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## COUNTERACTING POVERTY ON POLISH LANDS AFTER BOTH WORLD WARS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

**Abstract:** This article aimed to examine and compare ways of counteracting poverty in the Polish lands after both world wars. Based on available archival, printed sources and studies, the institutional foundations, methods, instruments, scope and effects of efforts to counteract the phenomenon of post-war poverty during the early post-war years were determined. It was necessary to assess the extent of this phenomenon and to perform a comparative analysis of efforts by the state, local governments and social organisations, focussing on similarities, differences and their sources. The chronological scope covers the years when welfare needs in Poland directly resulted from the effects of war (1918–1921 and 1944/45–1948). The research findings indicate that, both in the context of needs and the main methods employed, there were many similarities, as well as some differences. The similarities largely stem from comparable causes of post-war poverty and the similar scale of these phenomena, which primarily determined, the scope of required assistance. Notably, after 1944, the authorities could draw on the experience gained from activities carried out a quarter of a century earlier. Differences emerged due to specific needs, such as caring for returning inhabitants of the Kingdom of Poland “who were evacuated” in 1915, supporting Jews rescued from the Holocaust, or assisting inhabitants of bridge-head areas on the Vistula River living in extreme poverty after World War II. Additional differences involved the political climate surrounding rescue efforts. At the dawn of independence, the political background was limited to routine political disputes, whereas post-WWII efforts coincided with the forced power seizure by the communists, who, notably, imposed a form of ceasefire in social rescue activities. It is also worth noting that large-scale aid efforts after both world wars were generally inadequate, owing to the scale of needs, limited resources, organisational errors and decisions that did not always align with the real hierarchy of needs.

**Keywords:** post-war poverty, social welfare, social rescue, feeding the population

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## INTRODUCTION

War always brings greater or lesser deprivation of social needs. It translates into a significant increase in poverty in the affected societies, visible both during and immediately after the armed struggle. In this text, poverty is defined in a broader way (in relation to the classical definition) and is treated as a situation where several or all basic human needs are not met or are met at a low level (Szarfenberg, 2002: 221). It was no different in the case of the two twentieth-century great wars dubbed world wars because of their scale and impact. In their aftermath, the extent of poverty and social need became difficult even to quantify, and one of the areas in Europe which, for many reasons, was particularly affected by this phenomenon became the Polish lands. This was not only a direct result of the fact that they remained, in varying dimensions and spatial extent, the arena of armed struggles, including those that temporarily went beyond the caesuras officially ending major conflicts. The scale of post-war poverty in the Polish lands was also influenced by a number of other factors. These included: 1) the unique course of the two wars in these regions, 2) the long-lasting occupation and its negative effects, 3) the demographic and material losses endured, and 4) the mass displacements of the populations during and after the conflicts, which always worsened living conditions for hundreds of thousands of citizens uprooted from their homes.

In light of the outlined conditions and the severe scale of poverty in Poland following the world wars, it is worthwhile to examine the ways of counteracting this phenomenon and the methods of social rescue, as this exceptional and ad hoc activity was referred to in the period after the Second World War. After the end of World War II, the term *social rescue* was used to describe welfare and social assistance activities that provided emergency aid to individuals affected by the war. In this text, the term is also applied to relief efforts carried out after the end of World War I (more on the concept of social rescue see: Brenk, 2019: 121–124).

The aim of the text is to identify the institutional foundations, methods, instruments, scope and effects of the measures taken in the immediate post-war years to combat post-war poverty. An essential part of this analysis is both determining the extent of this phenomenon and, more importantly conducting a comparative analysis of the efforts made by the state, local governments and social organisations, with particular at-

tention to similarities and differences and their origins, and the processes that were more or less successful in applying lessons from the experience gained after the end of the First World War.

The chronological scope of the work covers the period when emerging welfare needs in the Polish lands were directly caused by the effects of war. Thus, it encompasses the years 1918–1921, when, following the end of the Polish-Soviet war, migration processes were winding down and aid activities could gradually shift towards peaceful efforts, which was also reflected in the development of institutions. After the Second World War, time caesuras are marked by the expulsion of the German occupier from the Polish lands and the end of the crucial rescue phase in 1948, along with Poland's move towards Stalinism and the displacement of social organisations from the institutional aid system.

## THE SCALE OF POST-WAR POVERTY

War, especially when occurring directly on a specific territory, is such a socially damaging phenomenon that its negative effects are often difficult to measure. This remains true in the case of the major armed conflicts fought on Polish soil in the 20th century, particularly because the consequences of depriving people of basic needs must be combined with the tragic fate of the displaced populations. Notably, awareness of this fact obviously shifts the point of analysis, which does not end with the conclusion of the fighting, but only after the critical phase of human displacement has been completed. It is also necessary to assess the balance of poverty caused both directly and indirectly by armed conflict. While measuring this impact is more challenging regarding the direct effects of war, it is somewhat easier to do so in the case of mass displacements, which were largely driven by circumstances or even by force. If those from better-off social groups, who constitute a significant minority managed to organise their relocation, return, or repatriation independently and under conditions that did not violate human dignity, then practically all those displaced in a systematic manner by the state, countries, or institutions established for this purpose were by definition relocated under significantly worse conditions, requiring essential assistance to meet their basic needs.

Comparing the needs for support among people affected by poverty in the Polish lands (which were then part of the developing borders of the Polish state) during the periods immediately following the two world wars, it should be noted that much less is known, in numerical terms, about the period after the First World War. While material and human losses have been fairly well researched and described, despite the sometimes significant differences in estimates, the extent of poverty clearly remains difficult to quantify. Its universality is undeniable for many reasons (destruction of housing, industrial plants and farms; decline in production and food shortages; infectious diseases; lack of means of subsistence, and the notable population decline during the war), but there is a lack of general estimates depicting the population of impoverished inhabitants of Polish lands. The analysis omits war and civilian invalids benefiting from institutional support in the form of disability pensions and allowances, as well as wards of care institutions also benefiting in this way from systemic, not ad hoc, support.

While it is known quite precisely how large the communities of returnees and repatriates in need of support were, there are no comprehensive estimates quantifying the overall scale of poverty among the entire population of the lands that became part of the reconstituted state. The number of deaths among their inhabitants is estimated at just under one million people (approximately 950,000). At the same time, after the end of the Polish-Bolshevik war, the number of residential buildings destroyed as a result of the war, including the losses from the Great War, was estimated at around 0.5 million, while the number of families who lost their possessions was about 800,000, which could amount to a total of up to 5 million people in need of support (Janicki et al., 2020: 55–60).

It is worth noting that estimates of this kind relate to the overall magnitude of material losses occurring over a relatively long period of time and consider the dynamic nature of the phenomenon. Therefore, it is difficult to interpret these figures as reflecting the immediate post-war situation or to simply aggregate data from different periods. Andrzej Chwalba estimates that, just at the threshold of independence (1918/1919), several hundred thousand people were living in “hastily put together houses, huts and shacks” after losing their homes, and a similar number faced the same issues in the North-Eastern Borderlands, which had become part of the country in 1919. In total, this may have amounted to as many be-

tween 1.5 and 1.8 million individuals in need of assistance due to housing deprivation even before the critical phase of the Polish-Bolshevik war (Chwalba, 2019: 161).

This highly inaccurate balance sheet was supplemented by the destitute unemployed, orphaned children, and a large number of Poles returning or relocating en masse from the East and West. The number of registered unemployed peaked at the end of April 1919, reaching as many as 376,000. Despite the obvious underestimation caused by the still ongoing development of labour market institutions, and assuming not every unemployed person had a family to support, this would have meant at least a million people were in poverty and in need of assistance. It should also be noted that the situation on the labour market improved significantly after the end of the Polish-Bolshevik war, when, despite demobilisation, unemployment reached a maximum of 132,000 in May 1921 ('Sprawozdanie z działalności Ministerstwa...', 1922: 149; 'Wydział...', 1919: 116; own calculations).

A much larger community should be discussed in context of people, particularly those who, for various reasons, became participants in the mass migrations following the Great War and the Polish-Bolshevik War. The diverse causes of migration do not entirely allow this community to be treated as a single homogeneous group. Theoretically, the situation of returnees from the broadly understood West was better. Generally, they returned to homes abandoned during the war, whereas in the case of those coming from Russia, only some had a place to return to, which still did not guarantee them a livelihood. Others left their homes in Russia for Poland and needed support to meet their basic living needs at least in the initial period after their arrival.

On German territory, at the time the war ended, there were approximately 700,000 Polish forced labourers and about 140,000 Polish prisoners of war from the Russian army; within the collapsing Habsburg Monarchy, there were around 80,000 Polish prisoners of war and roughly 50,000 refugees and forced labourers; in France, there were about 20,000 prisoners of war and refugees from Polish lands; in other European countries, there were approximately 30,000 Poles (labourers, prisoners of war and fugitives from the Austrian army) were present. Overall, excluding pre-war emigrants, there were over a million Poles outside Poland and Russia, some of whom might have been able to access support for their livelihoods. However, it is worth noting that, for example, the inhabitants of

Galicia who fled to other parts of the monarchy during the war generally belonged to the higher social strata ('Sprawozdanie z działalności Urzędu...', 1921: 52).

An even larger number of inhabitants from the Polish lands found themselves at the end of the war in revolutionised Russia, and their social structure differed significantly from that of those returning from the West. Among the approximately one million refugees from the Kingdom of Poland who, in 1915, were forced to resettle deep into Russia ('evacuated'), the peasant population was by far the most dominant. For them, staying for several years in the various gubernias of the Empire usually meant permanent deprivation of their basic subsistence needs and reliance on the support of Polish charitable organisations operating in Russian territory. The incomplete account of Polish refugees in Russia supplemented by an unspecified number of people who had made their way there from Galicia or remained in Lithuania and Belarus, and was estimated after the war by the Polish Emigration Office at a further 100- to 200,000 people. Some of the 1915 displaced persons, less than half a million, had still managed to return home before the end of the war. In addition to the half a million displaced persons remaining in Russia until the war's end, the category of potential beneficiaries of livelihood support also includes Poles living in the home country who, after the revolution and end of hostilities, decided to leave their previous places of residence. Another group of those returning to Poland were prisoners of war, of whom the Emigration Office registered nearly 450,000 between November 1918 and May 1921 (Korzeniowski, 2018: 205-238; 'Sprawozdanie z działalności Urzędu...', 1921: 52).

Considering the previous difficulties in quantifying the problem of post-war poverty and the difficulty of aggregating the estimates provided, it should be recognised that by the spring of 1919, the group requiring support was estimated to be up to 3 million inhabitants of the rebuilt state. Over time, the number was gradually increased by repatriates and settlers from Russia (totalling 1.3 million people), as well as the poorer segment of those returning from the West, notably prisoners of war (around a quarter of a million). Consequently, the long-term scale of needs must have exceeded 4 million people, which, even with this conservative estimate, implied that more than 15% of the population required assistance (author's calculations).

The influence of time was also evident in the area of poverty caused by the course and effects of the Second World War. It is important to

consider the halt of the front at the Vistula River in 1944 and the existence for several months of the so-called Lublin Poland, which was already free from German occupation and had to undertake aid measures for the large number of needy inhabitants in the areas under the control of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego). The total number of people needing assistance in this area, inhabited by 5.6 million people, was estimated at approximately 1.3 million, representing about 23% of the population. During this initial period, the list of potential beneficiaries mainly included around 800,000 residents of the so-called bridgehead areas, displaced from their homes by the fighting on the Vistula. Among those in need were also thousands of others suffering from shortages of housing, food, clothing and fuel, orphaned children, war and civilian invalids, the unemployed, the first groups returning from prisons and camps, Holocaust survivors among the Jews, or Poles displaced from Eastern Lesser Poland (Grata, 2016: 83–84).

The extent of the need for assistance increased dramatically in 1945 following the liberation from German control of the remaining territories to be included within the new national borders. With ongoing shortages in basic necessities, the number of people requiring support grew significantly, as many returned en masse from forced labour, prisoners of war, and concentration camps, as well as labour camps, displaced persons from the East, hundreds of thousands of civilian invalids, an estimated 150,000 war orphans, and around one million half-orphans. Overall, the number of individuals in need of aid for various reasons was estimated at 6.1 million in 1945, of whom 5.7 million (3.3 million adults and 2.4 million children) required emergency (off-site) support. This necessitated an estimate of the immediate needs identified by the end of the war, which was comparable to the population of so-called Lublin, Poland. Including those in need of permanent care, this amounted to as much as 26.5 per cent of the population. This figure did not yet account for later arrivals, such as the so-called repatriates from the East and those resettled in 1947 as part of the so-called Vistula action (Grata, 2018: 398–399).

An analysis of estimates of the extent of assistance needed in the Polish lands after both world wars paints an alarming picture. It affects over 10 million people suffering from variously defined poverty, constituting a significant part of the population at that time. The scale of needs, both in absolute and relative terms was higher after the Second

World War, which is generally regarded as being even more severe than the Great War. At the same time, it should be noted that, despite everything, the more “conventional” nature of the First World War meant that the number of those in need of assistance after its conclusion was at least four times greater than the number of deaths among inhabitants of Polish lands. The extermination focused activities of both occupying powers during World War II caused a fundamental change in these proportions. In fact, after this war, the number of those in need of assistance was similar to the number of fatalities, which, despite the shortcomings of the available estimates, also helps explaining the higher percentage of those in need of help among the survivors compared to after World War I.<sup>1</sup>

## INSTITUTIONAL GRID

The support system for “post-war” poverty relied, in the case of both analysed periods, on state and local government institutions, the broad participation of social organisations, especially those developing their structures and carrying out aid activities during armed conflicts, and foreign aid. However, the markedly different political and social contexts of the Polish lands in 1918 and 1944/1945, led to difference in how aid was organised.

Theoretically, it should have been easier in this respect after the Second World War, when rescue activities could be based on solutions and legal foundations inherited from the Second Republic, whereas a quarter of a century earlier the state had only just begun to establish its institutions. The Social Welfare Act of 16 August 1923, which imposed welfare tasks on the state and local authorities, was still in force, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare [Ministerstwo Pracy i Opieki Społecznej], which was being rebuilt within the structures of the new authorities, could draw on pre-war organisational models. Meanwhile, at the dawn of independence, the patterns and competencies of various

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<sup>1</sup> The number of Polish victims of the Second World War was estimated shortly after the end of the war at nearly 6 million dead Polish population losses (Żurowski, 1989: 254); an attempt at a contemporary estimate undertaken in 2022 put the number of victims, but only of the German occupation, at 5.2 million people (Wnęk, 2022: 107–113).

entities developed in parallel with the need to carry out welfare activities. This phenomenon was especially evident in the context of institutions responsible for caring for the displaced populations. The structures and scope of activities of the State Repatriation Office [ Państwowy Urząd Repatriacyjny], established in 1944, were significantly more developed than those of the earlier State Office for the Return of Prisoners, Refugees and Repatriates [ Państwowy Urząd do Spraw Powrotu Jeńców, Uchodźców i Repatriantów], founded at the end of 1918 and absorbed two years later by the Emigration Office [Urząd Emigracyjny] (Dz.U. 1920, No 39, item 232; Dz.U. 1923, No 92, item 726).

On the other hand, however, after the First World War, the political situation was less complicated, in terms of organising and conducting aid activities. The emerging Polish Republic naturally acknowledged the presence of aid organisations that had been considerably developed during the war, placing *de facto* responsibility for addressing post-war poverty largely on their shoulders, which met with little political opposition. Meanwhile, after 1944, the new communist authorities, fighting political forces associated with the London government and lacking much popular support, sought to take control of aid activities and eliminate institutions not aligned with the communists. In December 1944, the Polish Committee for National Liberation decided to dissolve the Main Welfare Council [Rada Główna Opiekuńcza] established in 1941, which had excellent structures but was accused of collaborating with the occupying forces. The situation was different after the First World War, when the then Main Welfare Council, which had been under development since 1915, not only operated until 1921 but also clearly expanded its scope of activity after 1918 (in 1919 Józef Piłsudski took over the patronage of the Council; Grata, 2016: 87–88; Przeniosło, 2017: 349–371).

The approach of the communists taking power after 1944 meant that the Main Welfare Council had to be replaced by a new entity with extensive territorial structure organising large-scale aid activities. This became the Central Committee for Social Welfare [Centralny Komitet Opieki Społecznej], established as early as December 1944, which, taking over the local structures of the Main Welfare Council, immediately covered the whole territory of the country with its agencies. By September of 1946, it was running 16 provincial welfare committees, 239 district committees, 52 municipal committees and 2397 commune committees. Importantly, with the existing rescue needs, it became necessary, as after the First World War, to maintain multiple relief organisations. Therefore,

the authorities recognised the need for the Polish Red Cross to continue to be active in this field, and agreed to reactivate some of the organisations with pre-war traditions. The most important of these was Caritas, which quickly built structures based on the dioceses and parishes of the Catholic Church, surpassing the achievements of the Central Committee for Social Welfare in this respect (25 diocesan associations and 2949 parish associations in September 1946). Thus, by analogy, just as after World War I when numerous social organisations played important roles in aid activities alongside the Main Welfare Council. From 1945 onwards, support for the Central Committee for Social Welfare and Caritas was provided by, among others, the Polish Red Cross, the Workers' Society of the Friends of Children, the Peasants' Society of the Friends of Children and, finally, the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (Grata, 2018: 391–396; Przeniosło and Przeniosło, 2018: 277–284).

In both instances, foreign aid organisations present on Polish soil played an invaluable role in combating poverty. After the First World War, support was based on American aid primarily administered by the American Relief Administration, established in 1919 by President Woodrow Wilson. It merged in 1920 with the Polish Children's Relief Committee to become the Polish-American Children's Relief Committee. Since the war, the American Red Cross and the Rockefeller Foundation had been active in Poland. The American Joint Distribution Committee (Joint), also present in Poland since 1919 and supporting not only the Jewish population but others as well, became an important entity. After the Second World War, rescue assistance to the Polish population was provided by both the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and charities from many Western countries affiliated with the Council of Foreign Voluntary Agencies in Poland. Significantly, with respect to the period after the First World War, the American Relief Administration withdrew from Poland in 1922, as the relief operation's essential phase ended; the Joint continued activities in Poland until 1939. A quarter of a century later, foreign organisations withdrew from Poland in 1949 due to the political changes taking place in the country (Amerykański..., 1922; Jarosz, 2002: 164–166; Jaroszyk, 2025; more on UNRRA and its activities in Poland see: Reinisch, 2008; Woodbridge, 1950).

## SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

### **a. Feeding children and adults**

The extent of post-war poverty, often short-lived but always very severe, necessitated a wide range of measures tailored to the specific needs identified, as well as the particular circumstances of different social groups in need of support. Therefore, the analysis should focus on assistance for adults and entire families, but also on help for children, who are generally regarded as a group requiring special care, and on specific forms of aid provided to victims of mass post-war population displacement. Given the nature of post-war poverty, as the main form of social intervention ad hoc activities carried out within the framework of open (non-institutional) care – aimed at alleviating deprivation of basic subsistence – should be regarded as the primary form of social rescue. Consequently, issues related to the provision of closed care for those requiring it due to orphanhood (lack of a legal guardian) or inability to earn and live independently due to lack of family support, have been excluded from this analysis.

Post-war poverty mainly involves a shortage of basic necessities, especially food. The primary way to combat this in the first few years after the two major conflicts was to provide food to those in need, thus fighting malnutrition or even starvation. Notably, both after 1918 and 1944, the differing approaches of authorities and aid organisations to various groups requiring support were quite evident. Priority was given to food aid for children. In both instances, this was based on a swiftly established system of aid institutions that were strongly supported by the state, whereas support for adults was more ad hoc and less developed. Overall, in cases of extreme needs, support was aimed at meeting additional 'criteria' of subsistence. Such needs often stemmed from extraordinary circumstances beyond ordinary wartime hardships, mass displacement, return from camps, residence in heavily destroyed areas or widespread unemployment.

Thus, after the end of both world wars, support for the basic needs of impoverished families generally translated into targeting food aid primarily at the most vulnerable individuals, namely children. Significantly, the child nutrition campaign in both cases organised quite similarly. It was based primarily on so-called kitchens (people's, children's, general

kitchens) that prepared and offered meals, run by aid organisations, both nationwide and smaller associations organising individual facilities, or local authorities. Funds for the activities came from various sources. Aid organisations raised them themselves, but they also benefited from national and foreign support.

After the First World War, the activity of the Main Welfare Council was symptomatic in this respect. Through local councils, it operated hundreds of soup kitchens for children (in March 1920, there were 745 such kitchens nationwide), but significantly fewer for adults (131 establishments). During this period, some of the eateries were set up by the Council in collaboration with the Central Children's Relief Committee, established in April 1919 and strongly supported by the American Relief Administration. Over, the Committee took over some of the feeding facilities and established new ones under its own name. From 1920 onwards, they operated under the auspices of the heavily government-supported Polish-American Children's Aid Committee. A fluctuating number of social organisations participated in feeding activities financed by the Committee reaching over 7,000 entities at peak times. Most of the provides free meals with only a few charging a small fee. Infant feeding in so-called milk kitchens, also known as 'Milk Drops', and often associated with milk distribution to children, played a role in supporting children. For nutrition, aside from the relatively small number of establishments offering meals, support was also provided through the distribution of unprocessed food, which was popular during the war. As of March 1920, this activity was conducted by 54 institutions operating within the Main Welfare Council, serving 11,300 people daily; on a smaller scale, adult nutrition organised by social organisations and local authorities was also carried out in connection with unemployment (Cylwik, 2021: 133–134; Przeniosło and Przeniosło, 2018: 201–217; *Rocznik...*, 1923: 334; Sochala, 2010: 199–200).

Similarly, after the Second World War, government administration became more closely involved in the organisation of nutrition programmes. Most of the funds still originated from abroad at that time, but the distribution of the in-kind aid from UNRRA, which played the most significant role, was managed through individual ministries, which transferred the funds to support providers. The child nutrition campaign was conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Initially, it was implemented by social organisations in the centres they operated, as well as in numerous educational establishments. Most feeding points

were run by the Central Committee for Social Welfare and Caritas, but other national and international entities also participated. Over time, the provision of nutrition for children based on supplies organised by the Ministry of Provisions was concentrated in schools, and the involvement of social organizations was gradually reduced in this area. Nevertheless, the responsibility for feeding adults fell to social organisations, which managed the feeding of adults in people's kitchens, also known as general or community kitchens, mainly operated by social organisations (by 1946/1947 there were around 1,300 people's kitchens nationwide). Feeding adults was also carried out within the framework of successive winter aid campaigns initiated from the winter of 1945/46, during which up to several hundred thousand people in need of help were fed (Chylak, 2025a: 80–81; Juźwik, 2011: 145–146).

Funding for the relief effort relied on three main pillars after the First World War, the funds of the American Relief Administration, funds transfer from the national budget and the expenses of social organisations. The cost of the relief effort organised by the American Relief Administration, and later by the Polish-American Children's Aid Committee, amounted to \$25.3 million between April 1919 and early June 1922. Of this, 9.9 million came from the Polish state budget, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare also supported numerous aid dozens of aid-giving social organisations at the time, headed by the Main Welfare Council, which received the largest share of the budget (although these subsidies, were rapidly decreasing). Due to insufficient source material, it is admittedly difficult to provide precise data on the total expenditure of the Main Welfare Council on a food aid, but it is worth noting that in spring 1920, as much as 70 per cent of its spending was aid to children, while approximately 15 per cent was allocated to adults (Przeniosło and Przeniosło, 2018: 176–179; Sochala, 2010: 199–200; own calculations).

The resources allocated to feeding the population after the Second World War were enormous for the time. Food aid accounted for as much as 42% of the total UNRRA support, worth approximately 0.5 billion dollars, which amounted to over 200 million dollars. A significant part of the additional support channelled to Poland by foreign charities (a total of 75–78 million dollars in the years 1945–1949) was also allocated to food aid. In this situation, the state's expenditure on feeding the population was initially relatively small, but after the cessation of UNRRA aid, in 1947–1948 it covered as much as 25.4 and 27.8% of budget outgoings, while in 1946 it accounted for only 4.9%. Thus, as in the first years

after the First World War, food aid was based, despite some differences in its very organisation, on foreign aid resources (Grata, 2018: 129–130; Jachowicz, 1998: 43–48; Jarosz, 2002: 166–168; Kowalski, 2014: 56). The budgets of the two largest national charities amounted to several billion zlotys a year, part of which were budget subsidies (about half of the PLN 2.1 billion of funds at the disposal of CKOS and less than 10 per cent of the PLN 5.2 billion revenue of Caritas).

Quantifying the extent of the feeding campaign after both world wars is challenging, as available statistics mainly focus on child support or solely the numbers of meals served. Additionally, these figures often do not add up, sometimes counting taking the same data multiple times. While institutional support is vital for the overall effort, these figures tend to overlook the activities of many smaller organisations that are not part of the mainstream aid initiative. Nonetheless, it is useful to present such rough estimates. As early as mid-1919, the American Relief Administration was feeding more than half a million children daily, and by the end of that year and the early months of 1920–1921, the number had risen to between 1.1 million. The peak in May 1920, when an average of 1,294,169 children per day (including their mothers) receive assistance with the figure reaching as high as 1,315,490. These figures should be supplemented by the thousands of others assisted by charities operating outside the “system” of the Polish-American Children’s Aid Committee. For instance, in March 1920, 134,500 children and 46,400 adults benefited from nutrition programmes in institutions financed or co-financed by the Main Welfare Council, the largest of these. However, it is worth noting that over time, as the activities of the Polish-American Children’s Aid Committee expanded, the role of the Main Welfare Council was systematically reduced (Przeniosło and Przeniosło, 2018: 201–204; *Rocznik...*, 1923: 334; Sochala, 2010: 192, 199). A total of 120.5 million tonnes of food had been distributed by June 1922 as part of the campaign run by the Polish-American Children’s Aid Committee.

After the Second World War, the extent of child nutrition efforts can be demonstrated through similar figures. As early as 1945, about one million children benefitted from various forms of support, while during the school year 1945/46, this number rose to 1.4 million children, including roughly 1 million in schools, 200,000 in kindergartens and 150,000 in day care centres. The estimates of the Ministry of Education suggested the needs in this regard were around 2.9 million children. In the following school year, the campaign expanded to include up to 1.5 million

children, despite initial opposition from the Ministry of Provisions. This was just over a quarter of a century earlier. Nonetheless, it appears that the scale of child nutrition measures undertaken was, in the context of a larger population than in the early years of independence, quite comparable (Chylak, 2025a: 81; Grata, 2018: 459).

It is difficult to determine the exact number of fed adults, but it can be estimated with high confidence to be in hundreds of thousands of needy people. These individual benefited from support provided by social organisations through numerous soup kitchens, which were especially active during the successive winter relief efforts. A particular group consisted of residents in the so-called "bridgehead areas" of the provinces of Warsaw, Kielce, Lublin and Rzeszów, as well as the still-damaged Warsaw. As late as January 1946, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare estimated that up to 1.2 million people in these areas were living in 'extreme poverty. Accordingly, by mid-1946, around 0.5 million meals were served daily to adults in the bridgehead regions (children received nutrition through the system organised by the educational authorities), and aid activities were conducted by both domestic and foreign charities (AAN, MPiOS, 265: 11–31; Chylak, 2025b: 208; Miernik, 2013: 248–249).

### **b. Assistance in kind**

In addition to nutrition, which served as the cornerstone of support for hundreds of thousands of adults and children in need, the assistance provided directly also included benefits in kind related to meeting other subsistence requirements. These benefits were much harder to quantify, but were equally vital in conditions of severe deprivation. Typically, this type of aid was organised by organisations active in food support as well, and the sources of the resources subsequently obtained and distributed were similar in both analysed periods. These mainly consisted of foreign aid supplies and the in-kind and financial effects of public collections.

In the period following the First World War, in-kind assistance was provided to those in need mainly through structured national social organisations. Although the Polish-American Children's Relief Committee, which was significant in child nutrition, did not play a decisive role in this context, the value of its in-kind aid, focused solely on children, amounted to nearly 4.9 million dollars. Much more support

for adults and families from the American Relief Administration and other foreign institutions was channelled to those in need via social organisations, led by the Main Welfare Council. It even established a dedicated unit, the Poor People's Clothing Supply Organisation. Through a network of local welfare committees, the Main Welfare Council managed to distribute aid worth millions of dollars (by June 1922, the Council had received \$32 million worth of aid through the American Relief Administration). The American Relief Administration supplied the Main Welfare Council with both imported and locally produced clothing and footwear (e.g. the 700,000 sets of clothes ordered in March 1920 for \$4 million, or the 250,000 woollen jumpers and 400,000 pairs of woollen socks received from the American Red Cross in spring of 1920). The Council also directly benefited from supplies and donations from the American Red Cross and Polish organisations (Przeniosło and Przeniosło, 2018: 174–175, 212–213; Sochala, 2010: 199).

After the Second World War, in-kind aid mainly consisted of UNRRA supplies, with textiles, clothing and footwear making up about 17% of the total aid, worth roughly USD 85 million. The distribution of donated resources, including those from other sources besides UNRRA, was carried out, as after World War I, through aid organisations operating within the country. A key role among them was played by parish branches of Caritas, which covered nearly all parishes with their network (4157 by the end of 1947) (Jachowicz, 1998: 47–48; Zamiatała, 2000: 133–134).

A significant role in this segment of the aid effort was played by the so-called winter aid campaigns (referring to the tradition of the late 1930s), which were managed by the authorities and organised by the Central Committee for Social Welfare from the turn of 1945/46. As a result of these campaigns, in addition to food aid, considerable funds were raised and distributed to those in need in the form of, among other things, clothing, footwear, underwear and fuel. While initially, the beneficiaries were mainly repatriates, by the winter of 1946/47, aid activities expanded to include various categories of adults unable to earn a livelihood (2.3 million people) and children (1.1 million). In the year 1947/48, the largest groups receiving aid consisted of children (800,000) and individuals unable to work (533,000) (Grata, 2018: 417–419; Miernik, 2013: 250).

Traditionally, after major armed conflicts, groups of demobilised soldiers have often been among those receiving relief support. This

was especially apparent in the period following the First World War. Despite the shortcomings of the newly developing employment system, the impact of demobilisation on the labour market was clearly evident, and support for the unemployed was regarded as a responsibility of the state and local authorities, particularly for former soldiers. Shortly after independence was restored, assistance consisted of ad hoc unemployment benefits paid from late 1918, which were later formalised by a law in November 1919 and continued until May 1920. Following the conclusion of the war with Bolshevik Russia, when unemployment was less severe, aid to demobilised soldiers was mainly concentrated in Warsaw, organised by the local Workers' Defence Committee, with funding from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and through employment offices. Elsewhere in the country, proposals to establish special kitchens for demobilised soldiers were met with disapproval (Grata, 2013: 198–199; 'Sprawozdanie z działalności Ministerstwa...', 1922: 142).

After the Second World War, the problem of demobilised soldiers effectively did not appear on the labour market due to the detached from reality unemployment statistics, which registered only a few tens of thousands officially. However, this was not surprising given that the new authorities stopped paying unemployment benefits, discouraging the unemployed – especially under conditions of a shortage of job offers – from registering at job centres. As a result, unemployed demobilised soldiers, like other unemployed individuals, joined the general welfare system, becoming among many who needed aid and were impoverished by the war. A notable exception to this pattern was the subsequent winter relief operations. In the first of these, carried out during the winter of 1945/1946, support was provided to 180,000 former military personnel. Although the level of assistance, was generally low, this number reflects the scale of the social issue. A year later, only 10,000 demobilised soldiers received aid through the campaign, but by 1947/48, number of beneficiaries in this group had risen to 105,000, underscoring the ongoing living difficulties faced by a substantial community of former soldiers (Grata, 2018: 204–207, 417–419; Miernik, 2013: 250).

The residents of the bridgehead areas along the Vistula River, deprived of their homes and enduring severe poverty or even destitution for months or years, formed a unique social group, especially in dire need of material aid from as early as autumn 1944. By autumn of 1945, it was estimated that 255,000 people there lacked shelter and required full winter provisions. The extent of their deprivation was reflected

in more than 200 recorded deaths by starvation in the most devastated districts of the Warsaw Voivodeship. Assistance to these inhabitants included the aforementioned, often insufficient, food supplies for hundreds of thousands of adults and children, inadequate clothing and footwear, and support in rebuilding homes. The relief efforts started to become more structured only in 1946, when nutritional levels among the residents of the destroyed areas stabilised, reconstruction accelerated and the scale of in-kind aid greatly increased compared to other regions. Nevertheless, as late as autumn of 1947, in some villages, residents still lived in shacks, cellars and bunkers awaiting help to rebuild their homes. Notably, between 1945 and 1948, the highest reconstruction funding was allocated to the bridgehead areas within the Warsaw voivodeship, despite the fact that the greatest destruction occurring was recorded in the Kielce voivodeship, where cases of living in bunkers and shacks persisted into the winter of 1948/49 (the Kielce voivodeship received the greatest amount of UNRRA supplies; Iwaniak, 1973; Miernik, 2012).

### **c. Assistance to post-war migrants**

The large-scale population displacements affecting the inhabitants of the Polish lands after both world wars created further responsibilities for the state institutions, which were tasked with organising aid for these impoverished groups. Similar to traditional aid efforts, the Polish Republic established in 1918 and the authorities after World War II both sought to develop a support system aimed at helping these generally impoverished citizens adapt to the new circumstances and ensuring their basic living needs were met.

Significantly, after the Second World War, the experience of the early years of independence was clearly evident, when migration resulting from the end of the First World War and the Polish-Bolshevik War, made it necessary to develop assistance schemes for the victims of these processes from scratch. As part of the support system established by the State Office for the Return of Prisoners, Refugees and Workers, 90 staging points for repatriates and 30 food distribution points were set up in the eastern part of the country. Over time, following the creation of the Emigration Office, these facilities were reduced to 33 staging points and 7 expatriate offices by 1921 (those arriving from Russia spent an average of 10 days at staging points, whereas those returning from Germany stayed an average of 42 days). The goal of the relief effort

was to offer permanent or temporary shelter at the staging points and later in Warsaw, which served as the distribution hub. Simultaneously, provincial governors received funds from the budget to organise support for migrants and borderland provincial authorities along with social organisations involved in aid received in-kind assistance, such as food and clothing. The Committee for the Care of Children and Young People, along with other organisations caring for children obtained additional subsidies from the budget (foreign organisations also contributed in this case). In-kind assistance was also provided to those refugees from the east who found themselves in the western parts of the country ('Sprawozdanie z działalności Ministerstwa...', 1922: 140–142; 'Sprawozdanie z działalności Urzędu...', 1921: 52–53).

After the Second World War, support systems for the much resettled communities were already more developed than in the early years of independence. Before the structures of the State Repatriation Office were in place, assistance for the resettled such as soup kitchens and night shelters – was organised by welfare committees operating within the Central Committee for Social Welfare. Later, the entire resettlement process, including care at staging points, was managed by the State Repatriation Office, with its sanitary aspects handled by the Polish Red Cross. The shortcomings of this organised system, however, led to active involvement by social organisations in caring for the 'repatriates', providing clothing and food from UNRRA supplies on behalf of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare as well as assistance during unscheduled stops of transports carrying them (funding for these activities was supplied from the Ministry's budget) (Gawroński, 2012: 83–87; Laska, 1999: 107–109; *Państwowy..., 1948: 60–67*).

Much more challenging than after World War I from the perspective of welfare activities for returning Poles were tasks related to satisfying their basic living needs both for those returning from the West and those liberated from German camps. Unlike the period following the First World War, the living conditions of these larger groups (1.5 million returning from Germany, and 300,000 from other countries) were significantly worse, requiring much greater support. According to arrangements made in 1945, responsibility for caring for the returnees until they reached their destinations fell to the structures of the State Repatriation Office, supported by the Polish Red Cross and numerous welfare organisations. Care for returnees from captivity, concentration camps and forced labour was organised through repatriation-sanitary and repatri-

ation-nourishment points, of which there were 400 across the country in the second half of 1945. It is worth noting that assistance for the broadly defined category of “repatriates” played an important role in the costs of subsequent winter aid campaigns. This was especially evident during the first campaign, when immediately after the war’s end and during the peak migration period, as many as 1.2 million individuals received aid (in 1946/47 it was 146,000, and in 1947/48 – 115,000) (Grata, 2018: 407–408; Sula, 2002: 146–147).

The category of post-war migrants also included Jewish survivors of the war tragedy. Most of them returned from the Soviet Union deprived of their livelihoods, lost their possessions as a result of the war and constituted another group of post-war destitute requiring systemic assistance. It was separated from all welfare activities in the country and was organised by the Central Committee of Jews in Poland. It operated closed establishments for children and adults. In the framework of emergency aid there were 37 public kitchens and canteens in operation at the end of 1945, by 1947, this number had decreased to 23. Food aid was used daily by approximately 6,000 and 3,100 Jews respectively, while the number of permanent beneficiaries of emergency aid was about 20,000 in 1947. Aid activities targeting the Jewish population were primarily financed with funds from the Joint, renowned for its welfare programmes in the Second Republic (AAN, MPiOS, 311: 4–6; Szaynok, 2000: 71–72, 137–138).

## CONCLUSIONS

In summarising the attempt to analyse and compare the conditions, problems and methods of combating post-war poverty on Polish soil after both world wars, it is important to note that there were numerous similarities in needs and basic approaches, as well as certain differences. The former mainly stemmed from similar causes of post-war poverty – such as the destruction of housing, shortages of food and daily necessities and mass displacement of people – and the comparable scale of these phenomena, which largely determined the scope of assistance required. It should also be remembered that after 1944, relief efforts benefitted from the experience of operations carried out a quarter of a century earlier, which was particularly evident in the much more developed

structures of aid for displaced populations. Differences arose from specific needs, such as caring for returning inhabitants of the Kingdom of Poland who were “evacuated” in 1915; or supporting Jews rescued from the Holocaust; or actions for the benefit of inhabitants of the bridgehead region living in extreme poverty after the Second World War. Differences also include the political atmosphere accompanying the rescue efforts – at the dawn of independence their political background was merely conventional political disputes. In contrast, after World War II, they were accompanied by the forcible seizure of power by the communists, who, remarkably, applied a kind of ceasefire precisely in the field of social rescue. Until the late 1940s, when they allowed a wide range of social organisations, including those linked to the Catholic Church, to operate in the name of increasing the effectiveness of relief efforts. (more see: Grata, 2018: 393–395). Notably, the range of aid activities was insufficient after both world wars, which was the result of both the scale of needs and the millions of people affected by post-war poverty, as well as a lack of resources, organisational errors and the taking of decisions that were not always adequate to the real hierarchy of needs (an example were the problems, which persisted for years, of satisfying the basic livelihoods of the population in the bridgehead areas).

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