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THE ASSASSINATION OF POLISH PRESIDENT GABRIEL NARUTOWICZ IN 1922. REFLECTIONS FROM THE CENTURY’S PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

From the geopolitical point of view the year 1922 could be perceived as a very first “ordinary” year for the newly emerged Republic of Poland. Military clashes were over, the frontiers had been determined and defended. Nevertheless, hardly achieved, relative international security caused a real eruption of inner difficulties. As the common enemy (mainly the Soviets) was gone, the demons emerged which up till now had been asleep for decennials because of the inexistence of Polish state. A dramatic climax was reached in the last quarter of the year, when firstly the parliamentary and secondly the presidential elections took place. The results were disappointing for both conservative and leftist parties and quite rewarding for the ethnic minorities. Highly strained atmosphere, exacerbated by aggressive media, resulted in street fights and full bloom of antisemite and nationalist behaviours. It all led to a drama: the 16th December 1922, Eligiusz Niewiadomski – a fanatic, frustrated nationalist – murdered the very first president of Republic of Poland, Gabriel Narutowicz – a supporter of tolerance and liberalism – who had been elected just few days earlier. It was a dramatic consequence of political violence – a phenomenon which has its contemporary incarnations.

Keywords: Gabriel Narutowicz, political violence, assassination, presidential elections

Introduction

On 16 December 1922 around 12:15, fanatical painter Eligiusz Niewiadomski fired three shots at the back of Gabriel Narutowicz, President of the Republic of Poland elected just one week before. Narutowicz was visiting an art gallery in Warsaw for the opening of a new exhibition. He collapsed to the floor and died almost instantly. The killing of

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the President was the tragic climax of an extremely turbulent year which put in question the most basic civil and human rights in Poland. The events of 1922 seemed to suggest that the newly revived Republic could descend into political and social chaos.

Narutowicz: a man of success

The first President of the Republic of Poland was born in 1865 in the town of Telše in Žemaitija. He was descended from an old noble family. He graduated from a secondary school in the town of Lipava and enrolled at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics of the University of St. Petersburg. Yet, he had to interrupt his studies due to poor health. He managed to leave for Switzerland, where he continued his studies at the University of Technology in Zurich. At the turn of the 1880s and 1890s, Narutowicz became associated with the Polish community in Switzerland, especially with the left-wing party in exile called "Proletariat". This led the Tsarist authorities to issue a warrant for his arrest, which prevented him from returning to his home country when he completed his studies. Therefore, the charges that he had no interest in Poland and would have nothing to do with it, which were formulated against him later, were unfounded. It is true that in 1895 he adopted Swiss citizenship, which facilitated his academic and professional career¹.

Narutowicz's first place of employment was the railway construction office in St Gallen, where he worked as a constructor and engineer. He was promoted steadily over the years. In 1895, he became the head of the Rhine regulation division, and one year later he won an award at the prestigious International Exhibition in Paris. It will not be an overstatement to describe him as a pioneer of Switzerland's electrification. He was also responsible for the construction of numerous hydroelectric power plants in Switzerland and beyond. In 1907, he was appointed Professor of the Department of Hydraulic Engineering at the Zurich University of Technology. In later years, until 1919, he even held the post of dean there. During the First World War, Narutowicz got involved in promoting the Polish cause and humanitarian aid: for example, he was an active member of the Swiss General Committee for Assistance to War Victims in Poland and of the organisation called La Pologne et la Guerre

¹ See: *Gabriel Narutowicz. Pierwszy prezydent Rzeczypospolitej. Księga pamiątkowa*, Warszawa 1925, *passim*; J. Pajewski, W. Łazuga, *Gabriel Narutowicz. Pierwszy Prezydent Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa 1993, *passim*.

(Poland and War) in Lausanne. During that time, his political views shifted towards Piłsudski's ideas².

The advent of the Second Polish Republic was a turning point in Narutowicz's life. He was a successful man, respected scholar and engineer, yet, in September 1919, he abandoned his comfortable and prosperous life in Switzerland and returned to his homeland, which he had not visited for over 30 years. It was a spontaneous and selfless decision. He understood that the new country desperately needed educated professionals. He also knew that the country was fighting to assert its borders against practically everyone around it, and its survival was uncertain. He was heading into the unknown. This was arguably the best proof of his commitment and patriotism, though his opponents denied him these qualities.

At the end of June 1920, when the Bolshevik offensive on Warsaw began to threaten the very existence of the Polish Republic, Gabriel Narutowicz, then aged 55, was appointed Minister of Public Works in Władysław Grabski's government. Had the Polish troops not driven the Soviets back in the "Miracle on the Vistula" that happened in August, he and the entire government would have likely ended up in Soviet captivity. Two years later, he was promoted to the position of Foreign Minister³. Yet, hardly anyone knew who he was at that time.

Affective polarisation

The newly appointed minister found himself at the centre of the government crisis and parliamentary conflicts. The March Constitution of 1921 was modelled on the system of the French Third Republic and replicated its flaws: soon, it became clear that the over-inflated power of the Parliament gave rise to a vicious circle of short-lasting unstable governments, futile, though heated party debates, and absence of a long-term political vision. The fear of the Chief of State Józef Piłsudski, which was shared by most MPs, resulted in a grotesque curtailment of the President's power. He, as well as the government and the Senate, had little to say. All that mattered was the whimsical Sejm, driven by conflicting tendencies. Poland turned into a "sejmocracy"⁴.

² M. Andrzejewski, *Gabriel Narutowicz*, Warszawa 2012, *passim*.

³ J. Pajewski, W. Łazuga, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–52.

⁴ W. Suleja, *Dawniej to było. Przewodnik po historii Polski*, Warszawa 2019, pp. 251–255.

The MPs were inexperienced, unable to reach compromise, or to share power, while ministers could not rise above party interests, as MPs blackmailed them. Corruption was a serious problem: distrust and resistance to externally imposed power became deeply ingrained in the Polish people, making it difficult for them to switch to civic reasoning. The decades under partitions left the country with no legacy of honest and efficient public service. The control of economic and import concessions was highly profitable for political parties. The fledgling land reform was accompanied by embezzlement, land speculation, and the leasing of state property. All these struggles and political scandals played out against the backdrop of an overwhelming economic crisis. It might be true to say that the years 1921-1922 were the time when the Polish society faced the greatest material hardship, at least until the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The economy was abruptly thrown off its wartime course and hit the rock bottom. The budget deficit posed a threat to the very existence of the state, while tax revenues were low. The policy of frantic money printing fuelled the rampant inflation. In mid-1919, one US dollar cost 590 Polish marks; three years later, it was worth nearly 18,000 Polish marks. The extensive social rights and the intensive development of trade unions (in 1921, trade union membership reached 1.3 million) mitigated the problems and protected people against speculation, but only to a limited extent⁵.

Social tension was not just the result of the economic situation. It was no coincidence that the rapid surge in internal disputes in Poland occurred in the second half of 1921, after the signing of the Riga peace treaty with the Bolsheviks that effectively marked the end of a period of incessant wars, and after the series of plebiscites and uprisings that shaped the borders of the new state. It was obvious that the lessening of the external threat reawakened deep ideological disparities that were consuming the society (which, in fact, were quite natural). This ended the extraordinary time of euphoria following the regaining of independence, accompanied by the fear of losing it again. It was time to return to ordinary life. But its realities turned out to be very different from the dreams of "glass houses" in free Poland that had been dreamt for decades. Until then, it was possible to maintain the delusion that the need to fight for the borders and to defend them would only temporarily delay the fulfilment of this spectacular vision, while the extraordinary social mobilisation during the war further sustained this illusory thinking. Now,

⁵ See: R.M. Watt, *Gorzka chwala: Polska i jej los 1918-1939*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 182-185; M. Eckert, *Historia polityczna Polski lat 1918-1939*, Warszawa 1990, pp. 69-70.

as peacetime came, dreams inevitably clashed with real life, which was extremely painful. This led to the eruption of new, deeper frustrations and disillusionment, which, in turn, provoked increasingly violent political and ideological struggles⁶.

Furthermore, the nation that had fought for its right to be Polish saw that one in three people living in the state that emerged from bloody battles were not native Poles. Now their fragile Polishness had to be protected from within. The decisive vote of the minorities in the presidential election of December 1922 made a considerable part of the population even more convinced that their homeland, which they miraculously won back, was not ruled by Polish people at all.

Meanwhile, since the summer of 1922, the heated social and political atmosphere was fuelled not only by the more and more grotesque clashes in the Sejm and the ever-changing government but also by the campaign before the parliamentary election that was due in November. Just then, on the eve of the election, the long-lasting economic crisis entered its particularly acute phase: at the beginning of the year, following another devaluation of the Polish mark, prices started to rise even faster. Price hikes were observed almost on a daily basis, with wages lagging behind them and savings melting away. This provoked an unprecedented wave of strikes. In August, protests of agricultural workers spread over nearly the entire province of Poznań. Textile workers in Dąbrowa, miners in Dąbrowa Basin, and postal workers, also went on strike. The seriousness of economic problems at the time is best illustrated by the fact that in 1922 state spending was two times higher than state revenues. The country seemed to be on the brink of bankruptcy⁷.

The Sejm election on 5 November, and of the Senate election on 12 November 1922 were the first "proper" parliamentary elections in free Poland and the only ones in the history of the Second Republic of Poland with so few parties trying to boycott them. The candidates standing for the election made a colourful and diverse group, representing minor parties as well as powerful movements. It all looked chaotic, especially given the low level of political awareness among the people⁸.

The vote was preceded by a "regular" campaign. "Regular" here meant: marked by a brutal and ruthless political struggle. The politically inexperienced nation showed signs of "affective polarisation", which has been described by political scientists. It meant that they saw their politi-

⁶ A. Ajnenkiel, *Od „rządów ludowych” do przewrotu majowego. Zarys dziejów politycznych Polski 1918–1926*, Warszawa 1986, pp. 324–336.

⁷ R.M. Watt, *op.cit.*, pp. 182–185; M. Eckert, *op.cit.*, pp. 69–70.

⁸ A. Ajnenkiel, *op.cit.*, pp. 324–336.

cal adversaries not so much as opponents, but as enemies they needed to combat⁹. The political competition turned into an ideological, polarised, and highly emotional clash of two camps: one made up of national democrats, clergy and speculators, and the other made up of socialists, communists, and Germans. It was therefore a clash of the nationalist, conservative right, and left-wing groups and supporters of Piłsudski. People were threatened with Bolshevism on the one hand and with the Jews on the other. Xenophobia and class struggle were widely exploited. People accused each other of treachery and theft¹⁰. One might want to ask whether this "affective polarisation", with a different set of slogans but of a similar nature, is not consuming the Polish political scene today.

In the autumn of 1922, journalists working for competing newspapers found themselves right on the frontline. The standard of articles produced by all sides of the argument was appalling: there were verbal attacks (such as "thugs", "freeloaders", "apostles of bribery", "journalistic peddlers", "scandalists"), childish mocking (for example, "Robotnik" ["The Worker"] was turned into "Rebe-tnik", PPS into "pepejsowcy"; the Christian Union of National Unity became "Chjena" Korfanty was nick-named Korfantek), and insults ("dunce", "half-wit"). Actions were taken too: famous journalists and writers were beaten (it happened, for example, to Adolf Nowaczyński and Stanisław Rymar), print shops and editorial offices were raided. At the same time, the high cost of the campaign forced parties to enter into curious alliances; for instance, the left-wing PSL "Liberation" party offered seats in the Sejm to some wealthy representatives of the bourgeoisie, who agreed to lend a large sum of money to the party¹¹.

In the end, the election was won by the right wing and the conservatives, with the National Democrats (the Popular National Union) playing the leading role. They obtained nearly 40 percent of all seats. The centre parties (PSL "Piast" and the National Workers' Party) also achieved a good result, gaining approximately 20 percent support. Members of the popular party "Piast" became the second largest political force in the Sejm. Only 20 percent of voters supported the left wing parties PSL "Liberation" and PPS. The election of the Senate, whose importance was

⁹ See: K. Skarżyńska, *Człowiek a polityka. Zarys psychologii politycznej*, Warszawa 2005; S.S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, vol. 1–3, London–New York 1961, 1962, 1991.

¹⁰ Compare: D. Nałęcz, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Nie szabłą, lecz piórem. Batalie publicystyczne II Rzeczypospolitej*, ed. D. Nałęcz, Warszawa 1993, pp. 6–7.

¹¹ W. Władysław, *Śmierć prezydenta – grudzień 1922*, [in:] *Nie szabłą, lecz piórem...*, pp. 14–16.

secondary to that of the Sejm, was held one week later and confirmed the distribution of votes in the Sejm election: the right-wing won 49 seats, centre parties – 20 seats, and the left-wing – 15 seats. The remaining seats were taken by national minorities¹².

The right wing was not pleased with this turn of events. Having no clear majority was plain incomprehensible from the point of view of Warsaw, where the National Democrats received more votes than the national average. This only fuelled the tension. However, its main problem was different: in the new National Assembly, ethnic minorities were represented by nearly 20 percent of MPs and by a similar percentage of senators. Jewish groups became the strongest. It was clear that this community, which, being strong in numbers, represented one of the main forces in the Parliament, would become the object (and subject) of dangerous conflicts. The first of these took place at the opening session of the Sejm on 28 November 1922: Ukrainian MPs wanted to take the oath in their native language but Speaker Maciej Rataj forced them to do it in Polish¹³.

The excitement over organising the work of the Sejm and the complex relations between parties had not yet subsided when the election of the President of the Polish Republic came to the fore. The course of the voting of 9 December 1922 was one of the most astonishing, surprising, and consequential events in the entire history of the Second Polish Republic. There had been no indication of what would happen in the Sejm chamber on that one dramatic day.

Electoral shock

Before the vote of 9 December 1922, the initial position was quite clear: the right-wing block (including the national and conservative parties), controlling around 40 percent of votes, counted on support from the centre party PSL "Piast". This majority would have enabled them to propose a joint candidate and speak from the position of strength. There was one problem though: the National Democrats were unwilling to give way to "Piast" over the land reform. There was also confusion about the game Józef Piłsudski was playing. It was generally believed that, despite his reservations, the Chief of State would eventually propose his candidacy, which he delayed almost until the very end. This made parties represented in the Sejm propose insignificant candidates, knowing that they would

¹² A. Ajnenkiel, *op.cit.*, pp. 326–328.

¹³ M. Eckert, *op.cit.*, pp. 71–72.

not stand much of a chance in competition with the highly popular Piłsudski. The Marshal's decision of 4 December 1922 about his final withdrawal from the race for presidency surprised politicians and astonished the public¹⁴.

The puzzled MPs had to choose one of the already proposed candidates, and let us stress that all major parties saw it as a point of honour to put forward their own champions. PSL "Piast" proposed the cooperative activist Stanisław Wojciechowski. The party's leader, Wincenty Witos, did not want to compete against Piłsudski. "Piast's" rival party, the left-wing PSL "Liberation" put its faith in Gabriel Narutowicz. Narutowicz, who was a supporter of Piłsudski, was in fact not linked to "Liberation". His candidacy was proposed as a result of a compromise reached within the party and... the absence of better alternatives. It is even not entirely certain whether Narutowicz gave clear consent to stand in the election! But the benefit of this nomination was that it showed the left-wing popular party as capable of rising above party divisions and its natural peasant electorate¹⁵.

Meanwhile, the Socialists decided to put forward one of their leaders, Ignacy Daszyński. Yet, his decidedly left-wing views meant that he stood no chance of being elected. His nomination was therefore a form of political statement. The national minorities decided to show their strength too, proposing a joint candidate; the exotic linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay. The National Democrats paid the highest price for Piłsudski's move. Assuming that its candidate would certainly lose in competition against the Marshal, the party bet on Count Maurycy Zamoyski, the top landholder in the Second Polish Republic, who was a staunch opponent of the land reform. It was a gesture of courtesy towards a distinguished partner, however, as the situation suddenly changed, the compromise with "Piast" proved impossible¹⁶.

The National Assembly, which gathered at a formal session on 9 December, faced the choice of five candidates. According to the binding rules of procedure, if no candidate managed to secure an absolute majority of votes in the first ballot, the person with the lowest support would drop out in subsequent rounds. That was what happened. Though Count Zamoyski received around 40 percent support, voting had to con-

¹⁴ See: M. Białokur, *Kandydat PSL „Wyzwolenie” pierwszym prezydentem Polski, czyli wielka gra Stanisława Thugutta w grudniu 1922 roku*, „Zeszyty Wiejskie”, 2019, vol. 25, pp. 85–107.

¹⁵ R.M. Watt, *op.cit.*, pp. 171–172; *Polska uskrzydłona, Polska spsiała. Rozmowa z Tomaszem Nałęczem*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 16 XI 2009.

¹⁶ See: M. Ruszczyc, *Strzały w „Zachęcie”*, Katowice 1987, pp. 133–138.

tinue. Ignacy Daszyński dropped out in the second round. Zamoyski was still the most likely winner, getting 226 votes. Wojciechowski was supported by 152 MPs, while Narutowicz received only one vote less. Badouin de Courtenay gathered only 10 votes and was eliminated in the third round. Zamoyski, Wojciechowski, and Narutowicz, who was considered the least important of the three, were still in the game. The candidate favoured by PSL "Piast" was the chief opponent of the National Democrats' man. The parties that were supposed to work together in the elections, opposed one another in a fierce clash. As a result of complex electoral arithmetic, the right wing managed to eliminate Wojciechowski in the fourth vote, as some left wing MPs, disposed negatively towards Piłsudski, did not support him. Zamoyski, and the underestimated Narutowicz, were the only candidates left¹⁷.

The national minorities decided to show its unity before the final resolution and supported one specific candidate. Gabriel Narutowicz was the only viable option for them. Indeed, the votes of the minorities were decisive for the election of the first President of the Polish Republic, however, he was supported by virtually all parties, with the exception of the right. In the end, he obtained 289 votes (103 from representatives of the minorities and 186 from the left and the centre), while Zamoyski got 227 votes, which was practically the same as initially¹⁸. It is unlikely that anyone would have expected this defeat of the right, least of all the right itself.

Narutowicz's astonishing success in the election came as a shock to the nationalists. The shock quickly gave way to anger. As soon as the evening of 9 December, radical nationalists from the influential "Development" Society drafted an appeal, announcing that a "great development rally" would be held on the following day by the Society's headquarters in Żurawia 2. "Encouraged by the success achieved to date, the Jews have reached for the supreme power in Poland", they cautioned and appealed for "the entire national camp to face the truth with courage and energy, and give a firm rebuff to the Jewish and Masonic assault on the honour and dignity of the Polish Nation." "Come in great numbers! – they called – Long live Poland freed from Jews! Long live the free Polish Nation, liberated from Jewish and Masonic influence!"¹⁹. Nationalist politicians sought to outdo one another in stressing

¹⁷ M. Białokur, *op.cit.*, pp. 85–107.

¹⁸ F. Bernaś, *Ofiary fanatyzmu*, Warszawa 1987, pp. 156–157.

¹⁹ *Odezwa Zarządu Głównego Towarzystwa „Rozwój” z 9 XII 1922 r.*, [in:] *Gabriel Narutowicz. Pierwszy prezydent Rzeczypospolitej. Księga pamiątkowa*, Warszawa 1925, p. 302.

the President's "foreignness" and the "anti-Polish" role of the minorities. General Józef Haller delivered fiery speeches from the balcony of his apartment in Aleje Ujazdowskie. The crowds that listened to him chanted: "Elected by Jews! Down with Narutowicz! Freemason! Atheist! Jewish lackey!"²⁰.

There was unrest in the streets of Warsaw. Radical nationalist groups organised protests on the night of 9 December. On the next day, the capital city saw thousands of people demonstrating in the streets. On 11 December, as the President was travelling in a carriage to the Sejm building to be sworn in, people threw snowballs and mud at him, hitting him in the eye. At the same time, there were fights in the halls of the Sejm building. In the end, Narutowicz was sworn in the gloom of a half-empty assembly chamber. A bruise on the President's cheek could be seen even from a distance²¹.

Meanwhile, National Democratic and Socialist militias clashed in the city. Trade union member Jan Kałuszewski was killed on 11 December in a fight at the Three Crosses Square. Terrified by the hatred around him, Narutowicz was close to breaking down. On 12 December, the National Democrats staged a strike of school children, while workers' organisations across the country called on their colleagues in Warsaw to protest. The chaos was deepening. The army was out in the streets of Warsaw, as the situation in the city resembled the state of siege²².

Amid this atmosphere, the Sejm session that had been scheduled for 14 December turned out incredibly heated and stormy. Speeches delivered by MPs were regularly interrupted by whistles, laughter, shouts, and applause from the audience. The left wing denounced the right as "fascists", while the National Democrats shouted that they would not give in to national minorities. On that day, Narutowicz assumed the duties of the President of the Republic of Poland, while Piłsudski resigned from the office of the Chief of State²³.

The national press did not hide its anger in these days. Right after the election, titles of National Democratic newspapers sent out a clear message: "Victory over Poland", "Jesus Maria!", read some of them. Shortly after that, "Gazeta Warszawska" called Narutowicz "a barrier" and urged: "We have survived foreign occupation and we can liberate

²⁰ See: D. Pacyńska, *Śmierć prezydenta*, Warszawa 1965, pp. 50–51.

²¹ P. Pleskot, *Portret mordercy. Artysta, który zabił prezydenta*, Kraków 2022, pp. 21–25; R.M. Watt, *op.cit.* p. 173.

²² F. Bernaś, *op.cit.*, pp. 164–165.

²³ M. Ruszczyc, *op.cit.*, pp. 151–152.

ourselves from the chains in which the Jews hold us with the help of some members of our own society, who, alas, have been duped by them. It's time to act! It's time to fight!"²⁴.

The murder and the murderer

On 13 December, censors confiscated the current issue of the "Gazeta Poranna" daily, which contained a text titled "Blood thirst", whose anonymous author cautioned against "rivers of blood" that could flow in the streets of the capital city in response to alleged provocations from the "socialists and liberationists" targeting "the Polish population of Warsaw"²⁵. One day later, Stanisław Stroński, an influential columnist and politician, called Mr Narutowicz "an obstacle"²⁶. And what does one do with an "obstacle"? The response from the implied reader would be: "One should get rid of it!". Eligiusz Niewiadomski did just that.

On 15 December, Gabriel Narutowicz met with Primate Aleksander Kakowski. He was feeling emotional and was clearly affected by the severe stress of the previous few days; he kneeled down and asked the Cardinal for a blessing, even though he was not a practicing Catholic at all. Kakowski was moved; he took this gesture for a confession, made the sign of the cross, and gave Narutowicz an absolution. Narutowicz, who had been accused of atheism and conspiring with the Freemasons (he actually was a member of the Grand National Lodge of Poland), crossed himself. The following morning, as Narutowicz was looking through documents, he came across a plea for pardon for a prisoner who had been sentenced to death. He hesitated: he was about to make his first formal decision as the President of the Republic of Poland. In the end, he signed the pardon. Little did he know that his first decision would also be his last²⁷.

Before noon, he paid back the visit to Primate Kakowski at the Borchów Palace. "You are a righteous and outstanding man, President", the hierarch was to say. "The street mob does not represent the whole of Poland". A few minutes later, the President walked the short distance from Miodowa street to the Małachowski Square and arrived in front of "Zachęta" gallery. Several minutes later he was dead²⁸.

²⁴ *Co dalej?*, „Gazeta Warszawska”, 12 XII 1922.

²⁵ *Glód krwi*, „Gazeta Poranna”, 13 XII 1922.

²⁶ S. Stroński, *Zawada*, „Rzeczpospolita”, 14 XII 1922.

²⁷ P. Pleskot, *op.cit.*, pp. 29–41.

²⁸ D. Pacyńska, *op.cit.*, pp. 102–111.

The killer, Eligiusz Niewiadomski, was not a trifling figure. He was an artist, painter, social activist, populariser of science, writer, and enthusiast of the Tatra mountains. He was also a radical, hard nationalist, an outsider, and an emotionally unstable fanatic deprived of empathy. He was born on 1 December 1869 in Warsaw. His mother Julia, a native German, died merely two years later. His father Wincenty, a staunch rationalist, literary man, and lover of chess, became involved with another woman. The upbringing of the youngest child, Eligiusz, was entrusted to his much older sister Cecylia. She was a distinguished social activist and educator, but also an authoritative old maid. Niewiadomski studied painting in St Petersburg (where he absorbed Russian radicalism) and in Paris. Later, he settled in Warsaw. One of his most famous paintings is the portrait of Stefan Żeromski (dated 1900)²⁹.

At the end of the 19th century, he became involved with the national movement. In 1901, he was arrested for distributing illegal publications and spent a few months imprisoned in the Citadel and in Pawiak prison. He was ideologically close to the National Democracy, however, he soon found himself in conflict with this circle, as he advocated radical sabotage measures against Russia. His willingness to blow up trains and bridges was more reminiscent of Piłsudski than of Dmowski. Besides, Eligiusz admitted his fascination with the Commander. In 1918, he was hired as an official at the Ministry of Culture and Art (initially in the Regency Council, later in the Polish government). During the Polish-Bolshevik war, he briefly worked for counterintelligence. He quarrelled with his superiors and soon returned to clerical work. Yet, he was unable to work in a team, which led to his dismissal in 1921. Increasing alienation and deep disappointment with the postwar reality led him to develop an almost obsessive hatred of Piłsudski: in Eligiusz's eyes, he was no saviour of the nation but rather the incarnation of evil. Niewiadomski decided to kill him³⁰.

Yet, in December 1922, unexpected circumstances led to the election of Gabriel Narutowicz as the President of the Republic of Poland, and Eligiusz recognised him as a proxy target. During his trial, he admitted that he had no negative feelings for the victim. He killed a symbol. In this sense, he displayed the characteristics of a typical fanatic and sociopath, a person having no regard for the consequences of achieving the mission and purpose that he believed in and that he set for himself. Following a speedy trial, he was sentenced to execution by the firing squad. The sentence was carried out on 31 January 1923 on the slope of the

²⁹ See more: P. Pleskot, *op.cit.*, Kraków 2022, pp. 85–244.

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

Citadel. He became the object of veneration, which, though not universal, was definitely real. Guards were set up at his grave in Powązki. Masses were celebrated for him in dozens of churches. In 1923, 300 boys in Poland were given the rare name Eligiusz³¹.

Conclusion

It became clear to everyone that the killing of the President was in fact a tragic conclusion of the ruthless campaign unleashed on 9 December 1922. At least for a few hours after Narutowicz was shot by Niewiadomski, institutional power in the Polish Republic was indeed virtually non-existent. Offices and ministries were not working. There was no government (as there was not enough time to form it), and there was no President anymore. Nobody declared public mourning but despite this, for an unknown reason, even cinemas were closed. The Speaker of the Sejm, Mr Rataj, was unable to take over the President's duties in line with the Constitution, as no validated death certificate had been drawn up³². Anarchy reigned supreme. No one could protect civil and human constitutional rights.

"People in the streets of Warsaw felt compelled to listen for shots", wrote Stanisław Cat Mackiewicz at the time. "It's the beginning of a civil war", wrote the Lithuanian press in Vilnius (not without satisfaction). A group of radical officers associated with Piłsudski intended to take advantage of the situation and organise a coup, however, Piłsudski opposed these plans. National Democratic militias were paralysed by the attack, but Ignacy Daszyński managed to assert control over the revenge-seeking Socialists. On the next day, Maciej Rataj appointed the government led by the energetic and tough Władysław Sikorski. The new PM channelled some of the negative energy accumulated in the country, announcing on the day of his election that he intended to punish not only Eligiusz Niewiadomski but also those who were morally responsible for the crime, namely, the Nationalists³³.

Yet, bloodshed was successfully averted. Shortly after that, in the morning of 20 December, the National Assembly elected a new President. It was Stanisław Wojciechowski, a popular politician, who was also quite close to the Socialists. He received support from exactly the same groups as his murdered predecessor, national minorities included.

³¹ S. Zasada *Zabili nam prezydenta. 16 grudnia 1922 r. zginął Gabriel Narutowicz*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 12 II 2015.

³² R.M. Watt, *op.cit.*, pp. 175–177.

³³ P. Pleskot, *op.cit.*, pp. 70–72.

The Parliament somehow managed to act rationally in that time of chaos. But democracy was barely saved. The year 1922 did not bring a revolution. Józef Piłsudski would stage a coup four years later, in what was, ironically, a much calmer time. Not for human rights, though.

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Zabójstwo Prezydenta Polski Gabriela Narutowicza w 1922 roku. Refleksje z perspektywy stulecia

Streszczenie

Z geopolitycznego punktu widzenia rok 1922 może być postrzegany jako pierwszy „zwykły” rok w historii odrodzonej Rzeczypospolitej. Walki zbrojne zostały zakończone, granice ustalone i obronione. Niemniej z trudem osiągnięte, stosunkowe bezpieczeństwo

zewewnętrzne wywołało prawdziwą erupcję problemów wewnętrznych. Po pozbyciu się wspólnego wroga (przede wszystkim Sowieców) obudziły się demony, uspięne we wcześniejszych dziesięcioleciach z powodu nieistnienia państwowości polskiej. Duszny klimat osiągnął punkt szczytowy w ostatnim kwartale 1922 r., wraz z wyborami parlamentarnymi i prezydenckimi. Wyniki wyborów rozczarowały zarówno prawicę, jak i lewicę, okazały się za to stosunkowo korzystne dla mniejszości etnicznych. Napięta atmosfera, zaogniana przez agresywne media, skutkowałą walkami ulicznymi oraz wzrostem nastrojów antysemickich i nacjonalistycznych. Doprowadziło to do zbrodni: 16 grudnia Eligiusz Niewiadomski – fanatyczny, sfrustrowany nacjonalista – zamordował pierwszego w historii prezydenta Polski: Gabriela Narutowicza, zwolennika tolerancji i liberalizmu, wybranego raptem kilka dni wcześniej. Taki był tragiczny rezultat przemocy politycznej – zjawiska, które manifestuje się również współcześnie.

Słowa kluczowe: Gabriel Narutowicz, przemoc polityczna, zabójstwo, wybory prezydenckie