The history of Podlaskie Voivodeship

At the dawning of its history, Podlaskie Voivodeship was covered by impenetrable primeval forests and swamps, which extended from the Bug to the Niemen River. Very few people inhabited only the edge of the voivodeship. This border area was under the ethnic influence of Polish, Russian and Lithuanian cultures.

In the XIII and XIV centuries the western part of present Podlaskie Voivodeship - Kurpie Land - permanently joined the Mazovia district. Subsequent to this, the middle strip of the area, extending between the Drohiczyn and Biebrza swamps, was incorporated into neighbouring principalities. The Drohiczyn Land temporarily even became a part of the Wlodzimiersko-Halickie Duchy. In 1253 the ruler of this duchy - Prince Daniel Romanowicz crowned himself King of Ruthenia. This interesting event, however, was incidental only. In the XIII century the princes of Mazovia and Wlodzimiersko-Halickie Duchies had to face strong competition arising in the north of the voivodeship, due to the establishment of the country of Lithuania. At the beginning this resulted mainly in the escalation of Lithuanian invasions of the Podlasie land. The continuous wars were the reason for a low population density in the region. Settlement concentrated only around the most important towns such as Bielsk, Drohiczyn, Lomza, Mielnik, Rajgrod and Suraz.

In the XIV century the expansion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was an important occurrence in our region. The Lithuanians conquered the entire area of the western Ruthenian lands. At the same time they also competed with Mazovian princes for the areas situated by the rivers of Biebrza, Narew and Bug. Though temporarily, the Lithuanians even conquered a part of the Mazovia land - the Vizna land.

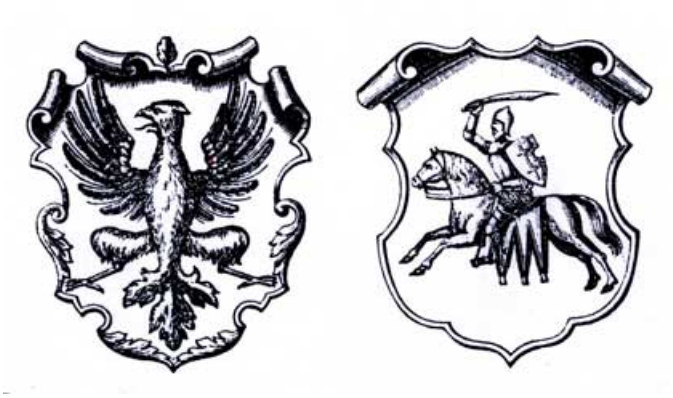
The borderland between Lithuania and Mazovia was shifted from one government to the other several times. Such a situation lasted until the XV century, when the border between Lithuania and Mazovia was finally established. From the north it stretched along the rivers of Elk, Biebrza, Narew and Slina, then towards the Bug River near the mouth of the Nurc River, next downstream of the Bug and then south along the Liwiec River.

In 1413, the part of the region which previously belonged to the country of Lithuania, became a part of Trockie Voivodeship. 100 years later this voivodeship was divided, that resulted in the formation of Podlaskie Voivodeship. In 1566 the Brzeski poviat, situated at the middle of the Bug River, was excluded from the voivodeship. This important centre has never returned to our province.

At the same time many other important changes also took place in the Duchy of Mazovia. From the mid - XIV century particular parts of the duchy, including Wizna and Lomza Lands, had been attached to the Crown of the Polish Kingdom. In 1526, when the last Mazovian Piast died, the whole of Mazovia was integrated into the Crown. In 1529 the Mazovian Voivodeship was created from the lands of Duchy of Mazovia

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The establishment of the Polish-Lithuanian Union in 1385 and overcoming the power of the Teutonic Order in 1410 led to peace and stabilization in the entire borderland. This also resulted in settlement progress and the economic revival of the region. Settlement was developing in three directions. Mazovian colonization started in Wizna Land and expanded in a north-easternly direction - along the Biebrza River and its tributary, and then to the west between the Narew and Bug Rivers. Russian colonization was developing from the south-east - from Brzesc, along the Bug River - and from the east - from the towns of Wolkowysk and Grodno along the lower Hancza, Lososna and Swislocza Rivers. The Lithuanians, however, settled the areas situated south-west from the Merecz and Olita, along the Niemen and Szeszupa Rivers. Rapid country settlement progress led to the creation of a municipal system. In the XV century civil rights were granted to the towns of Lomza, Tykocin, Kolno, Nowogrod, Radzilow, Ciechanowiec, Zambrow, Wasosz, Bielsk Podlaski, Mielnik, Drohiczyn and Bransk.



Throughout the XVI century the progressive colonization of Lithuanian forests was observed. During that time, about 40% of all town foundings took place in the voivodeship. Among them there were both the king towns (Milejczyce, Berezniki, Kleszczele, Knyszyn, Narew, Kuznica, Nowy Dwor, Krynki, Jalowka, Wasilkow, Augustow, Lipsk, Filipow, Przerosl and Wizajny) and magnate towns (Choroszcz, Bocki, Waniewo, Siemiatycze, Goniadz, Grodek, Zabludow, Sidra, Rajgrod, Raczki, Sejny, Bakalarzewo and Grajewo).

From 1569 the Polish - Lithuanian partnership became more permanent. During the Sejm of Lublin a decision was made about joining under a single crown. It was also decided that Podlasie will be excluded from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and incorporated into the Crown. From that time, until the partitioning of Poland, Podlaskie Voivodeship comprised one of the several voivodeships in the Malopolska region. It was situated, as a narrow strip of land, between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Mazovian Voivodeship. Signs of stagnation in the voivodeship were undoubtedly noticed at the end of the XVI century. Half of a century later, the Cossack Uprising (1648-1654), then the war with Russia (1654-1667) and finally the Swedish invasion (1655) caused real disasters.

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population of the voivodeship significantly decreased. Large areas of the voivodeship were depopulated. The municipalities changed their character; specific craft industrial production was ceased (e.g. in Bielsk, Drohiczyn, Tykocin and Wysokie Mazowieckie) and municipalities were transformed into settlements of an agricultural character. In effect, most towns fell into ruin and have never regained their previous splendor and importance.

At the end of the XVII century and during the next century many new towns were founded by owners of large magnate fortunes and orders: Bialystok, Suwalki, Szczuczyn, Stawiski, Jedwabne, Czyzew, Sniadowo, Rutki, Osowiec and Rutka. The weak economic base of most of them, except Bialystok - the present capital of Podlaskie Voivodeship - very often determined their further development. The city of Bialystok, with its magnificent Branicki Palace, visited by many famous artists, became an impotant cultural centre, situated in the borderland between the Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Jesuits' and Piarists' orders and patronage of such magnates as Sapieha, Radziwiłł and Branicki had a significant impact on cultural development. It was also difficult to overestimate the importance of the National Education Committee and other activists working during the Enlightenment.

The second half of the XVIII century brought with it slow social and economic growth to the Republic of Poland. Podlasie and Northern-Eastern Mazovia were involved in this development. These areas remained Polish territory until 1795. After the Third Partition of Poland and after forfeiting its independence, nearly the entire area of Podlaskie Voivodeship became part of Prussian territory. It joined a newly established, by the invader, administrative unit: New Eastern Prussia. In 1802 these lands constituted the Bialostocki department. Only a small part of the voivodeship, with Narewka, Milejczyce and Krynki, was left under the Russian annexation.

In 1807, by virtue of the Tylżycki Treaty Agreement, the eastern part of our voivodeship was incorporated into the Russian Empire as the Bialostocki district. As a result the western and northern part of the voivodeship both constituted a part of the newly created Duchy of Warsaw. According to administrative division this area was given the name of Lomzynski department.

In 1815, after the collapse of Napoleon, by virtue of the Vienna Congress decisions, the Polish Kingdom was established. The Lomzynski department, called Augustowskie Voivodeship became a part of the Polish Kingdom. The authority of this administrative unit was allocated to Suwalki city. The Polish Kingdom's government economic policy resulted in the economic revival of the region. This historical period left us with a splendid monument of polish technical thought – the Augustowski Canal, a masterpiece of the Kingdom's ministry of treasure – F. Drucki-Lubecki. The purpose of this construction was to make Polish export independent of Prussian Baltic Sea harbours. At that time the Bialystok district, a peripheral part of Russia, was developing much slower.

When the November Uprising broke out in 1830, the Bialystok district became both a supply and Russian Army concentration base, whose aim was to suppress the uprising.

Despite the fact that these lands were highly saturated by enemy Tsar troops, partisan actions were conducted in Puszcza Bialowieska, as well as the Augustowska and Kurpie areas. On the area of the present voivodeship a few battles also took place, e.g. in Tykocin, Rajgrod and Hajnowka.

After suppressing the November Uprising, in 1832 Tsar authorities established a tariff boundary between the Polish Kingdom and Russian Empire. In order to avoid high tariffs, some Polish manufacturers moved their businesses from the Kingdom to the district area of Bialystok, where they found adequate natural conditions for non-tariff sale on the huge Russian and Far East markets. Thus the process of industrialization on these lands was begun. This led to the creation of a powerful center of textile industry. At first, textile plants were launched in the towns placed around Bialystok e.g. Suprasl, Choroszcz and Grodek. Later, in the 60s, Bialystok became the dominant center of this industry. This economic development was supported by the building of a roads system along certain railway lines: Warsaw – Petersburg (1862), Brzesc – Białystok – Elk (1873), Bialystok – Baranowicze (1886), Siedlce – Wolkowysk (1906), Grodno – Suwalki – Orany (1889) and many other local connections.

The citizens of Podlaskie Voivodeship took active part in the January Uprising of 1863. This uprising was different from the previous one mainly because insurgents concentrated on partisan actions. Distracted forces, operating in forests, consisted of no more than dozens or several dozens of insurgents. As opposed to the situation in other voivodeships, lower nobility and peasants widely took part in the combats of our voivodeship. Insurgent actions were mainly concentrated in the woods of the Augustowska Forest, Bialowieska Forest and Czerwony Woods by the Lyk and Biebrza Rivers. On the 6-7 of February, in the area of Siemiatycze, one of the largest battles of the January Uprising took place. The uprising was suppressed, with the result of Tsar victimizations against the polish people. In 1866, the areas of present Podlaskie Voivodeship, which earlier constituted part of the Polish Kingdom, were divided into two guberniyas: Lomzynska and Suwalska.

A highly important event was the enfranchisement of peasants, carried out on the lands incorporated into the Empire between 1861-1864. In the Polish Kingdom, enfranchisement took place in 1864. It is worth mentioning, that the idea of enfranchisement came from the insurrection authorities. Tsar authorities granted lands for the peasants for free, in order to pull them out of the uprising. These peasants, free from subjection and able to work on their own land, made a contribution to the development of a merchandise economy as well as the development of local and regional markets.

The so - called russification policy was a great threat to the state of native Polish culture. Within the framework of this policy uniate church, monasteries with schools were closed. It became difficult to sustain traditional culture patterns. During the 80s of the XIX century a portion of the russificated jewish population, called “litwiaki”, arrived to Bialystok. This complicated the national-cultural relations even more, but at the same

time Bialystok became the most important centre of Jewish cultural life next to Wilno. Before World War I, in the western part of the voivodeship, popular culture began reviving; a good example was the activity of Adam Chętnik.

As a result of World War I, the development of industry and fall of many urban districts took place. In 1915, while withdrawing from these areas, the Russians looted factories, stealing personal property and very often destroying the buildings. The most destruction occurred alongside the Narew River, where the front line of the battle lasted for the longest period of time. Some places were totally destroyed, and some towns were up to 70% ruined (e.g. Nowogrod, Sniadowo, Jedwabne). Population in the area of the present voivodeship, was reduced by about 40%, as the result of war and the compulsory evacuation of citizens.

The introduction of German economic policy to the occupied area, except some efforts to reconstruct industry, resulted in negative effects. The enslaved country was rather treated as a source of stock. Predatory forest exploitation continued. Lumber was removed to Germany where it was burned on the spot. In order to have better access to forest exploitation railway tracks were built in the Bialowieza and Knyszyn Forests and lumbermills were created. Moreover, chemical wood processing industries were built in Hajnowka. Contributions, restrictive decrees and other forms of victimization against inhabitants of rural and urban areas caused significant of the economy weakening.

The rise of the Polish state in 1918 greatly changed the geographical position of present Podlaskie Voivodeship. However, the liberation of our voivodeship proceeded in a differently compared to the rest of Poland. In November 1918, only the west part of Podlaskie attained Voivodeship independence. The remaining parts were gradually, as the German Army withdrew from the east, retrieved by the Polish Army. This process ended in the summer of 1919.

By virtue of a seym act, on August 2 Bialostockie Voivodeship was established. It covered almost the entire territory of three provinces: Grodzienska, Łomzynska and Suwalska. The capital of the voivodeship was the largest city - Bialystok. Within the area of the voivodeship there were 15 administrative districts and 3 province cities: Grodno, Lomza and Suwalki. On November 19 1919 head of state Józef Piłsudski appointed Stefan Bądzyński Voivode of Białystok. The period of the II Republic of Poland was characterized by progressive reconstruction and economic development of the voivodeship. Also in the cultural field destruction caused by war as well as the invader policy were eliminated. Theaters were introduced, debates were organized and publishing activity was revived in our voivodeship. The press and cinema experienced particular growth.

World War II is the most tragic period in the history of our region. On September 1 1939 Germans attacked Poland. From the early hours on the area of Podlaskie voivodeship the battles began. In Podlasie the defense was led by the Independent Operation Group “Narew”. German domination was so extensive that the Polish Army was forced to withdraw to the southeasterly direction. The toughest battles were fought near Wizna

withdraw to the southeastern direction. The toughest battles were fought near Wizna, Nowogard and Lomza. Unfortunately, already on September 12, Germans took over the capital of the voivodeship – Bialystok. An additional blow to our army was the Red Army invasion. By virtue of a Russian-German agreement (The “Ribentrop – Mołotow” Pact) from the, September, 17 the eastern lands of the Republic of Poland became an object of aggression of the Russian army. On the September 22, 1939 the Germans directed Bialystok city to the Russian authorities after which a common procession took place. The voivodeship was incorporated into the Belarussian Socialist Russian Republic. Only the suwalskie area was made part of Germany.

Despite an only two year Russian regime tragic consequences were observed in the history of this region. This period was characterized by the powerful regime of NKWD - an everlasting process of arrests and sentencing people to Siberia. On the June 22, 1941 Germany attacked the USRR. After a couple of days, the Russian Army was displaced from the area of the present voivodeship by the Germans. One month later by virtue of Hitler’s decrees Bezirk Bialystok was established. It covered almost the whole area of Podlaskie voivodeship except Suwalki which was earlier made part of Eastern Prussia. After the end of the war Bialystok was also supposed to join Eastern Prussia and undergo germanization. The years between 1941 – 1944 were characterized by ruthless economic exploitation, terror among civilians and the complete extermination of Jewish people.

Both invaders, aimed at the destruction and limitation of Polish culture development, perceived it as a great threat to their authority. Occupation caused great loss among people connected with culture. Many of them were murdered and others were forced to leave the country for several years.

From the first days of the Russian occupation, in autumn 1939, the first conspiracy organizations were created, whose main goal was to defeat the invaders. The Home Army played the most important role. Apart from the Home Army, other military organizations, such as the National Armed Forces, the Peasant Battalions and other smaller organizations operated in the area.

On July 27, 1944, after a two day struggle, Bialystok was occupied by the Russian Army and by the end of October, the German Army left our region. Only lands to the north of Narwia were left under German occupation, until the January offensive in 1945.

After World War II, eastern lands, lying outside the newly established eastern border, did not return to bialostockie voivodeship. At the same time the voivodeship was extended by such administrative units from Eastern Prussia as: Goldap, Olecko and Elk. The voivodeship existed in this configuration until the administrative reform in 1975, when the borders of the voivodeship were moved once again. As a result of this division three new voivodeships were created: Bialostockie, Suwalskie and Lomzynskie.

In 1999, a following administrative change took place. With reference to the historical name of the region Podlaskie Voivodeship was created. The present voivodeship

consists of the following previously existing voivodeships: Bialostockie, almost all of Lomzynskie and some parts of Suwalskie. The new voivodeship has many advantag One of the most important is its ability to link together subregions of a different economic, agricultural, tourism and cultural character.



