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BOOK REVIEW: CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF AGRICULTURE IN GREATER POLAND IN 1919–1939

Abstract: The book entitled *Przemiany struktury rolnictwa wielkopolskiego w latach 1919–1939* [Changes in the structure of agriculture in Greater Poland between 1919 and 1939] was written by Wojciech Mielewczyk, an employee of the National Museum of Agriculture and Agricultural and Food Industry in Szreniawa, and published by Exemplum in Poznań in 2025. This comprehensive, 317-page monograph is devoted to the structure of agriculture in Greater Poland during the interwar period. The study provides an understanding of the agricultural specificity of this region and is a vital source of information for anyone interested in both regional history and the economic history of Poland.

Keywords: Polish agriculture, Greater Poland, economic history of Poland, Second Polish Republic

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In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the history of the countryside and its inhabitants, which has resulted in a number of academic publications. Some of these have also sparked heated debates (Leszczyński, 2020). However, regional research remains a neglected area, as do issues related to agriculture. For this reason, the study 'Changes in the structure of agriculture in Greater Poland in 1919–1939' by Wojciech Mielewczyk (2025) is a vital addition to the existing research as well as knowledge about the functioning of agriculture in Greater Poland and in the Second Polish Republic.

The author has already published several articles devoted to the history of rural areas and agriculture (Mielewczyk, 2014; 2021; 2024). In the reviewed monograph, he set himself the task of presenting a comprehensive overview of the issues that make up the structure of agriculture in Greater Poland. Among the many definitions of the term 'agrarian structure', the author has adopted a broad understanding of it as not only the division of agricultural land and forms of ownership, but also as a description of the nationality relations between owners and users, the size and types of agricultural production as well as the degree of mechanization of agriculture (Mielewczyk, 2025: 19). The content of the work corresponds to this understanding of agrarian structure (the author uses the terms 'agricultural structure' and 'structure of agriculture' interchangeably). The entire monograph is divided into eight chapters, in which the author not only discusses individual elements of this structure but also refers to a number of issues concerning agriculture in the Second Polish Republic as a whole.

The first chapter is entirely devoted to the historical origins of the agricultural structure in Greater Poland. Many factors have influenced its shape; however, the agrarian reforms carried out by the German state during the period of partition were of crucial importance. Consequently, by the 19th century, the paths of agricultural development in this area differed from those in the other partitions. These differences were also visible in later years, and in many areas they can still be seen today. At the time of regaining independence, agriculture in Greater Poland had become highly intensified and mechanized compared to other parts of the country, and the villages had a different social structure. Smallholders and landless peasants, so numerous in other regions of the Second Polish Republic, constituted just a small percentage of the agricultural population in Greater Poland, even though the number of agricultural workers was the highest in the country (Janicki, 2014a). Another consequence of the partitions was a strong connection with German markets for agricultural products and supplies of artificial fertilizers and agricultural machinery. Cutting them off has led to a decline in agricultural production and difficulties for the agri-food industry. The author also draws attention to the economic significance of German national policy and the consequences of the outflow of the German population from the territories incorporated into Poland after 1918. This specificity of Greater Poland is relatively little known, since most studies devoted to the socio-economic history of the Second Polish Republic omit regional differences.

The second chapter, entitled 'Greater Poland in the interwar period', is also introductory in nature. In it, the author presents the territorial changes and administrative divisions of the Poznań Province during the Second Polish Republic, as well as providing detailed information on the population of individual counties, including the percentage of the population living in rural areas. It is worth noting that the author returns to demographic issues in the final part of the chapter, discussing the ethnic and socio-professional structure of rural areas, and then again in chapter three. This dispersion of information on social issues makes the text somewhat difficult to read. In the same chapter, the author also discusses the natural conditions of agriculture in Greater Poland, such as the terrain, soil and climate.

The next chapter is devoted to discussions on the main factors shaping the structure of agriculture in Greater Poland in the years 1918–1939. The author considers the state's agricultural policy and demographic factors to be the most important. The distinctiveness of Greater Poland from other parts of the reborn Polish state meant that not all government measures proved beneficial to its agriculture. An example of this is the tax policy that resulted in higher burdens on farms in the western provinces than in the central and eastern provinces (Orczyk, 2001: 221). The author also discusses in detail the measures taken by the authorities to stabilize agricultural prices in the early 1920s and attempts to reduce rural debt in connection with the Great Depression. He also devoted considerable attention to the assumptions of the agricultural reform, which was expected to fix the agrarian structure in the Second Polish Republic and eliminate rural overpopulation. However, as the reviewed monograph shows, these were not the problems that weighed most heavily on agriculture in Greater Poland.

The legacy of the period of partition, and especially the Germanisation policy of the German state, was an ownership structure characterised by a large percentage of German land ownership. W. Mielewczyk devoted most of chapter four to the actions of the Polish authorities aimed at limiting the scope of this ownership and, ultimately, getting rid of German colonists. Polish policy towards the German minority was met with more or less overt opposition from Germany. The Germans were interested in keeping as many Germans as possible in the lost territories, as this would give them arguments in favor of a possible revision of the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles in the future. For the Polish state, however, the takeover of estates and leases, still in German hands, was a matter of na-

tional interest. An important tool in achieving this goal was the agricultural reform, which enabled the parceling out of 61.5% of German estates (Mielewczyk, 2025: 115). The theme of the Polish-German struggle for land, which continued throughout the interwar period, is not widely known, although it has been addressed many times in literature. It is therefore good that it has been recalled and explored in greater depth. The author's summaries of all the ownership changes that took place in the Greater Poland region are also interesting. However, they would be more understandable if they were presented in a nationwide context.

Chapter Five, entitled 'The Restructuring of the Agricultural System in Greater Poland,' presents the results of agricultural reform and regulatory work, which, however, had little significance for transformations in the agrarian structure. The author points out that there was little support in Greater Poland for the forced parceling out of large estates, which is why the scope of parceling in the first half of the 1920s was limited. Furthermore, the parceling plans resulting from the 1925 agricultural reform act were not fully implemented, and the pace of implementation was among the slowest in the country. By the end of the interwar period, only 40% of the land reserve had been parceled out, while the national average was approximately 70% (Mielewczyk, 2025: 141). The author focused on presenting the course and effects of the reform in statistical terms, hence the numerous tables and graphs illustrating not only the overall results but also, for example, the differences between private and government land parceling (Mielewczyk, 2025: 140). Nevertheless, there are far fewer attempts to explain the reasons for the differences between Greater Poland and the rest of the country.

Chapter six discusses issues related to the spatial structure of farms and the structure of agricultural land use. As in previous chapters, the author compiles statistical data from various sources and compares them with data from censuses and studies, for example Mieszczankowski (1960). In the rest of the chapter, he discusses issues of agricultural ownership, divided into categories such as owner groups, land use titles, and nationality. This approach differs from most sociological studies (Halamska, 2020). In my opinion, these issues are closely related to the content of chapter four, which was titled 'Ownership changes in agriculture in Greater Poland'. This is another example of dividing the subject matter into too many small parts.

In accordance with the accepted understanding of the structure of agriculture, W. Mielewczyk discussed issues illustrating the organization of agricultural production in Greater Poland in the interwar period (chap-

ter seven). The reader can find out how many former employees were employed in the estates during the period in question, as well as the professional categories into which this group was divided. It is worth noting that in the Poznań Province, a significant proportion of agricultural workers were employed on peasant farms rather than on manors. Detailed data illustrating the state of mechanization of farms, livestock and the structure of crops and livestock breeding were also presented. According to the author's comparisons, agriculture in Greater Poland stood out favorably compared to the rest of the country, although it would be worthwhile to compare these indicators with agriculture in Western European countries. Only then will it become apparent that this level was not particularly high. For example, at the end of the 1930s, just about 10% of the Greater Poland countryside was electrified (Topolski, 2018: 274).

The final chapter, the eighth, is a recapitulation. As a consequence of the changes that have been going on for two decades, W. Mielewczyk pointed out, among other things, changes in the space and landscape of the countryside. The focus on these aspects is a result of the author's interest in documenting the intangible heritage of the countryside (Mielewczyk, 2014). He devoted considerably more attention, however, to changes in agricultural production trends. Similarly, as in previous chapters, the discussion was illustrated with tables and graphs.

Assessing the publication as a whole, it should be noted that the author has used a wide range of sources, especially statistical data from censuses, studies by the Central Statistical Office and trade journals. He also drew on archival sources and carried out a number of his own calculations to illustrate the issues discussed. It is commendable that the work draws on numerous publications from the interwar period and later studies, although it should be noted that the author did not have access to some valuable studies (Janicki, 2014 a,b). In the existing literature on the subject, issues related to agriculture in Greater Poland have been addressed many times, mainly in the form of articles scattered across numerous journals. The collection of earlier research results and their comparison with the author's meticulous calculations is, therefore, undoubtedly valuable. However, those interested in a synthesis of the information may feel somewhat dissatisfied due to the abundance of detailed data illustrating individual aspects of agriculture in the Greater Poland region. With regard to the content of some chapters, the accuracy of the layout of the content is also debatable, especially the repeated return to issues such as demographic structure, nationality and ownership relations, and agricultural

reform. This does not change the fact that the reviewed monograph is of great documentary importance and is an interesting read for those interested in the history of Greater Poland and agriculture.

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