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Wartime Management of the Government of National Defense Headed by Wincenty Witos during the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1920

Zarządzanie wojenne Rządu Obrony Narodowej na czele z Wincentym Witosem w czasie wojny polsko-bolszewickiej 1920 roku

• Abstract •

Wincenty Witos is one of the undisputed Fathers of Independence of Poland, reborn in November 1918 after 123 years of partition. An outstanding statesman, leader of the people's movement. Three-time Prime Minister of the Polish government in 1920–1921, 1923, 1926. During the Polish-Soviet War, Witos headed the Government of National Defense, which lasted 433 days, including 254 during the war. When analyzing his management as Prime Minister, two stages should be distinguished. In the first one, he was absorbed in matters of war. He was in favor of concluding peace as soon as possible, which he expressed in his exposé in 1920. In his second exposé, he worked on the reconstruction of the country after the war and the further development of the Republic of Poland as a democratic state. During the war, Witos's role in mobilizing peasants to participate in the defense of threatened borders, as well as defending independence in the war with Bolshevik Russia in 1920, was particularly important. The article discusses the decisions made regarding management during the war: mobilizing society to rally around

• Abstrakt •

Wincenty Witos jest jednym z niekwestionowanych ojców niepodległości Polski, odrodzonej po 123 latach zaborów w listopadzie 1918 roku. To wybitny mąż stanu, przywódca ruchu ludowego, trzykrotny premier rządu polskiego. Aktywnie włączył się w działania mające na celu odbudowę państwa, obronę jego granic i unifikację. Witos był jedną z najważniejszych osób w wielkim procesie przemiany chłopu przywiązanego do monarchów zaborczych w Polaka i świadomego obywatela. To właśnie Witos i ruch ludowy pozyskali chłopów dla idei polskości i własnego państwa. W czasie wojny polsko-bolszewickiej Witos stał na czele Rządu Obrony Narodowej, który trwał 433 dni, z których 254 przypadły na czas wojny. Analizując jego zarządzanie jako premiera, należy wyodrębnić dwa etapy. W pierwszym pochłonięty był sprawami wojny. Opowiadał się za jak najszybszym zawarciem pokoju, czemu dał wyraz w exposé w 1920 r. W drugim etapie pracował nad odbudową państwa po starciach wojennych oraz dalszym rozwojem Rzeczypospolitej jako państwa demokratycznego. Szczególnie istotna była rola Witos

the authorities of the reborn Poland and defend the country's independence, to reject Bolshevik propaganda and fight for the future of the Polish nation and state. The practice of war management was manifested in frequent field trips, organizing support and supplies for the population. Witos paid particular attention to the Borderlands. He emphasized that the presence of the head of the government and this direct contact made it possible to learn about many difficult problems of the reborn state, and at the same time, direct contact with the authorities was an element that bound the population to this state, and the people did not feel alone in solving these problems.

w mobilizowaniu chłopów do udziału w obronie zagrożonych granic, a także samej niepodległości w wojnie z Rosją bolszewicką w 1920 roku. W artykule omówione zostaną podejmowane decyzje dotyczące zarządzania w czasie wojny: mobilizowanie społeczeństwa do skupienia się wokół władz odrodzonej Polski i obrony niepodległości kraju, do odrzucenia bolszewickiej propagandy i walki o przyszłość narodu i państwa polskiego. Praktyka zarządzania wojennego przejawiała się w częstych wyjazdach w teren, organizowaniu wsparcia oraz zaopatrzenia ludności. Szczególną uwagę zwracał Witos na Kresy. Podkreślał, że obecność szefa rządu i bezpośredni kontakt ze społeczeństwem pozwoliły rozpoznać wiele problemów odrodzonego państwa, a jednocześnie ów kontakt stawał się elementem przywiązania ludności do państwa, niwelującym poczucie osamotnienia obywateli w obliczu trudności, z którymi się borykali.

Keywords: wartime management; Government of National Defense; Wincenty Witos; Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920

Słowa kluczowe: zarządzanie wojenne; Rząd Obrony Narodowej; Wincenty Witos; wojna polsko-bolszewicka 1920 roku

Introduction

Wincenty Witos is one of the undisputed Fathers of Independence of Poland, reborn in November 1918 after 123 years of the partitions. An eminent statesman, the leader of the peasants' movement, he was actively involved in the activities aimed at rebuilding the state, defending its borders and unification. Witos was one of the most prominent people in the great process of transforming a peasant committed to the invading monarchs into a Pole and a conscious citizen. It was Witos and the peasant movement that won the peasants over to the idea of Polishness and their own state. Three times the Prime Minister of the Polish Government in the reborn Poland (in 1920, 1923, 1926) (Podgajna, 2019), he was first appointed the Prime Minister of the Government of the National Defense on July 24, 1920. He held his post for 433 days, 254 of which fell during the war. When analysing his wartime management as the Prime Minister during and after the Polish-Bolshevik war, two phases should be distinguished. During the first one, he was preoccupied with war matters. He was in favour of achieving peace as

soon as possible, which he expressed in the exposé in July 1920. In the second, he worked on the reconstruction of the state after the war and the further development of the Republic as a democratic state.

Witos's role in mobilising the peasants to participate in the defense of the threatened borders, as well as the independence itself in the war against the Bolshevik Russia in 1920, was particularly important. The article examines the management decisions taken during the war: mobilising society to rally around the authorities of a reborn Poland and to defend the country's independence, to reject the Bolshevik propaganda and fight for the future of the Polish nation and state.

War decisions and management in 1920

The spring of 1920 brought significant changes to the country's political situation. In April, Piłsudski launched the so-called Kiev expedition. After some temporary successes, the Polish armies suffered defeats and the Soviet army went on a strong counter-offensive, heading west. The Polish state was facing more and more peril every day. Due to the challenging situation, political disputes and party fights diminished in the state. On July 1, 1920, the Sejm passed a law creating the Council for the Defense of the State, which was to decide on all matters relating to the war and the establishment of peace. It consisted of: the Chief of the State as the Chairman, the Marshal of the Sejm and the Prime Minister, as well as two representatives each from ten Polish parliamentary parties, government representatives, and the military (Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland, 1920, p. 327; Drozdowski, 2021c, pp. 13, 14; Drozdowski, 2021b, pp. 200–201).

In an effort to encourage the peasants to serve in the army and provide for the defense of the Polish state, on July 15, 1920, the Sejm unanimously passed the Land Reform Act. The Act announced that 80% of the land from the land reform would be allocated for distribution among the landless and smallholders. Privileges in receiving land were to be given to soldiers and war invaders. The land servants of the parcelled estates were guaranteed land allocation. The law provided for the establishment of rural and communal land commissions. For the land that was bought out, the state was to pay the owners 50% of the average market price in the area. Peasants were to pay the state for land at market prices. The maximum possession for landowners was set, according to a parliamentary resolution of July 10, 1919, at 180 ha. The Agrarian Reform Act also covered dead-end estates and church property. Soldiers, invalids and smallholder peasants were to receive financial assistance in the form of long-term loans for the purchase of land. For the richer

peasants, 20% of parcelled land was guaranteed for distribution. The law stipulated that any peasants who refused to take part in the war, arbitrarily occupied land of the manor or acted against the authorities would lose the right to benefit from the parceling out. The financial implementation of the land reform was to be handled by the Agricultural Bank established at that time together with the General Land Office (Borkowski et al., 1970, pp. 62–63).

Confronted with a dangerous situation caused by the Red Army's actions, Piłsudski decided to propose Wincenty Witos for the post of the Prime Minister. The appointment as the Prime Minister of the leader of the Polish People's Party Piast, one of the leading politicians and statesmen of the time, had its impact. It was believed that only Witos could mobilise and unite all the country's social forces, integrate the peasants to resist the enemy. Witos received the proposal to form a government while staying in his hometown of Wierzchosławice, working in the fields. He was visited by an emissary of the Chief of State Józef Piłsudski, who informed him that he had been entrusted with the mission of forming a government (Witos, 1990, pp. 78–79). After returning to Warsaw and meeting with J. Piłsudski, Witos began work on assembling the Cabinet. The critical situation of the country involved in the war with the Soviet Russia, and the successes of the Red Army in its counter-offensive to take Wilno, Baranowicze, and Grodno, meant that the new government could be formed within a day. In the Prime Minister's seat, in the Namiestnikowski Palace on Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw, following several months of a Polish state reborn after 123 years of slavery, sat the representative of the peasants, an eminent politician, self-taught, representing realism in politics and a vision of evolutionary change.

The very unique situation in which the Witos Government was formed and in which it had to operate was reflected in the programme that Witos presented to the Polish Sejm on July 24, 1920 in an exposé. Witos's government was a coalition government and was named the Government of National Defense.¹ The Government's

¹ The government consisted of: The President of the Ministers – Wincenty Witos, the Vice President – Ignacy Daszyński, the Minister of Foreign Affairs – Eustachy Sapiecha, the Minister of Internal Affairs – Leopold Skulski, the Minister of Treasury – Władysław Grabski, the Minister of Railways – Kazimierz Bartel, the Minister of Provisions – Stanisław Śliwiński, the Minister of Labor – Edward Pełowski, the Minister of Education – Maciej Rataj, the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs – Władysław Stesłowicz, the Minister of Agriculture – Juliusz Poniatowski, the Minister of Justice – Stanisław Nowodworski, the Minister of Public Works – Gabriel Narutowicz, the Minister of Industry and Trade – Wiesław Chrzanowski, the Minister of Military Affairs – Józef Leśniewski, the Minister of the Former Prussian Partition – Władysław Kucharski, the Minister of Culture and Arts – Jan Heurich, the Head of the Ministry of Public Health – Witold Chodźko (The Legislative Sejm, 1920, p. 166, c. CLXVI/4–CLXVI/5).

programme, as Witos emphasised, “was created and dictated by events, and can be defined in very few words: defense of the state, end of the war, conclusion of a just and lasting peace. [...] We stand at the Polish Sejm as the Government of the National Defense appointed by the entire representation of the nation. Seizing power at a dangerous moment for the Fatherland, we vow to concentrate all our forces to defend the borders of the state, the wholeness and independence of the Republic. Ready at all times to conclude a lasting, just and democratic peace, inscribing such a peace on our banner, we shall not yield to any threat to violate the Polish nation’s right to freedom and unity” (*Sprawozdania Stenograficzne Sejmu Ustawodawczego...* [Legislative Sejm], 1920, p. 166, c. CLXVI/7–CLXVI/8). In his exposé, Witos called on the public to sacrifice, defend and save the homeland. He realised that being entrusted with the function of Prime Minister was an attempt to unite the peasant masses at a time when the state’s security was under threat. The Cabinet he appointed regarded consolidating society and winning it over to the defense of the country as its main task. A feverish agitation in this spirit therefore began. Committees for the Defense of the State were set up, numerous rallies and meetings were organised, and leaflets calling on the population to join the army as volunteers were published.

Witos as Prime Minister addressed a proclamation to the peasants, which was distributed in several million copies throughout the country. Written in outstanding language, it appealed to the patriotic feelings of the peasants and called on them to testify for defense: “Let each of you do your duty! Who among you is fit to bear arms, go to the battle front! Today, the greatest duty of every Pole is to serve in the defense of the Fatherland. On the battlefield, at the front, there is room for everyone who can carry a weapon. All others must sacrifice their work and property. Down with pettiness, down with doubt. The people, who are the power, must neither doubt nor give up [...]. It depends on you, my fellow peasants, whether Poland will be a free people’s state, where the people will rule and live happily, or whether it will not become a slave of Moscow, whether it will develop in freedom and prosperity, or whether it will be forced, under the whip of the Russian rulers, to work for the invaders and feed them with their blood and drudgery” (Witos, 1920d, 1990, pp. 81–82).

He also addressed the women by asking directly: “Give your husbands, sons and brothers to a service that is hard but full of glory. Run away from your villages and homesteads those who have deserted from the army, because they have tarnished the honour of the nation and the people; show contempt for those who, at the moment when the Homeland is in danger, when you are threatened with disgrace and destruction, sit at home and avoid military service” (Witos, 1990, pp. 81–82). Many

such proclamations to the Polish nation were made (Do mieszkańców Warszawy [To the People of Warsaw], 1920, p. 2; Do wojska [To the Military], 1920, p. 2). They were aimed at mobilising and strengthening the fortitude to defend the homeland against invaders.

In his proclamation to soldiers, the Prime Minister Witos wrote: "Whoever of you excels with bravery on the battlefield can become an officer. The homeland will reward you generously after the war is over. Soldiers who have been at the front for a longer period of time or who have volunteered for service will receive land from the state before anyone else when peace comes, because this is clearly stipulated in the Agrarian Reform Act" (Do wojska [To the Military], 1920, p. 2; Drozdowski, 2021a, pp. 96–97).

Wincenty Witos's government seized its responsibilities during the ongoing war. The wartime administration consisted of preparing emergency laws and regulations under intense time pressure, submitting them to the Council of State Defense for approval. These concerned the drafting of five new classes into military service (from 1890 to 1895), the introduction of *ad hoc* military courts-martial for desertion, incitement to desertion, espionage, unauthorised recruitment, cowardice before the enemy, plunder, insubordination by actively challenging a superior, mutiny and military rioting, as well as other offences in the former annexed territories, such as rape, murder, and malicious damage to other people's property (Powołanie pięciu nowych roczników [The Appointment of Five New Classes], 1920, p. 6; Sądy doraźne za zbrodnie przeciw wojsku [Summary Courts for Crimes against the Military], 1920, p. 6).

General Józef Haller, who was widely popular among the public, became the commander of the forming Volunteer Army. His activity and work, his fiery speeches and proclamations meant that he managed to mobilise around 100,000 people in a period of a few weeks. These were dedicated and self-sacrificing people working for others. The ranks of the Volunteer Army included peasants, the intelligentsia, civil servants, landowners and a significant number of priests. The units formed complemented the frontline units. The volunteers brought a new fighting spirit to the army, and rekindled the belief in victory, which was of great importance, given that the vast majority of soldiers were demoralised by the constant retreat. Those who could not join the Army voluntarily made donations to serve its needs (Witos, 1990, pp. 87–88).

Numerous agricultural, educational and cultural organisations called and issued appeals for support in the struggle for freedom. All parties developing work in the countryside were also active in this respect. A strong accent in this propaganda, especially that of the people, was placed on the issues of future social

reform. The extensive propaganda work that was part of the wartime management brought to a halt the anti-war movement, that part of society that, tired of wars and conflicts, wanted stability. The consolidation of society, the vision of the future on the basis of promised reforms had the effect of winning it over to the defense of the country. There were collections for the army organised in the countryside, some of the population bought state loans and declared other benefits. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the countryside did not adopt a uniform attitude during the Red Army offensive. A large part of the population listened to the appeals of the Witos government, but a minority took a waiting attitude (Borkowski et al., 1970, p. 65).

Assessing the attitudes of the peasants in the wartime period, Witos stated that they “passed the test”, but realistically admitted that “the countryside generally held out reluctantly, although there were more and more frequent cases of clear sympathy for the Bolsheviks. This appeared to be the case in the eastern borderlands and the lands of the former Kingdom, but Pomerania and Poznań were not entirely free of it either. The nests of sympathy were also found on the territory of former Galicia” (Witos, 1990, p. 143).

The number of troops was increasing day by day, but the wartime situation was very harsh. Moscow declared its willingness to enter into direct negotiations with the Poles, but these were delayed because the Bolsheviks wanted to make the most of their success at the front, seize Warsaw, install a revolutionary government under their subordination and only then to negotiate. As a substitute for this, the Galician Revolutionary Committee was set up on July 8 as the future authority for eastern Galicia, followed by the formation of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee of Poland in Białystok on July 30, with Julian Marchlewski at its head. There were problems with arms supplies, due to the activities of the Communist International, which, in support of Soviet troops, issued an appeal to the workers of the world to support the Russian revolution fighting the Polish invasion, which supported nationalist forces hostile to Poland. The strongest response to this action came from Germany, where the favour was secured with the promise that the Bolshevik troops on their march west would respect the inviolability of the partitioned German-Russian border. The result was that trains carrying war supplies for Poland were stopped or deliberately sent to distant parts of Germany to avoid being forwarded to the front. A very difficult situation developed in Gdańsk, where, in order to prevent the unloading of arms and ammunition, the dockers went on strike and the Senate of the Free City of Gdańsk passed a resolution to maintain neutrality (Brzoza, 2003, p. 31). The Western states advised the Polish government to step aside, assessing the reality as being hopeless.

In the light of the tragic situation, Witos, as the Prime Minister of the Government, met with the Commander-in-Chief Józef Piłsudski in mid-August 1920. The meeting was also attended by Deputy Prime Minister I. Daszyński, Ministers L. Skulski, A. Sapiecha, Chief of Staff Gen. Rozwadowski. The plan for the defense of Warsaw and the offensive, as well as the political position, were presented and discussed at length. The main war objectives were to defend Warsaw and strike offensively against the Bolshevik forces. For security reasons, the details were left to the knowledge only of the military men who had worked out the offensive plan. These were Piłsudski, General Tadeusz Rozwadowski and General Maxime Weygand.²

At several cabinet meetings, the government was also busy preparing plans for the possible evacuation of the capital and the government's departure. Piłsudski proposed Częstochowa as the temporary seat of the Government, due to the religious feelings of the Poles and the great sentiment and memory of the victory over the Swedes there. Ministers Rataj, Daszyński and Poniatowski pointed to Kraków. A large group was in favour of Poznań. However, it was unanimously agreed that the Government should not leave the capital until the last moment, and that in the event of a necessary withdrawal, to continue to organise defense and fight until victory (Witos, 1990, p. 89).

In addition to the laws and ordinances on war measures, a large-scale rallying and propaganda campaign for the defense was introduced on Polish territory. It was conducted by MPs belonging to almost all political groupings. As a result, morale was rising among soldiers and the public. However, the most important contributor to this was the authority of Prime Minister W. Witos, who was largely responsible for the weakening of anti-war sentiment among the peasantry. The Presidium of the Council of Ministers, on the initiative of I. Daszyński also set up the Foreign Propaganda Office in Berlin to strengthen Poland's information campaign outside its borders (Drozdowski, 2021a, p. 102).

The Roman Catholic Church also joined in to uplift the spirits of the capital's population. The clergy authorities ordered public prayers in all churches. Huge crowds of people, walking in procession with banners through the streets of Warsaw, sang religious and patriotic songs, asking God in their prayers for victory. Witos, wanting to observe the tens of thousands of people participating in the prayers,

² General M. Weygand – the Chief of General Staff of the French Armed Forces; advisor to the Chief of General Staff of the Polish Army, General Tadeusz Rozwadowski. Member of the Inter-allied Mission to Poland, established on the initiative of British Prime Minister Lloyd George, which was to advise the Polish government during the truce negotiations with Soviet Russia. It was a British-French diplomatic mission, established in accordance with the provisions of the Spa Conference. The mission arrived in Warsaw on July 25, 1920, less than three weeks before the Battle of Warsaw.

went to one of them. He talked about defending the state and praying. To his remark that “one should pray and ask God, but one cannot use God everywhere, because God has also left free will to people”, the interlocutor became indignant and replied that “this is such godless talk because nothing can happen without God’s will”, stating that “the Bolshevik invasion is God’s punishment for the sins and a test sent upon the nation, because he often uses such instruments” (Witos, 1990, p. 95). This campaign did not seem to please Witos, and on his return to the Presidium he asked the Minister of the Interior, Skulski, to prevent healthy citizens, the civilian population in the face of the greatest threat to Poland, from “walking mindlessly through the streets of Warsaw”, and instead of praying they could work at strengthening its defenses. However, it was not decided to issue bans on public prayers, due to the mood prevailing among the population and a significant part of the clergy, which could have had undesirable effects (Witos, 1990, p. 95).

For the effective functioning of the state even in the most challenging wartime conditions, it was crucial, in Witos’s opinion, for the administration to operate efficiently and under the rule of law. He was still concerned with these matters in the Galician period, but they did not recede into the background in the reborn Poland. He intensified this interest in matters of administration when he headed the government during the Polish-Bolshevik war. In his first days as Prime Minister, he issued a proclamation to civil servants and state functionaries, calling on them to perform their duties with integrity in order to maintain law and order even during wartime. He stressed their importance in building the Polish statehood by acting as a link between the state and its citizens. He was interested in the complex of issues concerning the relations of “authority – citizen” or “office – citizen” (Drozdowski, 2021a, p. 90). He referred to civil servants as the builders of the state. He made every effort to ensure that civil servants had a sympathetic approach to petitioners and that matters were dealt with in the shortest possible time. He emphasised that a civil servant “is a servant of the state and of society” (Witos, 1920c). At the Cabinet meetings, Witos was the initiator of normative acts whose content was the administration’s activity during the war. At a meeting of the Council of Ministers on October 31, 1920, the Prime Minister proposed that one of the forthcoming Cabinet meetings, which was done, should be devoted in its entirety to “the organisation of the state administration of all the districts, taking into account the annexed territories” (Zakrzewski, 1977, pp. 114–115).

The practice of wartime management also manifested itself in frequent trips to the field, organising support and supplies for the population. During the ongoing war, Witos, as Prime Minister, travelled frequently. With his authority, he largely weakened the anti-war mood among the peasants. The peasants gave him their

support by joining the army and undertaking other activities for it. There were times when he even conducted meetings on a daily basis, including in places where fighting was still going on. He stressed that these visits were not just tactical, but had a much deeper meaning. On the pages of his diary, reporting on these trips, he wrote that he tried to get to know the local people and their everyday life. He often dealt with matters that required a quick intervention on the spot. He would stress that the presence of the Head of the Government, this direct contact, made it possible to learn about many difficult problems of a reborn state plunged into war, and that, at the same time, the Head of the Government's direct contact was an element binding the people to that state, and was an expression of the fact that the people were not alone in solving the problems with which they were struggling (Zakrzewski, 1977, pp. 108–109). After the fighting had ceased, he went on a visit to the Eastern Borderlands to meet the people who had been most affected by the negative consequences of the war: "This vast expanse of country had for several years been an area of constant fighting, struggle, the passage of various armies carrying death and destruction there" (Witos, 1990, p. 154). Witos used to stress that no data was available on the consequences of the war, either in material terms or on the scale of the social and national relations created in the area. Visits to the Borderlands allowed him to "collect and prepare the necessary material" for work on laws and regulations (Kirwiel, 2009, p. 465). The outcome of one of the visits, made on October 27 1920, was a report presented to the Council of Ministers, on the basis of which the government adopted recommendations on policy in the Eastern Galicia. These sought to unify the conduct of the Polish military and civilian authorities who took charge of these areas. A ban on mass arrests was introduced. It was stressed that political poaching or personal considerations must not play any significant role. All ministries were obliged to show assistance to the population living in these areas. Without unnecessary bureaucratic formalities, the individual ministers dealt with urgent matters for the local population (Zakrzewski, 1977, p. 109).

In the first days of August, the Bolshevik army attacking from the north crossed the Bug River and approached Warsaw at a very fast pace. The Polish command issued an order to regroup on August 6. Its guiding idea was to break away from the enemy, create a final defensive line based on the Vistula, and prepare Polish forces for a counterattack. Witos as the Prime Minister of the Government additionally faced a very difficult challenge at the beginning of August 1920, when Piłsudski, devastated psychologically by the situation at the front and attacks from the National Democrats, submitted his resignation as the Head of State in the presence of Deputy Prime Minister I. Daszyński, Minister L. Daszyński and Minister L. Skulski at the Presidium of the Council of Ministers, with a request that he be replaced in that

role. Witos did not accept the resignation, locking the letter in the fire box and keeping the whole affair a secret. When hostilities ended, he went to the Belvedere and handed Piłsudski the letter of resignation (Witos, 1990, pp. 90–91).

Before the military plans were put into action, the battle for the capital began on August 13. The Bolsheviks broke through two lines of defense, took Radzymin and approached Praga. On the subsequent day, they managed to occupy Ossów as well, but were held back by a bloody assault by Polish troops. Positions changed hands and neither side gained the upper hand. General Władysław Sikorski's 5th Army joined the action, attacking the right wing of the Soviet forces from Modlin, as well as General Lucjan Żeligowski's reserve troops. The scales of victory on August 15 began to tip on the Polish side and the Russians were pushed beyond the second line of the Polish defense. The repulsion of the attack on Warsaw did not yet mean the defeat for the Bolsheviks. They suffered it only under the blows of the maneuver divisions, which struck from above the Wieprz River on the flank and rear of the Russian troops engaged in the fighting in Warsaw. The surprise of the Soviet command, and thus the success of the Polish troops, was a foregone conclusion. From that point on, the war turned into a victorious pursuit of the Bolsheviks (Brzoza, 2003, pp. 31–32). The Bolsheviks were crushed in the battles of Komarov on August 31, the last cavalry battle of the 20th century. In the first days of September, the Polish army found itself on the banks of the Bug River. The subsequent phase of the war began, culminating in the battle for Lida and the victorious Battle of the Niemen on September 28.

Peace negotiations began on August 20, 1920, in Mińsk. The Moscow delegation set conditions that would make Poland a vassal state as a Soviet republic. Poland would accept the Curzon line as its border, abolish its army and hand over all arms and armaments plants to Russia. The implementation of the provisions would be under the control of the Red Army. After the defeat at Warsaw, the peace negotiations were moved to Riga and Russia withdrew its exorbitant demands. Due to the approaching winter and the lack of a military settlement, as the Red Army was not destroyed although it suffered many defeats, the peace preliminaries were signed on October 12, 1920, and fighting ceased a week later.

The Prime Minister Wincenty Witos stood before the Sejm on January 27, 1921, and reported on the work of his Cabinet. He began with the crucial issue of completing work on the constitution of the Polish state, which had been interrupted by the threat of the loss of Poland's independence and sovereignty. He referred to the necessity of lifting Poland out of the difficult economic situation, which would be "the test of our civic and political maturity, our state capacity, the measure of our patriotism". The Prime Minister devoted much space to matters of demobilisation,

which were initiated after the cessation of hostilities. Demobilisation was to encompass 60% of soldiers. The number of officers was to be reduced by 25%. Some 50,000 horses were also to be demobilised and put to the use of farmers.³ In his speech, he stressed his continuing concern for public administration as the guarantor of a smoothly functioning state. As the main task, he mentioned ensuring the internal security of citizens and the strict observance of the law, as well as the need to unify all Polish lands. He also referred to the issue of local self-government, “the expansion of which he considered one of the most urgent and beautiful tasks of our legislation, as well as equipping it with the necessary means of action”. A significant part of the speech concerned the Polish economy. He highlighted the difficulties the country was experiencing, and pointed out that the government had decided to reduce state spending on the army, administration and to liquidate or reorganise state institutions (the State Timber Export Office, the State Coal Import and Export Office, etc.). He referred to the need for land reform, education and schooling reform. He also referred to foreign policy matters, and stressed the need to end wars and disputes. Witos regarded the year 1921 as a transitional stage due to the end of warfare, on which the Polish economy had hitherto been focused. The most imperative task was to rebuild industry, and to conclude favourable international trade agreements (The Legislative Sejm, 1921, pos. 203, c. CCIII/5–CCIII/24).

The Polish-Bolshevik war came to a definitive end on March 18, 1921, with the signing of the Treaty of Riga. The Riga Peace established a border between Poland and Soviet Russia running from the Dvina in the north, through Belarus (Mińsk remained on the Soviet side), the marshes of Polesie to the Zbruch and Dniester. Both sides undertook not to interfere in each other's internal affairs and not to support activities directed against them. An odious obligation was imposed on the Polish side to disarm and intern the allied Ukrainian army. The compensation for the Polish side was set at 30 million roubles in gold, which was never paid anyway. An important point in the treaty was the Soviet side's obligation to return Polish cultural property taken out of the Polish lands after January 1, 1772, including archives, museum collections. The agreement also involved granting the population the right to choose their place of residence, which became the legal basis for the return of a large wave of repatriates from all corners of Russia, and the right to guarantee the development of cultural life to the national minorities, Polish and Russian, in both countries. The peace did not fully correspond to the successes achieved by the Poles in the final phase of the war, and in political terms it meant the cancellation of Polish

³ The details on demobilisation were included in the regulation of the Council of Ministers of November 29, 1920. On this basis, an inter-ministerial committee for demobilisation was established.

aspirations in the east. Indeed, the war did not result in the creation of a Ukrainian state, which was the most important objective of the Kiev expedition. Poland had to recognise the subordination of the Ukrainian and Belorussian republics to Moscow. Consequently, the war realised Roman Dmowski's concept of incorporation, albeit undoubtedly to a limited extent. Piłsudski's federation plans failed (Witos, 1920a; *Traktat pokoju między Polską a Rosją i Ukrainą...*, 1988).

Wincenty Witos was notified of the signing of the treaty during a gala performance at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw to celebrate the enactment of the Constitution on March 17, 1921. The Prime Minister addressed the participants in the ceremony after the end of the third act of Stanisław Moniuszko's *Countess* opera. He expressed his deep satisfaction with the provisions contained in the treaty: "The treaty signed today in Riga, closes the period of bloody struggles that turned huge tracts of our land into deserts, exposed millions of people to death or the hell of torment or anguish, set back the natural development of the culture and the farm of all Europe. We believe that with this moment, not only Poland, which was most severely affected by the war, but Europe has at last entered the state of peace it desired, so necessary for healing the wounds inflicted by the war, consolidating the gains of democracy, bought with great sacrifices, and creating a new order in Europe, on the ruins of the war-torn partitioning states. This peace is an eloquent testimony to the fact that the Polish state has within itself those internal forces that constitute the invulnerability of independence. The Treaty of Riga is a strong link in the chain of the nation's efforts to defend the state framework of the Republic. The eastern borders of the state are established by the Treaty of Riga in a decisive manner, removing all doubt, because it establishes them on the basis of a settlement between interested states. The period of war, begun by the partitioning powers, closes with the will of a reborn Poland" (Witos, 1921b).

After the agreement of peace, Witos stressed that he fully accepted the established territorial and political realities: "thanks to our army and the concerted strain of all the forces of the nation, we finally brought Bolshevik Russia to make peace with us, we realized that in our negotiations we had to stand on the ground of the real interests of Poland. We did not betray any greed. Thanks to this, we have also won peace with Russia, the terms of which we will keep, expecting the other side to do the same. For it should become the basis for a peaceful, and therefore mutually beneficial, neighborhood between Poland and Russia" (Witos, 1921a).

Witos was proud that this was the first state act of international significance signed by the Republic, and emphasized that the treaty was signed in accordance with the democratic values within which the Polish state was reborn: "The Treaty of Riga is eloquent proof of the good will, moderation and sincerely democratic

intentions of the Polish government and people. Despite military successes on the battlefield, we entered the peace treaties with the strong intention of bringing about peace not on the basis of drawing consequences from our fortunate military situation, but on the basis of agreement. These indications guided our Polish peace delegation throughout the treaties, and such is the conclusion of the treaty, putting an end to the war” (The Legislative Sejm, 1921, p. 223, c. CXXIII/6–CCXXIII/10). Witos was well aware that despite the peace treaty, the state of tension in mutual relations remained, and that the concessions made by the Russians were only tactical. Nevertheless, he comforted himself with the thought that the Bolshevik government, due to the internal problems, would inhibit, at least for a while, the innate tendency to expand westward. At the same time, he assured that “the government is determined sincerely and loyally to keep its treaty obligations without interfering in any way in the internal affairs of the countries dealing with us, and, expecting the same from the other side, will require that the other side in no way violate the obligations assumed in the treaty” (The Legislative Sejm, 1921, p. 223, c. CCXXIII/6–CCXXIII/10). Thus, the basic political principle was non-interference in the internal affairs of the Soviet Russia, which was not to interfere in actions aimed at overthrowing the Bolshevik regime and also to further stop the Polish expansion to the east. This allowed for the settlement of peaceful relations and the security of the eastern state border (Podgajna, 2021, pp. 35–36).

Conclusions

Summarizing the study of the wartime management of the Government of National Defense under the leadership of Prime Minister Wincenty Witos, it should be emphasized that he struggled with the enormous difficulties associated with the war, the functioning of the young, only a few months old reborn Polish state after 123 years of captivity. Among Prime Minister Witos’s main activities for war management are the following:

- The agitation aimed at the peasants to mobilize for the defense of the homeland – the proclamation and numerous speeches carried the profound message of a peasant Prime Minister to people of the same background. No one else among politicians had such tremendous authority among villagers to convince them to fight for an Independent Poland.
- The preparation of exceptional legislative acts, relevant to the management of the critical situation at the front and in the background of the warfare.

- The organizational activities related to the development of a plan for the defense of Warsaw in cooperation with the Council for the Defense of the State, meetings with the Head of State, Commander-in-Chief of the army and representatives of political parties, organizing a plan for the eventual evacuation of Warsaw and the Government's departure.
- Measures to reliably inform the Western countries about the Polish government's standpoint during the war effort – as a counterweight to communist propaganda, which presented the situation in a contradictory manner.
- The exercise of public administration management in wartime to engage government officials as a link between the state and the ordinary citizen.
- Field trips to organize the support and supply of the civilian population.

By carrying out a number of the above-mentioned activities, Witos succeeded in mobilizing multitudes of peasants to stand up for state sovereignty and independence in the face of the Bolshevik invasion. The government carried out a series of reforms in the form of laws and regulations that allowed the war effort to continue while allowing the state apparatus to function. Witos was obliged to make decisions quickly, reacting to the changing war situation. He was consistent in his actions. In formulating his government, he was ready to cooperate with all political forces from nationalists and conservatives to socialists. At critical moments for the nation, he proclaimed the need for unity in the name of achieving superior, nationwide goals. Standing at the head of the government, he united the quarreling parliamentary parties, carried out a number of reforms important to the Polish state, and united the nation to fight the Bolshevik threat.

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