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The history of Polish diplomacy. The Supreme National Committee in the period of 1914–1918 and some informal efforts to recognize the Polish sovereignty

Introductory remarks

The history of the Polish state in the period of 1914–1918 covers a short, only five-year time, but the events of this five-year period had a decisive impact on the situation of Poland in both the international and domestic arenas. In 1914, World War I broke out with the participation of the partitioning powers: Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia. It led to the awakening of a sense of national identity among Polish citizens. The course and results of the war enabled the restoration of an independent Polish state. The Supreme National Committee was formed on August 16, 1914, in Krakow as a representation of all Polish political factions operating in Galicia. In fact, it was a semi-official organization. It was intended by its founders to be the main representative of the Polish cause in the international arena.

The purpose of the article is to present a part of the history of Polish diplomacy, particularly the activities of the Supreme National Committee directed towards the maintenance the presence of the Polish cause in the politics of the European superpowers and restoration of the Polish state. The main questions the present study strives to answer are: What were the activities of the information agents of the Committee? How can we evaluate the actions of the Supreme National Committee? Unfortunately, since the modest scope of this article does not allow for an exhaustive treatment of the subject, the present work is contributory in nature. In this particular study the historic-descriptive method of theoretical analysis and legal methods (including

formal legal method) were applied to address the research questions and to reach the conclusions.

The work consists of two parts. At first, there is a short exposition of the structure of the Supreme National Committee. Then, propaganda activities of the information agents of the Committee are taken into closer consideration.

The structure of the Supreme National Committee: posts and delegations

At the beginning, the activities of the Supreme National Committee (further SNC) were focused on the creation of armed Polish forces¹. That time it was primarily concerned with the recruitment, training, and equipping of the soldiers of the Polish Legions². There was not any organizational unit dealing with foreign affairs in the structure of the Committee. The first work in this direction was carried out by the Press Bureau of the Military Department. Typical diplomatic and consular activities of the SNC began in 1915, after the emergence of a separate institution within its structure, dealing with foreign policy matters, namely the General Secretariat. It was headed by Konstanty Srokowski. Since November 1915, the leader was Michał Sokolnicki, the former commander of the First Brigade of the Legions, and a close associate of Józef Piłsudski. In the foreign policy matters, Sokolnicki's main priority was to impart the Polish cause a broader dimension beyond the plane of relations with Austria, but also, for balance, with Hungary and Germany. His closest and most important co-worker was Leon Wasilewski, whose main responsibilities included organizing the SNC foreign offices, and managing the Committee's press affairs³.

The Committee established its first foreign posts at the end of 1914. This was a network of permanent information and press agents of the Press Bureau of the Military Department established, i.e., in Rapperswil (Switzerland), Munich and Berlin (Germany), and Milan and Rome (Italy), supplemented by

¹ About the development of the Supreme National Committee, see K. Srokowski, *N.K.N. Zarys historii Naczelnego Komitetu Narodowego*, Kraków 1923, passim; W. Suleja, *Orientacja austro-polska w latach I wojny światowej (do aktu 5 listopada 1916 roku)*, Wrocław 1992, passim; J. Holzer, J. Molenda, *Polska w pierwszej wojnie światowej*, Warszawa 1973, 3rd edn., passim.

² M. Drozdowski, *Naczelnny Komitet Narodowy: jak uratowano Legiony*, [in:] F. Musiał, M. Wenklar (eds.), *Zanim nastąpiła wolność. Droga do niepodległej II Rzeczypospolitej*, Kraków 2021, p. 102.

³ J. Sibora, *Narodziny polskiej dyplomacji u progu niepodległości*, Warszawa 1998, p. 18; idem, *U źródeł dyplomacji odrodzonej Polski. Wybrane problemy z dziejów polskiej akcji zagranicznej w czasie I wojny światowej*, [in:] C. Bloch, Z. Zieliński (eds.), *Powrót Polski na mapę Europy*, Lublin 1995, p. 152.

a number of “occasional relations in almost all European countries”⁴. In Rapperswil, Stanisław Zieliński was appointed to the post of information agent. Before, he headed the Information and Press Office of the Galician National Council there. In April 1915, the post was transformed into the Polish Central Press Office in Rapperswil, entrusting its management to Karol Bader. The foreign action started by the Military Department was then developed by the General Secretariat of the SNC. The function of the Committee’s representative in Munich until March 20, 1915 was held by Zofia Daszyńska-Golińska – her task was to promote the Polish cause in Bavaria – a German state that did not always agree with the Prussian policy pursued in Berlin. On the other hand, a mission to Berlin was sent in September 1914. Wilhelm Feldman (he served as a representative of the SNC until May 1918). The main task of the Berlin expatriate office, initially a one-man operation, was to “instruct the Germans about Polish aspirations and the goals of the SNC”⁵. As Konstanty Srokowski recalls, Feldman carried out the tasks entrusted to him ‘in an astonishing manner’ – he established some extensive contacts on the spot, published propaganda brochures and a periodical “Polnische Blätter”, he also kept track of all anti-Polish speeches, and even with an almost incomprehensible cleverness extracted the most secret prints, intended for exclusively confidential use, reports of various German agents, and all this already in copies, already in originals by conspiratorial means sent to the SNC⁶. The Military Department of the SNC delegated Władysław Baranowski to Milan, while Stanisław Smolka went to Rome. The activities of Baranowski focused primarily on a broad propaganda campaign, gaining contacts with the press and Italian politicians favorable to the Polish cause. Smolka, on the other hand, was given a different task in Rome - his mission was strictly political in nature – the SNC leadership sent him to intervene with the Papal Curia on the issue of forced conversion to Orthodoxy in Eastern Galicia⁷. However, the activities were soon interrupted (in May 1915, Italy entered the war by the side of the Entente states, and it declared war on Austria-Hungary), as a result, further political action in Italy by the SNC delegates lost its *raison d’être*. The foreign action initiated by the Military Department was then developed by the General Secretariat of the SNC.

One of the links of the SNC foreign offices and at the same time an outpost to coordinate their activities was the Vienna Press Office, established in early January 1915⁸. One of the most important foreign outposts of the SNC

⁴ M. Nowak-Kielbikowa, *Początki krajowej służby dyplomatycznej*, [in:] A. Ajnenkiel (ed.), *Rok 1918. Odrodzona Polska w nowej Europie*, Warszawa 1999, p. 31.

⁵ K. Srokowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 324–325.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ J. Sibora, *Narodziny polskiej dyplomacji...*, p. 122.

⁸ A. Garlicka, *Organizacja akcji prasowej Naczelnego Komitetu Narodowego*, “Rocznik Historii Czasopiśmiennictwa Polskiego” 1964, Vol. 2, p. 109.

became the post in Rapperswil, which in 1915, was reorganized and moved to Bern⁹. In mid-October 1916, the management of the Polish Central Press Office in Bern – for that was the full name of the post – was entrusted to hr. Michał Rostworowski, who slightly modified the organization and expanded the scope of the office activities¹⁰. The numerous staff and wide range of activities testified to the high rank of the post, which is best confirmed by the words of the Secretary General of the SNC, Konstanty Srokowski, who expressed the belief that it was already a strong diplomatic post at the time, later developed “on the scale of a diplomatic mission”¹¹.

Other outposts of permanent SNC delegates were established, e.g. in Budapest, Sofia, Constantinople, Basel, Lausanne, Fribourg, Copenhagen, Stockholm, and The Hague¹². There were also some attempts to reach public opinion

⁹ J. Pajewski, *Wokół sprawy polskiej. Paryż – Lozanna – Londyn 1914–1918*, Poznań 1970, p. 120.

¹⁰ J. Sibora, *Narodziny polskiej dyplomacji...*, pp. 93–96.

¹¹ K. Srokowski, op. cit., p. 322.

¹² Unofficially, Studnicki was initially sent to Hungary. He was followed by Ludmił German – an SNC delegate who stayed in Budapest from December 11 to 13, 1914. In June 1915, his function was taken over by Tadeusz Stamirowski – cf. W. Suleja, op. cit., p. 102. The exposition of the SNC Press Office in Sofia, under the leadership of Stanisław Tadeusz Grabowski, began official operations on September 10, 1915 – cf. P. Masłowski, *Relacje polsko-bułgarskie w okresie pierwszej wojny światowej i ich odzwierciedlenie na łamach „Monitora Polskiego”*, [in:] J. Faryś, M. Szczerbiński (eds.), *Z dziejów polskiej służby dyplomatycznej i konsularnej. Księga upamiętniająca życie i dzieło Jana Nowaka-Jeziorańskiego (1914–2005)*, Gorzów Wielkopolski 2005, p. 397. S.T. Grabowski became an informal representative of the still non-existent Polish state – he engaged in public and managed to gain sympathy among many prominent representatives of the Bulgarian political and intellectual elite – J. Tomaszewski (ed.), *Prehistoria polskiej dyplomacji: starania o udział w rozmowach pokojowych państw centralnych z rewolucyjną Rosją w Brześciu w 1917 r.*, “Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny” 2005, Vol. 4, p. 154. After Bulgaria joined the war, he took care of Poles from the Russian partition – deserters from the tsarist army, political refugees, prisoners of war from the Russian army, who were considered Russian subjects in Bulgaria. Thanks to the intercession of the bureau’s staff and the Austro-Hungarian and German military attachés, the Bulgarian authorities allowed, among other things, the grouping of Poles in a single camp in Sofia and exempted them from heavy labour – J. Sibora, *Narodziny polskiej dyplomacji...*, p. 49. In Turkey, the SNC cooperated with Zygmunt Maciejowski, who had been residing there for years. In Denmark, the Committee was initially represented by Ernest Łuniński (he was authorized as the SNC press delegate in 1914, and he held this position until mid-1915), but due to financial difficulties and some reservations concerning his person, he was not given an official position as the SNC delegate – at that time he served as the Russian press clerk at the Austro-Hungarian embassy in Copenhagen. Since mid-1916, his functions were taken over by Józef Karasiewicz. The main task of the Copenhagen centre was to act as an intermediary in maintaining the SNC communications with the United States, from where financial aid was received (the Polish National Defense Committee had great merit here), recruiting for the Legions and sending foreign press to the SNC Secretariat – J. Sibora, *Narodziny polskiej dyplomacji...*, pp. 53–55. At the beginning of 1917, the post was abolished, and its powers were taken over by the information office in Stockholm. Stanisław Wędkiewicz served there as the SNC representative from September 14, 1916. His work focused mainly on maintaining contacts with anti-Russian organisations in Russia – J. Szymański, *Sprawa polska w Szwecji w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej*, [in:] M. Andrzejewski (ed.), *Gdańsk i Pomorze w XX wieku. Księga ofiarowana Profesorowi Stanisławowi Miko-*

in the Entente countries that were at war with Austria-Hungary. Sending official delegates agitating for the Central Powers to these countries was impossible, so the Committee sent secret emissaries to these countries not directly from Krakow, but through its offices in Switzerland. Their task was to cooperate with politically neutral institutions under the banner of working for a free and independent Poland¹³. In Paris, the interests of the SNC were represented until April 1915 by the SNC agent Tadeusz Szpotański¹⁴, while in London cooperation was established with August Zaleski¹⁵.

Propaganda activities

SNC propaganda activities were carried out not only in Europe. In November 1914, Artur Hausner and Feliks Młynarski were assigned an important mission in the USA¹⁶. Their task was to agitate and collect money in the American Polish community and “to promote” the idea of free Poland in the US government and among influential American personalities¹⁷. After arriving there, the delegates established contacts with the Committee for National Defense, with the help of which they organized the departure of volunteers for the Legions, transferred financial aid and food aid to the Polish citizens¹⁸.

sowi z okazji 70. rocznicy jego urodzin, Gdańsk 1997, p. 94. The official representation of the SNC in The Hague was the Polish Correspondence Office (PCO), founded by Jan Włodek in January 1917 – P. Zajas, *Polskie zagraniczne przedstawicielstwa prasowe w czasie Wielkiej Wojny (1914–1918)*, “Dzieje Najnowsze” 2014, Vol. 3, p. 41.

¹³ M. Drozdowski, *Naczelny Komitet Narodowy (1914–1918). Polityczne i organizacyjne zaplecze Legionów Polskich*, Kraków 2017, p. 351.

¹⁴ M. Nowak-Kielbikowa, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁵ P. Wandycz, *August Zaleski Minister Spraw Zagranicznych RP 1926–1932 w świetle wspomnień i dokumentów*, Paryż 1980, pp. 10–11; W. Suleja, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

¹⁶ The delegation travelled with Austrian passports, in addition to propaganda materials promoting the Legions, a formation that cooperated with the Central Powers. By English control at sea, this could have been treated as a diversionary attempt in the rear, for which an English court-martial would undoubtedly have been threatened. See: F. Młynarski, *Wspomnienia*, Warszawa 1971, pp. 90–130.

¹⁷ W. Suleja, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

¹⁸ The technique of transporting volunteers to the Legions was confidential. This was done with the help of Austro-Hungarian and German foreign service personnel (including the vice-consul at the Austrian consulate general Eugeniusz Rozwadowski, the counsellor of the Copenhagen embassy Zdzisław Okęcki and the wife of Dębski – Rozalia, who stamped and signed documents at the Austro-Hungarian consulate in New York – M. Frančić, *Komitet Obrony Narodowej w Stanach Zjednoczonych a obóz niepodległościowy w kraju w czasie I wojny światowej*, [in:] H. Florkowska-Frančić, M. Frančić, H. Kubiak (eds.), *Polonia wobec niepodległości Polski w czasie I wojny światowej*, Wrocław 1979, p. 124. When organizing the action of sending food, even permission was obtained from the occupation authorities to distribute donations in their territories, but the action was prevented by the British blockade on food sent to Poland. London feared that foodstuffs brought into the Kingdom and destined for the Polish population would be requisitioned by the German army. All efforts and assurances that the aid would reach the right hands were

The responsibilities of the SNC press delegates were defined in *Circular No. 1 to press delegates abroad* issued on February 6, 1915. It was emphasized that a delegate was not a diplomatic agent, and he had no authority to enter into any political negotiations with government representatives. Delegates, without prior agreement with the SNC, did not have the right to enter into agreements or make any commitments. Among their powers were to conduct propaganda activities in favor of the SNC and the Legions, to proclaim the program of the unity of the Polish nation with Austria-Hungary and the necessity of restoring Polish statehood, as a guarantor of balance in Central Europe, being an effective barrier against the expansionist policy of Russia, to keep a detailed record of prominent Poles residing in the country of their activities and to establish contacts with them (regardless of any political differences), so that externally mutual relations would present the image of Poland as a 'unified whole'. To facilitate their work, the SNC delegates used the 'feuille de route' – a type of diplomatic passport available to officials of the deputies of countries maintaining relations with Austria, and (e.g. the Bern mission) the Austrian diplomatic courier¹⁹.

The biggest problem in everyday work of the SNC Offices abroad was the lack of financial resources. Funds received for magazine subscriptions, mailings, for trips, and food expenses were insufficient. It happened that employees of the outposts used their private savings to maintain, and after spending their own money, they pawned their belongings in a pawnshop. In Bern, the mission was supported only by the modest salary of professor Michał Roztworski and an equally modest representation fund. Its employees received no emoluments and only at the end of the war did they receive a 400 franc monthly allowance (maintenance cost three times as much)²⁰. In Berlin, Wilhelm Feldman received 300 marks a month including the representation fund). Konstanty Srokowski, who was full of admiration for Feldman's achievements in his work for the Committee in Germany, recalled that "there has probably never been a cheaper and at the same time more efficient diplomacy"²¹.

Due to the poor material situation, the SNC foreign activities were criticized by the Committee's representative in Copenhagen, Józef Karasiewicz, who wrote in letters to Jaworski: "As for the work itself abroad and our outposts, I have to conclude with unspeakable regret that there is a terrible confusion in it; it is devoid of allowances and directives, which entails a lack of uniformity in deeds, unnecessary loss of time due to waiting for this or that and,

not accepted. See more in: H. Florkowska-Francić, *Między Lozanną, Fryburgiem i Vevey. Z dziejów polskich organizacji w Szwajcarii w latach 1914–1917*, Kraków 1997, pp. 97–104.

¹⁹ J. Sibora, *U źródeł...*, pp. 154–155; idem, *Narodziny polskiej dyplomacji...*, pp. 19–20; E. Ligocki, *Dialog z przeszłością*, Warszawa 1970, pp. 151, 167.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 155, 202.

²¹ K. Srokowski, op. cit., p. 325.

finally, a complete lack of division of labor, which, in the absence of forces suitable for everything, only aggravates the situation and increases the callousness. (...) If the country, or the responsible factors in the country, are not able to take this action in a resilient organization, to properly equip the relevant organs and provide them with the necessary materials with a well-defined scope of action, then sporadic and haphazard reminders of their existence and needs is, in my opinion, a useless and ineffective throwing away of small sums of money, which in time will grow to large sums, and it would probably be better to roll up similar agencies than to drag out their useless vegetation” (trans. J.S.)²². Then, Karsiewicz wrote: “let the country, or the relevant and appointed factors, duly equip both morally and materially its outposts and foreign expatriates, or let all these agencies be dissolved, still allowing various Dmowskis, Piltzes and Rettingers, or some honest fantasists, to harm or ridicule the Polish cause (...). After all, one does not need to be a great strategist to understand and properly assess the absolute futility of sending an army to the front without weapons and ammunition. Even Russia, poor in reason but rich in cannon flesh, has ceased to afford such things in the literal sense (...). Our people abroad but they are soldiers...” (trans. J.S.)²³.

The Supreme National Committee lost its *raison d'être* after the Central Powers proclaimed the Act of November 5, 1916, announcing the possibility of creating a Polish state dependent on them. The proclamation of the manifesto of the two emperors and the establishment of the Provisional Council of State marked the final defeat of the Polish-Austrian concept, and on January 29, 1917, the Executive Commission of the SNC decided to terminate the Committee²⁴. The commission (composed of the existing heads of SNC departments) was appointed to oversee the liquidation work. However, this did not result in the liquidation of foreign centers – under the agreement of February 11, 1918, the SNC information offices and missions in Bern, Sofia, Stockholm, The Hague, Constantinople, Budapest, and Berlin were transferred to the Regency Council.

Concluding remarks

The part and importance of the Supreme National Committee is assessed differently in the subject related literature. By some it is criticized and it is perceived as a helpless apparatus dependent on the Central Powers. By others it is understood as a body that was a substitute for an official agenda, and a step towards the creation of a state organization, including the future fore-

²² J. Sibora, *Narodziny polskiej dyplomacji...*, pp. 55, 286.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 55, 286.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 44; J. Holzer, J. Molenda, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

ign service. It is noteworthy that the SNC undertook activities on a smaller or larger scale in Europe and America. Although, the information agents of the Military Department and employees of the Press Offices of the General Secretariat were deprived of such important powers in the foreign service as the conduct of political negotiations, the right to conclude agreements and undertake obligations, they actively, depending on local conditions, carried out propaganda, information, undertook publishing activities, and thus promoted the idea of a reborn Poland on the territory of the central or neutral states, but also unofficially in the Entente states. In addition, their role in performing strictly consular activities and their contribution to the protection of the Polish population residing in prisoner of war camps, refugees, etc., should also be appreciated.

It should be also taken into consideration that they undertook the mentioned above activities while overcoming a number of difficulties, including the most serious problem, which was the lack of sufficient financial resources. They represented a state that formally did not exist, in the midst of the ongoing war, in the absence of support from all Polish organizations. The most important testimony to their importance is undoubtedly the fact that with the liquidation of the Supreme National Committee, its foreign centres did not end their activities, but on the contrary, they continued them under the agency of the Regency Council.

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Summary

The history of Polish diplomacy. The Supreme National Committee in the period of 1914–1918 and some informal efforts to recognize the Polish sovereignty

Keywords: diplomatic law, foreign politics, the Supreme National Committee, Polish diplomacy, diplomatic missions, consular missions.

The Supreme National Committee was formed on August 16, 1914, in Krakow as a representation of all Polish political factions operating in Galicia. In fact, it was a semi-official organization. It was intended by its founders to be the main representative of the Polish cause in the international arena. The purpose of the article is to present a part of the history of Polish diplomacy, particularly the activities of the Supreme National Committee directed towards

the maintenance the presence of the Polish cause in the politics of the European superpowers and restoration of the Polish state. The information agents, depending on local conditions, actively operated in European non-European countries as far as propaganda, information, press, and consular spheres are concerned. Unfortunately, they had to overcome a number of difficulties. The most important evidence for their significance was the fact that following the Committee's liquidation at the beginning of 1918, its foreign centres did not cease their activities, and they continued their work under the auspices of the Regency Council, and later the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its first diplomatic and consular missions which were established in independent Poland.

Streszczenie

Z historii polskiej dyplomacji. Naczelny Komitet Narodowy w latach 1914–1918 i nieformalne zabiegi o uznanie polskiej niepodległości

Słowa kluczowe: prawo dyplomatyczne, polityka zagraniczna, Naczelny Komitet Narodowy, polska dyplomacja, placówki dyplomatyczne, placówki konsularne.

Naczelny Komitet Narodowy powstał 16 sierpnia 1914 r. w Krakowie jako reprezentacja wszystkich polskich frakcji politycznych działających na terenie Galicji. W rzeczywistości był to organ półoficjalny. W zamyśle założycieli Komitetu miał on być głównym propagatorem sprawy polskiej na arenie międzynarodowej. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie fragmentu historii polskiej dyplomacji, a w szczególności działalności Naczelnego Komitetu Narodowego, ukierunkowanej na akcentowanie sprawy polskiej w polityce mocarstw europejskich oraz odbudowę państwa polskiego. Agenci informacyjni, w zależności od lokalnych warunków, aktywnie działali w Europie i poza nią w sferze propagandy, informacji, prasy i działalności konsularnej. Niestety, musieli także pokonać szereg trudności. Najważniejszym dowodem na ich znaczenie był fakt, że po likwidacji Komitetu na początku 1918 r. jego ośrodki zagraniczne nie zaprzestały działalności, a kontynuowały ją pod auspicjami Rady Regencyjnej, a później Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych i jego pierwszych placówek dyplomatyczno-konsularnych, które powstały w niepodległej Polsce.