressive attempts to spread communism in Europe. The author of the study focused on the most important type of crimes characteristic of the borderland such as robbery and smuggling, using the literature on the subject, source publications, and archival resources, mainly from the Central Military Archives, the Border Guard Archives in Szczecin, and Ukrainian archives in Lviv and Tarnopol. The research aims to show the characteristic types of common crimes, their connection with anti-Polish activities on the part of the USSR and Lithuania, and the intertwining of political crime with criminal offences. In the work, the author uses the critical analysis of sources, literary analysis, and the comparative method.

Keywords: common crime, border protection, Second Polish Republic, Borderlands

Streszczenie: Celem prezentowanych badań jest ukazanie zjawiska przestępczości pospolitej na wschodnich terenach Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1921-1925. W tekście autor podaje przykłady oraz przyczyny i skutki tego zjawiska dla funkcjonowania młodego państwa polskiego. Ramy czasowe opracowania obejmują okres od podpisania traktatu ryskiego kończącego wojnę polsko-sowiecką w 1921 r., do 1925 r., kiedy bolszewicy czasowo zrezygnowali z agresywnych prób szerzenia komunizmu w Europie. Autor opracowania skupił się na najważniejszych typach przestępstw charakterystycznych dla pogranicza, takich jak rabunek i przemyt. Wykorzystał literaturę przedmiotu, publikacje źródłowe i zasoby archiwalne, głównie z Centralnego Archiwum Wojskowe-

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go i Archiwum Straży Granicznej w Szczecinie oraz z archiwów ukraińskich we Lwowie i Tarnopolu. Badania mają na celu ukazanie charakterystycznych typów przestępstw pospolitych, ich związku z antypolską działalnością ZSRR i Litwy oraz przeplatania się przestępczości politycznej z przestępstwami kryminalnymi. W pracy autor wykorzystuje metodę krytycznej analizy źródeł, analizę literatury oraz metodę porównawczą.

Słowa kluczowe: przestępstwo pospolite, ochrona granic, II Rzeczpospolita, Kresy Wschodnie

Introduction

Common crime in the eastern borderland and eastern voivodships of the Second Polish Republic is a topic relatively rarely addressed in scientific works. The reason for this is mainly due to the difficulty of accessing dispersed sources. Historians are eager to cover terrorist activities and sabotage of a political nature. The authors of the available editions of the sources focus on political crime that directly harms the interests of the Polish state. Such spectacular acts of violence were associated with major political events. They also represented important moments in Polish history such as the attack on the train carrying Polesie Voivode Stanisław Downarowicz near Łowcza, or the attack by a Soviet sabotage band on the town of Stołpce. We can find information about these incidents in the old press. In contrast, typical criminal offences are less frequently mentioned in the sources, apart from police and court records. The press reported on the most violent ones such as murders and major robberies. In the borderlands, on the other hand, there was a constant struggle for survival. At the intersection of two countries, two opposing political and economic systems, there was a constant illegal flow of goods, people, and intelligence warfare.

The timeline of the article covers the period from the signing of the Riga Treaty ending the Polish-Soviet War to 1925, when, after Lenin's death, the Soviet leadership concentrated on building socialism in one country and postponing its expansion into Europe for the future. Such a dividing line would also be the establishment of the Border Protection Corps, which, in the difficult border service, replaced frequently changed formations that could not cope with the task assigned to them. The author does not cover the period of the Border Protection Corps' operations. The most important scientific studies partially treating common crimes are: H. Dominiczak, *Granica wschodnia Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w latach 1919-1939*, Warsaw 1992; P. Cichoracki, *Stołpce-Łowcza-Leśna. II Rzeczpospolita wobec najpoważniejszych in-*

cydentów zbrojnych w województwach północno-wschodnich, Łomianki 2012; idem, *Kresy Wschodnie w pierwszej połowie lat dwudziestych XX w. Uwagi do genezy powołania Korpusu Ochrony Pogranicza*, [in:] *U polskich stali granic. W 90. Rocznicę utworzenia Korpusu Ochrony Pogranicza*, A. Ochał, M. Ruczyński, P. Skubisz (eds.), Szczecin 2018; O. Razyhrayev, *Policja państwowa w województwie wołyńskim w okresie międzywojennym*, Warsaw 2019. The most relevant source publication used by the author is Wojciech Śleszyński's work titled *Walka instytucji państwowych z białoruską działalnością dywersyjną 1920-1925*, Białystok 2005.

1. Eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic in 1921-1925

1.1. The characteristics of the territory under research

Geographical location and natural conditions were very important factors for the safety of the population. The eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic were mostly former territories of the Russian and Austrian partitioning sectors. The Lithuanian borderland and Belarusian lands were areas mostly covered with forests, with a very sparse network of roads and railroads. Polesie, covered with marshes and a dense network of rivers, was a rarity on a European scale. The area was inaccessible for most of the year and provided convenient shelter during war for guerrillas and larger bands. The idea to overcome the difficult terrain of Polesie was to use local rangers, hunters, poachers, fishermen, and bee-keepers, i.e., people who had been living in the Polesie wilderness and marshes since childhood, to help the police and border services. Their loyalty was planned to be won in exchange for privileges and rewards¹.

Heading south, the situation was different. Agricultural Volhynia was not as heavily covered with forests. Ravines and gorges were numerous in Podolia. The south-eastern border was largely densely

1 November 10, 1924, Bereza Kartuska, Notes by Mayor Nowak, Commander of the School Battalion on effectively combating diversionary action, Bereza Kartuska, 10 XI 1924, Headquarters of the School Battalion OK No. IX, [in:] W. Śleszyński, *Walka instytucji państwowych z białoruską działalnością dywersyjną 1920-1925*, Białystok 2005, p. 143.

forested mountainous areas, providing very good conditions for smuggling and hiding people and weapons. The role of the forest in ineffective pacifications was repeatedly highlighted in records and situation reports on the state of security in various areas of the country. There was a thinly-spread settlement network in the eastern areas of the Second Polish Republic and roads and railroads sometimes ran through sparsely inhabited and forested areas, making it easier to raid trains and attack road travellers. Many of the train stations were dozens of kilometres apart, making it difficult to bring in help.

In most of the Polish-Lithuanian and Polish-Soviet border areas, the condition of the road network was abysmal. There was also a shortage of means of communication. A single police station sometimes covered 185 settlements². The state border ran across peasant land, forcing the owners to illegally cross it to farm³. The situation was similar in other border areas; along the Zbrucz River, there were stretches where fenced-off properties, orchards, or cornfields reached all the way to the river bank. This prevented effective patrolling of the border and was almost a dream area for those people who would cross the border illegally⁴. The Volhynian Polesie, with low population density, was backward in terms of civilisation, while Volhynia itself was a more densely populated agricultural region⁵. The Tarnopol Voivodship was an agricultural region as well. A very important economic role, however, was played by the Lviv Voivodship with the city of Lviv.

1.2. The attitude of the inhabitants of the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic towards the Polish state

At the beginning of the 1920s, the population living in the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic manifested resentment towards the Polish state, primarily because national minorities were harbouring hopes

2 Military Historical Office – Central Military Archives (hereinafter CMA), Ref. I. 303.4.122, p. 2, sh. 7, Minutes of the proceedings at the congress of the Eastern Borderlands' Voivods (Eastern Borderlands) on 8 November 1924 at the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

3 Ibidem, p. 4, sh. 9.

4 State Archives for the Tarnopol Region (hereinafter SATR), Fond 231, description 1, report 67, p. 3, sh. 37, Tarnopol Provincial Police Headquarters, Ref. No. 1765/22. Ternopil, September 26, 1922. Report on a visit to the Belarussian section of Border Guards No. 23, 39 and parts of 22.

5 W. Włodarkiewicz, *Przed zagładą. Społeczeństwo Wołynia i Małopolski Wschodniej wobec państwa polskiego (1935-1939)*, Warsaw 2013, p. 122.

for the establishment of their own states. In the first half of the 1920s, this resentment sometimes took a very drastic form of irregular armed clashes and organised raids by looting groups. The Lithuanian minority, with a reluctant attitude to the Polish soldiers and border guards, manifestly refused to make their homes available to the army for military quarters⁶. The Belarusian population also expressed an unfriendly approach towards the Polish state. At a conference of voivods held on 8 November 1924, Nowogród Voivode Marian Żegota-Januszajtis expressed an opinion that there was widespread dissatisfaction among the Polish and Belarusian population with the prevailing situation in the region, so in the event of war, the residents of municipalities in the borderlands of Belarus would stand up against the Polish authorities. Even the Catholic clergy in their sermons spoke out in harsh terms against the Polish administration⁷. A similar attitude was displayed by the Ukrainian population, which fought to establish its own state during World War I and the Polish-Ukrainian war. In the autumn of 1922, there were even fears of an armed uprising during preparations for elections to the Polish Sejm and Senate. At the time, the State Police officers were directed to protect the polling stations and the commissions working there, and the threatened area was to be supervised by soldiers. This attitude of a large part of the population made it difficult, if not impossible, for state services to cooperate effectively in combating crime.

At the turn of the 20th century, a double antagonism – social and ethnic – arose between the Polish nobility and Ukrainian landowners in Eastern Galicia. One reason for this, besides economic issues, may have been the higher civic and legal consciousness of Galician Ukrainians – former subjects of Austria-Hungary⁸. In the early 1920s, we observe instances of the interesting phenomenon of sympathy for criminals on the part of the local population, which had already occurred in the Kingdom of Poland during World War I. Bandits were

6 A. Głogowski, *Policja Państwowa i inne instytucje bezpieczeństwa na Wileńszczyźnie w latach 1918-1939*, Cracow 2015, p. 74.

7 CMA, Ref. No. I. 303.4.122, p. 2, sh. 7, Minutes of the Meeting of Borderland Voivodes (Eastern Borderlands)...

8 B. Hud, *Ukraińcy i Polacy na Naddnieprzu, Wołyniu i w Galicji Wschodniej w XIX i pierwszej połowie XX wieku*, Warsaw 2018, p. 284.

considered militant fighters against the aristocracy, and their actions were treated as an anti-caste rebellion⁹. According to the author, a similar situation may also have occurred in Belarusian lands.

1.3. The phenomenon of criminal activities in Poland in the first half of the 1920s

The first years of independence were a particularly turbulent period in Polish history. Within a few years following the end of World War I, crimes involving robbery committed on Polish lands were characterised by brutality. They were often carried out with firearms and often resulted in casualties. The punishments for crimes committed were correspondingly harsh, such as long-term imprisonment and even the death penalty. The number of robberies in 1921 reached 1,730, rising to 1,934 in 1922. In subsequent years, the number of these crimes decreased; however, the number of robberies among detected crimes was small in the 1920s and 1930s, accounting for between 0.2% and 0.6%. The robbery rate during the interwar period averaged 4-5 per one hundred thousand inhabitants¹⁰.

The development of criminal activities was often associated with anti-state political activity and sabotage. With police forces engaged in combating sabotage, a favourable ground was created for common crime. The most common of the crimes committed at the time were offences against authority; their number rising from 301 incidents in 1922 to 2948 in 1924, while the number of cases of disorderly conduct rose from 1,785 incidents in 1923 to 1,901 in 1925. Another type of offence was vagrancy, with the number of cases ranging from 445 incidents in 1922, 493 in 1923, dropping to 276 in 1924, and then rising again to 553 in 1925, and 621 cases in 1926. The phenomenon of vagrancy was traditionally associated with potential thievery, while vagabonds and beggars provided excellent material for the recruitment of spies by foreign services. Already the Mongols, during their invasions of Polish lands in the 13th century, were eager to use beggars

9 M. Rodak, *Banditry in the lands of the former Kingdom of Poland 1914-1918*, [in:] *Metamorfozy społeczne 21. The First World War on Polish Lands. Expectations – Experiences – Consequences*, W. Mędrzecki (ed.), Warsaw 2018, p. 167.

10 P. Piotrowski, *Rozbój. Uwarunkowania psychospołeczne, motywacja i racjonalność sprawców*, Warsaw 2011, p. 30.

and vagabonds as spies. In the area of common crime in the borderland, smuggling proved to be particularly important. It hit the country's treasury system and generated costs associated with enhanced border security. It instilled a disdain for the law in the multi-ethnic border community, but on the other hand, it often gave sustenance to entire villages and made up for market shortages of the most staple products. In Volhynia, 251 cases of smuggling were detected in 1923, whereas there were 91 and 92 in 1924 and 1925 respectively. The counterfeiting of money, securities, and documents was also significant; 64 crimes connected with document and money forgery were reported in 1922, 33 a year later, and as many as 293 in 1926¹¹. The forgery of money and documents directly hit the powers of the state and was always punished very severely.

In Volhynia, the most numerous groups of crimes consisted of burglary, theft, pickpocketing, theft of field crops, forest crimes, and theft of horses and cattle. Theft was common because the population did not use proper security measures to protect their property and livestock. In the second quarter of 1925, 67 robberies were recorded in the Volhynia Voivodship, and in 31 of them, the perpetrators were detected¹².

2. Common crime in the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic

2.1. Border crime – smuggling

Economic difficulties and, above all, the significant impoverishment of the population meant that smuggling, practised by border residents, not only casually but also professionally, was developing widely in the first post-war years. The main items smuggled across the eastern border included leather goods, clothing, footwear, cloth, furs, fur and leather for soles, livestock including horses, weapons, saccharine, tea, tobacco, cocoa, fats, salt, vodka and other goods. The fight against smuggling was hampered not only by the lack of preparation of bor-

11 O. Razyhrayev, *Policja państwowa w województwie wołyńskim w okresie międzywojennym*, Warsaw 2019, p. 135.

12 Ibidem, pp. 134, 141.

der services to combat the unlawful practice but also by the authorities' low interest in matters of securing the border from a customs and economic point of view¹³. In the USSR, stores were filled with smuggled goods from Poland, which were much cheaper than Soviet goods. Smugglers from across the eastern border were making huge amounts of money from this illegal activity¹⁴. The primary factors influencing smuggling methods and techniques were terrain, communication networks, and the distance over which the smuggled goods were to be transported. The assortment of smuggled goods, their quantity, quality, destination, and means available to smugglers, as well as the state's means of combating smuggling, played an important role¹⁵. Goods were smuggled primarily across the green border, but also through customs roads or the so-called local border traffic transition points¹⁶. Groups of smugglers were made up of from three to as many as a dozen people. The larger ones, called "bands", were led by so-called "drivers", who knew the terrain, while smaller ones crossed the border on their own. The smuggling groups were mostly unarmed. "Border sharks" were lurking smugglers, local peasants armed with pitchforks, rods, axes, and even firearms like revolvers and rifles and "otriezes" – sawn-off shotguns or rifles. These peasants probably also partook in poaching. Another particularly dangerous group of criminals on the border were horse thieves, the so-called "skamiejeczniczy", who chased stolen horses from the USSR to Poland¹⁷.

The existence of smuggling gave Soviet spies stopped at the border a very good alibi. It also provided an attractive form of additional emolument for those engaged in intelligence or courier activities, allowing the recruitment of new Soviet agents and even forcing or-

13 H. Dominiczak, *Granica wschodnia Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w latach 1919-1939*, Warsaw 1992, p. 173; The Border Guards Archives in Szczecin (hereinafter: BGA), Ref. No. 110/26, sh. 1, Cordon Platoon of the Military Police No. VII Ref. No. 71/pf Husiatyn. On 15 July 1921 Situation Report.

14 W. Włodarkiewicz, *Z genezy Korpusu Ochrony Pogranicza – napad na Stołpcę w 1924*, [in:] *Wojsko i kultura w dziejach Polski i Europy*, R. Dmowski, J. Gmitruk, G. Korneć, W. Włodarkiewicz (eds.), Warsaw–Siedlce 2006, p. 357. The chronological framework of the article covers the period of the so-called New Economic Policy – NEP – in the USSR.

15 M. Jabłonowski, J. Prochwicz, *Wywiad Korpusu Ochrony Pogranicza 1924-1939*, Warsaw 2003-2004, p. 173.

16 H. Dominiczak, op. cit., p. 176.

17 S. Piasecki, *Kochanek wielkiej niedźwiedzicy*, Warsaw 1999, p. 45.

dinary border criminals into intelligence work¹⁸. One of the most important goals of the Soviet secret services was to promote anarchy in the Polish Eastern Borderlands and prevent their full integrity with the rest of the state¹⁹.

2.2. Activities of criminal groups

In the first half of the 1920s, the activities of organised crime groups engaged in assaults and robbery posed a significant problem in the eastern borderlands of the Republic. Not only did individuals, farms, or mansions fall victim to armed bandits, criminals were able to terrorise entire localities as well. The roots of these groups' activities dated back to World War I and the struggle for the borders of the reborn Second Polish Republic. In their operations, the bands could often count on Soviet and Lithuanian support and they were often organised by Soviets and Lithuanians.

In the Polish-Lithuanian borderland, after the end of the heaviest phase of the Polish-Soviet war and the Polish-Lithuanian fighting, there was, as Lithuanian historian Tomas Balkelis put it, a "dirty war". Previously bloody battles between regular troops or paramilitary organizations turned into a war of civilians, conflicts between regions, localities, and even clashes within individual families. In the Polish-Lithuanian borderlands, robber gangs attacked villages at night, only to make their way back home in the morning²⁰. In the autumn of 1921, in agreement with the Łastowski government, diversionary groups and regular partisan Belarusian troops recruited primarily from among refugees from Vilnius and Grodno were organized in Lithuania. They conducted operations on their own, primarily looting the area²¹. In the last quarter of 1922, there were numerous armed incidents in

18 P. Skubisz, *Wojska pograniczne ZSRS na odcinku z Polską w świetle materiałów wywiadu II Rzeczypospolitej (1921-1939). Struktura i dyslokacja. Działalność wywiadowcza. Regulaminy służby*, Szczecin 2010, pp. 70-71.

19 R. Oleszkowicz, *Kontrwywiad kresowy. Działalność polskiego kontrwywiadu wojskowego na obszarze Dowództwa Okręgu Korpusu nr IX w Brześciu nad Bugiem okresie międzywojennym*, Cracow-Warsaw 2020, p. 212.

20 T. Balkelis, *War-revolution and nation making in Lithuania 1919-1923*, Oxford 2018, p. 154.

21 W. Śleszyński, op. cit., p. 55.

the Polish-Lithuanian borderland involving attacks on Polish Border Guard posts by Lithuanian partisan units²².

Although Vilnius was considered a safe area, in the second half of the 1920s the districts of Święciany and Vilnius were the target of robbery attacks by bands from Lithuania and Soviet Belarus²³. For example, according to information provided by administrative authorities in the Vilnius region, in mid-June 1922 Bolshevik bands composed of up to 50 people each, armed with machine guns, crossed the border in the Vilnius district area, burning down surrounding villages and landed estates. In the first half of June 1922, two people travelling from the train station to Raków, near the village of Dubrowa, were attacked by a 15-20 person gang robbing the victims of money and clothing and beating them into unconsciousness. The leader of the gang was said to be Michał Wenczeruk, who lived near the Adamaryn estate in the Raków Commune. The man allegedly had a Branch II service card issued in another name and wore the uniform of a second lieutenant in the Polish Army²⁴.

In mid-1922, there were increasingly frequent incidents of attacks by armed bands from the border areas of the Nowogród province. The gangs, each about 40 people strong, also included horsemen. These groups sneaked across the state border around midnight and operated along the border section burning and looting farms. There were murders of border residents and their abductions to the USSR. The gangs returned to the USSR at dawn with or without loot. The terror of the border population, and their fear for their lives and property, caused a lowering of the authority of the Polish state and undermined confidence in it. The Ministry of Military Affairs decided to partially reinforce the protection of this section of the border with troops that were part of DOK IX²⁵. They aimed to protect civilians from attacks and chasing bandits. The basis for success in fighting the gangs due

22 A. Głogowski, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 69.

24 BGA, Ref. No.118/2, sh. 18, Command Headquarters of 2nd Customs Battalion Raków, 19 June 1922, Officer's Order No. 18.

25 Command of Corps District No. IX, headquartered in Brześć Litewski.

to their *modus operandi* and nocturnal activity was the speed of issuing alerts²⁶.

The security situation in Volhynia was somewhat different. In a letter to the Łutsk Voivodship Office in 1923, the leadership of the investigative service explained the genesis of crime in Volhynia as follows: since the end of 1920, during the Polish-Soviet war, numerous robbery bands composed of large numbers of demobilised soldiers were formed. These bands in Volhynia felt that they were masters of the situation, furthermore, the population, which was susceptible to Bolshevik agitation, gave them support and obstructed the actions of the police²⁷. Among the most dangerous gangs operating on the border were the groups of Marcin Panek "Ataman Czort", Dulka and Mucha Michalski. Mucha Michalski's gang attacked a mansion in Nacza in 1923, killing its owner Stefan Świącicki with a shot to the head. Attacks on manors often took on a very dramatic character. During the attack on the Levada mansion, barns and pigsties were burned, and the animals enclosed in them perished in the flames. They also set fire to the quarters from which people were not allowed to leave²⁸. Some of the gangs operated in an extremely brutal manner, such as Stepan Kozik's gang, which conducted its operations in Volhynia, or the criminal groups of Awerian Stashenko and Ivan Kozak. In addition to looting the local population, Kozak's gang murdered a family of five in the Aleksandrówka village. Shortly after committing this crime, Ivan Kozak was killed by the police²⁹.

Criminal groups were tracked down and destroyed by state services. Police officers' pursuit of bandits sometimes had a very tragic outcome. One such incident is described in an account of a shooting that took place on the night of September 13-14, 1922. During the chase, police officers shot armed criminal Józef Ostrowski. At the time, two constables from the Połoczna post in the powiat Kamionka Strumiłowa

26 17 June 1922, Baranowicze – Order from the commander of the 9th Cavalry Brigade delegating designated squadrons from the 26th and 27th lancer regiments to reinforce Customs Battalions, [in:] W. Śleszyński, op. cit., p. 51.

27 O. Razyhrayev, op. cit., p. 137.

28 M. Piątkowska, *Życie przestępcze w przedwojennej Polsce. Grandesy, kasiarze, brylanty*, Warsaw 2012, p. 135.

29 O. Razyhrayev, op. cit., p. 140.

were killed. Police officers suffered deaths as a result of the extremely irresponsible manner in which firearms were used during the chase³⁰.

In the autumn of 1922, gangs under the command of Osipowicz and Ławruć were active in the Kossowo Poviát. Polish services liquidated a group consisting of 7 members of the Soviet Zakordot³¹, which carried out attacks in the Sarny Poviát, as well as Konrad Stachowiec's gang operating in the Stolin area and hiding in deep swamps and forests. Finally, on December 16, 1922, there was a regular battle between the State Police and a 10-member gang loitering in the vicinity of Kamień Koszyrski. A large number of people carrying out armed robberies on their own were also tracked down³². A small gang, whose ringleader was a bandit nicknamed Wowk, operated in the Zaleszczyki Poviát and included deserters from the Polish Army. Bandits terrorized mansions and wealthier landlords by ordering the population to bring money and food to a certain place with threats of murder or arson. The leader of the criminal gang was shot dead by police³³.

A serious problem for the local population was the practice of horse theft, which threatened the foundations of the farmers' livelihood. Stolen horses were driven across the border of the USSR. After World War I and the border wars, Poland suffered from a great shortage of horses or even a complete lack of them. A large number of these animals were needed by the military and, in the event of a necessary requisition, their absence represented a danger to the defence of the state³⁴.

At the beginning of November 1924, 8 diversionary attacks were reported in Volhynia province, of which none had been prevented.

30 SATR, Fond 231, description 1, report 36, sh. 3, relation.

31 Zakordot – a foreign branch of the KP(b)U with headquarters in Kharkov. It had its own military department.

32 W. Śleszyński, op. cit., p. 54. The Polesie Voivode at the time was Stanisław Downarowicz.

33 SATR, Fond 231, description 1, report 35, State Police Headquarters of the 4th District of Tarnopol, Tarnopol, 10 August 1922.

34 In the book titled *The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia*, we can read an opinion about horse thieves in Russia in the 19th century: *Periodic epidemics, or other disasters, cannot compare to the damage that horse thieves inflict on the countryside. A horse thief keeps the peasants in constant fear. In Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, horse thieves led violent and dangerous lives, risking capture by police, or peasants who would take the law into their own hands and execute them. Russian peasants were so afraid of the horse thieves that they used the cruellest forms of lynching against those captured. Paradoxically, this strengthened the criminals' resolve because it forced them to join together and form larger groups. After: M. Galeotti, Wory. Tajemnice rosyjskiej supermafii, Cracow 2020, p. 29.*

Of the 35 robberies, 6 were detected; of the 62 arsons, 21 were detected; and of the 135 horse thefts, 54 were detected. The criminal actions aimed at creating unrest, according to the Volhynia voivod. Sabotage on the railroad and destruction of bridges and station buildings were all aimed at preparing for an uprising of the non-Polish population in the spring of 1925. Volhynia Voivode Kazimierz Młodzianowski expressed the opinion that the reason for the spread of common crime was the disappearance of a sense of law in the population, the hard material situation, and the lack of positive influence from landowners³⁵.

Particularly drastic examples of the activities of robbery gangs, linked to political terrorism, were the attack near Łowcza on a train carrying Polesie Voivode Stanisław Downarowicz, the attack on the train near the village of Leśna – in a wooded area near a wilderness area, called Kupiszowe Jamy by the local population, or the forest of the Byteń estate. In an action near Leśna, the attackers focused primarily on robbing clothing, cash, and jewellery. Just as at Łowcza, they tried to forcefully give the attack political significance by shouting that Poles had illegally entered Belarus. The only fatality of the attack near Leśna was a police officer murdered with premeditated intent³⁶.

In March 1925, a group of 30-40 people carried out a robbery attack on the train station in Lachowicze and the local State Police station. A total of 110 bandit crimes (murders and robberies) were committed throughout 1925 in the north-eastern provinces. In 1924, there were 207 incidents³⁷. The number of armed incidents in 1921-1924 for the three north-eastern provinces alone reached 900. The incidents of this armed aggression can be divided into externally inspired and politically conditioned, while on the other hand, there were purely criminal actions. However, it is impossible to determine what were the particular reasons for individual attacks since most of them were

35 CMA, Ref. No. I. 303.4.122, p. 7, sh. 12, Minutes of the Meeting of...

36 P. Cichoracki, *Stolpce-Łowcza-Leśna. II Rzeczpospolita wobec najpoważniejszych incydentów zbrojnych w województwach północno-wschodnich*, Łomianki 2012, pp. 226, 228.

37 Ibidem, p. 271.

not explained³⁸. In the first half of the 1920s, the most dangerous gangs had already been eliminated³⁹.

The development of banditry in the east of the Second Polish Republic was facilitated by easy access to illegal weapons. Possessing them enabled resistance against the authorities. Weapons could also have been used during riots⁴⁰. The problem was the large amounts of them hidden in haystacks or in the woods. During the pursuit of the bandits, rifles were found hanging in trees a short distance from the houses⁴¹. The searches carried out by the military and police were generally unsuccessful, and it was necessary for the police to conduct constant operational intelligence⁴². In September 1921, police had a list of people in possession of illegal weapons in the villages of the Zaleszczyki Poviát during searches being conducted, but the searches had almost no effect. The Poviát Governor of Zaleszczyki claimed that without paid confidants and cash rewards the local population could not be disarmed⁴³. The Lviv Voivode threatened residents of villages where illegal weapons or ammunition would be discovered (even during a fire) with punitive military expeditions⁴⁴. Gun accidents were not only criminal acts committed by civilians. Many drastic situations involved the unauthorized use of weapons by soldiers. For example, on September 16, 1924, one of the privates of the 54th infantry regiment, while standing at a post near the detention centre, shot another private for disobeying orders of the service and allegedly insulting the post⁴⁵.

38 P. Cichoracki, *Kresy Wschodnie w pierwszej połowie lat dwudziestych XX w. Uwagi do genezy powołania Korpusu Ochrony Pogranicza*, [in:] *U polskich stali granic. W 90. Rocznicę utworzenia Korpusu Ochrony Pogranicza*, A. Ochał, M. Ruczyński, P. Skubisz (eds.), Szczecin 2018, p. 56.

39 M. Piątkowska, op. cit., p. 135.

40 Central Historical Archives of Ukraine in Lviv (hereinafter CHAUL), Fond. 791, description. 1, report 13, sh. 10, Lviv, 31 March 1921.

41 W. Śleszyński, op. cit., p. 144.

42 CHAUL, Fond. 791, description 1, report 13, sh. 10, Lviv, 31 March 1921.

43 SATR, Fond 231, description 1, report 105, sh. 93, The District Office in Zaleszczyki, Ref. 391/pf, Zaleszczyki, on 25/9.1921 to the Presidium of the Province in Tarnopol.

44 SATR, Fond 231, description 1, report 35, sh. 33, Lviv Province, Presidium Department ref. no. 15244/1922. Lviv, 22 July 1922. To all the Gentlemen Heads of the District Offices of Lviv Province.

45 Command of Corps District No. VI General Branch L. 57090/Tjn.Og. Org. Lvov, September 18, 1924 Commander of the 11th Infantry Division Stanisławów. Daily report, [in:] M. Franz, M. Kardas, A.A. Ostanek, *Wojsko Polskie a sytuacja wewnętrzna Małopolski Wschodniej. Działalność Rejonów Bezpieczeństwa 5, 11 i 12. Dywizji Piechoty w latach 1924-1925*, Warsaw 2018, p. 239.

2.3. Combating crime by state services

In the Nowogród, Polesie, Tarnopol, and Volhynia Voivodships, protection of the eastern border was the responsibility of the Customs Battalions under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Border crossings of the first category were manned by Customs Battalions and the second category by the Police. The district commander of the State Police in 1922, in a letter to the district commander of the Police Station in Łuck, wrote that a large number of Customs Battalion soldiers were of Ukrainian and Jewish nationality, and mostly came from Volhynia⁴⁶. The Customs Battalion Headquarters received information about prohibited contacts between border guards. The contacts with Soviet border guards were evidence of a deep decline in service discipline and facilitated the work of Soviet agents⁴⁷. In sources stored in the Border Guard Archives, we find a description of a case when two privates of the 38th Customs Battalion, while on duty at the border over the Zbrucz River, facilitated smuggling from the Soviet side to the Polish side for bribes. The amount of bribes was 500 marks and a bottle of vodka⁴⁸. Border service soldiers were often accommodated in peasant huts with farmers who were themselves involved in smuggling⁴⁹.

The eastern border was also guarded by the Border Guard and Cordon Military Police, about whom we read positive comments in the report of the Border Guard Voivodship Headquarters in Tarnopol. According to him, 7 soldiers of the Cordon Military Police were to apprehend more smugglers and illegal border crossers than 400 Border Guard soldiers⁵⁰.

After the Customs Battalions had been liquidated, the border with the USSR on the Belarusian section was manned by the State Police. From that point on, it was much more difficult for smugglers to carry out their trade, since Polish policemen, as Sergiusz Piasecki wrote,

46 O. Razyhryayev, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-146.

47 BGA, Ref. No. 122/38, sh. 1, Ministry of the Treasury, General Headquarters of the Customs Battalions, Mobilisation and Organisational Section, Ref. No. 2/72/tjn. Warsaw, day of III 1922.

48 SATR, Fond 231, description 1, report 52, sh. 3, District State Police Headquarters in Skalat, Ref. No. 2249, To the State Police Headquarters of District IX, Investigation Office in Ternopil, Skalat, 5 September 1922.

49 H. Dominiczak, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

50 SATR, Fond 231, description 1, report 67, p. 12, sh. 41, Provincial Headquarters of the Border Guard in Ternopil, L. dz. 1765/22. Ternopil, 26 September 1922. Report on a visitation of the border on the Belarusian section of Border Guards No. 23, 39 and parts of 22.

had a spat with the Bolsheviks. Soviet border guards called Polish policemen “chornyie vorony” /black crows/ and “chornaja sotnia” /black army unit/⁵¹. The State Police’s protection of the national border was based on permanent posts, which was not enough to protect against gangs or organised groups of smugglers. There was also a lack of adequate training and personnel⁵². In the Volhynia Voivodship, throughout the interwar period, the State Police were unable to establish proper contact with the local population. The police authorities did not find support from the Ukrainian population nor from a large part of the Polish population either⁵³. As Polesie Voivode Kazimierz Młodzianowski stated: *The police [were] in good condition but few in number and not very brave. If anything, they would be slaughtered in an instant*⁵⁴. In the Vilnius region, State Police stations were deprived of means of communication so, in the event of an attack by a larger gang, there was no way to call for help⁵⁵.

The Neutral Belt Volunteer Self-Defence called the Belt Self-Defence or Civic Militia was active on the border with Lithuania. Composed of former military officers, it was unable to stop the actions of Lithuanian partisans or local criminal groups⁵⁶. During the existence of Central Lithuania, its public security was supervised by the State Police, established in March 1921 with strong support from the military⁵⁷. The moral state and training of the local police left a lot to be desired as they also committed a number of irregularities, including thefts, together with soldiers⁵⁸.

On the eastern border, the fight against smuggling was improved by the establishment of the Border Guard Corps. At that time, smuggling activity had virtually ceased to exist. The Soviet border troops also made a significant contribution to his decline, effectively combating

51 S. Piasecki, op. cit., p. 129. Customs Battalions were formed in the earlier stage battalions-military rear formation of an auxiliary nature. Serving in the stage battalions were soldiers of lower health categories, older in age, sometimes even crippled.

52 A. Głogowski, op. cit., p. 6.

53 O. Razyhrayev, op. cit., p. 27.

54 CMA, Ref. no. I. 303.4.122, p. 4, sh. 9, Minutes of proceedings at the congress....

55 A. Głogowski, op. cit., p. 70.

56 Ibidem, pp. 77-78.

57 *Encyklopedia Historii Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Warsaw 1999, p. 197.

58 W. Śleszyński, *Policja Litwy Środkowej*, “Biuletyn Historii Pogranicza” 2005, no. 6, p. 8.

smuggling on their own territory with brutal repression⁵⁹. In the early 1920s, the Soviets manned the western border with a well-armed defence formation organized along military lines and subordinate to the GRU security service. Under the conditions of a terror-stricken country, few in the USSR had the courage to engage in smuggling activities⁶⁰. The smuggling problem remained on the borders with Lithuania, Latvia, Germany, and Romania⁶¹.

2.4. Assaults on police officers

Crimes that undermined the authority of the state included assaults on State Police officers. Here, we can present some examples: in July 1922, residents of the village of Rudnik in the Krzemieniec Poviát disarmed police officers who had been sent there in order to conduct an investigation. In the Równe district, residents of Derażne beat an intervening police officer who came to interview people and inspect the horses⁶². An example of an unusual crime suffered by State Police officers was the lynching of bandits snatched from the hands of the police. A small group of thieves terrorised residents of a village near Kopyczyńce in September 1921. After the lynching was carried out: *The local population, after the deed was done, apologised to Constable Hoff (from whose hands they had snatched the bandit), who, surprised by the incident, was very upset, so the whole community escorted him all the way to the forest and reassured him not to make a fuss about it, because they, having no other choice and the support of courts...*⁶³. This self-judgment was described by the newspaper "Gazeta Poranna," reporting that the crowd, while recapturing the bandit, disarmed the police officer escorting him⁶⁴. The incident shows the population's lack of trust in the state, the courts, and the police. The villagers preferred to administer justice themselves, believing that the state would not do so. The disarming and beating of the police officer occurred at the Kranzberg State Police station and, in addition to the criminal

59 H. Dominiczak, op. cit., p. 175.

60 M. Jabłonowski, J. Prochowicz, op. cit., p. 180.

61 H. Dominiczak, op. cit., p. 175.

62 O. Razyrayev, op. cit., p. 13.

63 SATR, Fond 231, description 1, report 36, sh. 11, copy (an untitled document).

64 "Gazeta Poranna", 19 September 1921.

background, the act also had a political motive, as during the assault the perpetrators shouted at the officer: “*You red-headed Lachy, you’ve sucked enough of our blood*” or “*You cursed Dublany Lachy, you have nothing to do here on our land*” etc.⁶⁵

3. Social and political impact of common crime

Polish authority on the border was weakened by an ineffective civil administration, demoralised police force, whose officers drank alcohol addictively and went over to the USSR with their entire families, a complete lack of authority of state power, or toleration of overt incitement to riots. The army was not able to casually fight off the assaults, being unaware of the local situation and having against them a reluctant local population often cooperating with the bandits⁶⁶. The population favoured these diversionary bandits because they enforced obedience by threat and force⁶⁷.

Ruthless assaults by criminal groups were often inspired by the Soviets, who wanted to expel and terrorise Polish citizens from the Borderlands by this means. This way, they intended to prepare the local population for an anti-Polish uprising. Soviet saboteurs and agitators as well as Bolshevik soldiers would group together at specific locations, they were supported by local bandits and would organise an assault. They would then flee abroad, particularly with their looted horses, while the local criminals dispersed peacefully to their homes. Such terror lowered the authority of the Polish authorities in the Borderlands in the eyes of the local population⁶⁸.

⁶⁵ State Archives for the Lviv Region, Fond 1, description 57, report 72, sh. 17-18, District State Police Headquarters in Sambor to L. 972 State of public security. Account. To the State Police Headquarters of District VIII in Lviv. Sambor, 13 September 1922.

⁶⁶ 5 August 1924, Warsaw, Letter of the Minister of Military Affairs General W. Sikorski to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers on taking decisive steps to stop the activities of diversionary groups in the eastern borderlands, [in:] W. Śleszyński, op. cit., p. 80.

⁶⁷ CMA, Ref. I. 303.4.122, p. 4, sh. 9, Minutes of the proceedings at the congress...

⁶⁸ W. Śleszyński, op. cit., p. 75.

Conclusion

Common crime in the Eastern Borderlands was a rampant phenomenon in the first half of the 1920s. The reasons for this widespread crime were economic problems, the devastation after World War I, the severance of economic ties, and the collapse of empires-metropolises like Tsarist Russia for north-eastern lands, Belarus and Volhynia, and Austria-Hungary for Eastern Galicia. According to the author of the presented article, the social consequences of World War I, and the Polish-Ukrainian, Polish-Soviet, and Polish-Lithuanian wars were important factors in the great increase in crime. They caused a lack of respect for human life and a lack of respect for private and state property. A group of people emerged who had previously lived off the war by fighting on the front lines or making a living from requisitioning or looting in the rear. These people, during peacetime, engaged in what they did best, which was violence. The procedure could not be confronted by ineffective law enforcement with no authority within society. Criminal activity was facilitated by the terrain and proximity to the hostile USSR, constantly initiating sabotage activities. A characteristic phenomenon on the eastern borders of the young Polish state was a small border war, fought not only in the borderlands of Central Lithuania but until the mid-1920s on the established Polish-Soviet border from Eastern Galicia to the border with Lithuania. In addition, during the period in question, the USSR had a specific economic regime called the New Economic Policy (NEP), allowing for limited activity by small entrepreneurs. With a widespread shortage of consumer goods, smuggling developed; the lack of economic cooperation between Poland and the USSR forced these illegal activities.

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