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The Influence of the Union of Brest on the Formation of Cultural Identity of Podlasie

Abstract

The article aims to show these elements of the cultural identity of Podlasie that were shaped by the Union of Brest. The history of the Union in Podlasie, from the time of its setting up until its forceful and often bloody dissolution by tsarist authorities, as well as the traces of the Union preserved nowadays in spiritual and material culture indicate the fundamental role it played in forming the cultural identity of the region.

Keywords: Union of Brest, Podlasie, unity of the Church, religious culture, ecumenism.

Wpływ Unii Brzeskiej na kształtowanie tożsamości kulturowej Podlasia

Streszczenie

Artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie tych elementów kulturowej tożsamości Podlasia, które zostały ukształtowane przez Unię Brzeską. Dzieje Unii Brzeskiej, od jej zawarcia aż do przymusowej, a niekiedy krwawej likwidacji przez władze carskie, jak również ślady Unii zachowane do dzisiaj w duchowej i materialnej kulturze regionu wskazują na fundamentalną rolę, jaką odegrała ona w kształtowaniu jego kulturowej tożsamości.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Brzeska, Podlasie, jedność Kościoła, kultura religijna ekumenizm.

Introduction

Podlasie, which under no circumstance should be identified with Voivodeship of Podlasie (*województwo podlaskie*) created in 1999 as a result of the administrative reform of the Republic of Poland, is unique compared to other historical

and geographical regions of Poland. This distinctive character is ethnic and consequently also religious and cultural in nature.

The distinctive character of Podlasie, compared to many other regions of Poland, is a result of its geographical location where the influences of Western and Eastern Christianity meet. It has also been shaped by its often difficult history. Despite the fast changes affecting cultural, religious and ethnic situation, the distinctive character of Podlasie can still be visible. This unique diversity makes it difficult for outside researchers to determine the local ethnic and religious relations; particularly for those researchers who are trying to find the application for their theoretical premises in the practice of social and religious life. However, the way in which cultural and religious diversity of Podlasie was created and still prevails is a factor that can verify the credibility and adequacy of existing theoretical approaches, both from the perspective of cultural as well as religious and ecumenical studies.

The presented article aims to show these elements of the cultural identity of Podlasie that were shaped by the Union of Brest. The history of the Union in Podlasie, from the time of its setting up until its forceful and often bloody dissolution by tsarist authorities, as well as the traces of the Union preserved nowadays in spiritual and material culture indicate the fundamental role it played in forming the cultural identity of the region.

1. The specifics of Podlasie

Podlasie as a geographical and historical region stands out among other regions of Poland particularly in terms of religion and ethnicity. This situation is deeply rooted in the beginnings of settlements in Podlasie as well as in the history of ethnic and religious relations that were mostly influenced by the Union of Brest¹.

The very beginning of settlements in Podlasie indicates emerging diversity. Already in the Middle Ages this region formed the Western border of Ruthenian settlements and the Eastern border of Mazovian settlements. These two cultural and ethnic elements accompanied by the religious diversity (Catholicism and Orthodoxy) shaped Podlasie and influenced its course of history. The aforementioned diversity of the discussed region is expressed in the very name, which

¹ M. SKŁADANOWSKI, *The Cultural, National and Religious Identity of the Inhabitants of the Polish-Belarusian Borderland: Historical Experiences as a Factor in Shaping the Contemporary Podlasie Region*, "Ecumeny and Law" 2 (2014), 75–76.

means ‘the land taken by Lechites’, that is Poles (it is particularly visible in the original Ruthenian form ‘Podlashe’)².

While the Masovian population had awareness of their Polishness and was attached to the culture shaped by Catholicism, the Ruthenian population living in Podlasie maintained the awareness of their own identity for a long time³. This identity was preserved by belonging to the Eastern Church. Awareness of this distinction became at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries the reason for the significant success of the Union of Brest in Podlasie. After announcing in 1589 the establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate, Orthodox hierarchy in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth expressed – albeit to a lesser extent than believed until recently – concern as to the subordination of the Orthodox Church, which continued the traditions of the Orthodox Church of Kiev and was connected with Constantinople, to Moscow’s jurisdiction. The union with Rome was supposed to secure the Eastern Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth against encroachment by Moscow and dependence on it. Belief of the Ruthenian population in the Podlasie region of their own ethnic autonomy made the idea of their own Church (Ruthenian), in communion with Rome, very successful.

The experience of abolition of the Union in the Podlasie region (in 1839 in the areas incorporated into the Russian Empire and in 1875 in the Kingdom of Poland⁴) as well as numerous cases of accession of the former Uniates into the Latin Church after the Act of Toleration (1905)⁵ showed that the Ruthenian people’s awareness of their own identity in Podlasie was extremely strong. The martyrdom of the Uniates in Drelów and Pratulín in Southern Podlasie (1874) was a telling example of that Ruthenian and Catholic identity. They gave their life in faithfulness to the Holy See and to the Catholic Church and, at the same time, they kept their Ruthenian ethnic identity⁶.

² *Źródła dziejowe*, vol. 17, part 2, *Polska w XVI wieku pod względem geograficzno-statystycznym*, ed. A. JABLONOWSKI, Warszawa 1909, 1; *Sokołów Podlaski. Dzieje miasta i okolic*, ed. G. RYZEWSKI, Białystok – Sokołów Podlaski 2006, 45.

³ E. BESZTA-BOROWSKI, *Dzieje parafii katolickiej Narodzenia NMP i św. Mikołaja w Bielsku Podlaskim*, ed. M. Składanowski, Drohiczyn 2012, 114–115.

⁴ W. KOLBUK, *Trzy kasaty unii kościelnej: 1795, 1839, 1875 – różnice i podobieństwa*, „Zeszyty Naukowe KUL” 34 (1991) nr 1–2, 3–5; H. DYLAĞOWA, *Unia Brzeska. Geneza – dzieje – zagłada*, in: *Czterechsetlecie zawarcia Unii Brzeskiej 1596–1996*, ed. S. ALEKSANDROWICZ, T. KEMPA, Toruń 1998, 21

⁵ M. SKŁADANOWSKI, *Współpraca duszpasterska parafii obrządku łacińskiego i wschodniego jako znak skuteczności Unii Brzeskiej. Przykład Bielska Podlaskiego*, „Drohiczyński Przegląd Naukowy” 6 (2014), 433.

⁶ Por. H. DYLAĞOWA, *Unia Brzeska. Geneza – dzieje – zagłada*, 22, 159–160; J. ŁUPIŃSKI, *Dzieje grekokatolików w Królestwie Polskim po powstaniu styczniowym*, Olecko 2002, 128.

Nowadays Podlasie maintains its own cultural separateness as well as ethnic and religious diversity shaped over the centuries of its history. This identity and diversity are strongly connected to the history of the Union of Brest.

2. Historical description of Podlasie

Defining Podlasie as a region, even though its existence does not raise any doubts, poses some difficulties. It is heavily influenced by the administrative division introduced in Poland in 1999, according to which there is the Voivodeship of Podlasie with the capital in Białystok that does not, however, include the important areas of Western (the Sokołów Podlaski land) and Southern Podlasie (the Siedlce and Biała Podlaska lands). It contains, on the other hand, lands that have never been administratively or culturally a part of Podlasie (the Łomża land, the Suwałki region, a great part of the Białystok region).

In order to determine the borders of the region one needs to apply two premises: ethnic and historical-administrative. The former is connected with the aforementioned Ruthenian and Masovian settlements. Therefore, it is possible to define Podlasie as a land where Ruthenian and Masovian settlements met and crossed. The historical-administrative premise, on the other hand, takes into account the emergence of the Voivodeship of Podlasie with the capital in Drohiczyn (in 1520) and the formation of its borders after its inclusion into Crown of the Kingdom of Poland as a result of the Union of Lublin (in 1569). The Voivodeship of Podlasie was originally composed of the Drohiczyn and Bielsk Podlaski lands. The Drohiczyn land contained previous counties: Węgrów, Drohiczyn and Mielnik; with time the Mielnik County separated and became the independent Mielnik Land, and the Węgrów County, being the remnants of Masovian administration, ceased to be a separate entity. Meanwhile, the Bielsk Podlaski land had a more diverse character. Following A. Jabłonowski, one can distinguish its Southern and Northern strips of land. The Southern strip stretched basically between the Nurzec and Narew rivers and was divided into the Brańsk and Bielsk Podlaski parts. In the northern strip one can distinguish the Suraż part (from Wysokie Mazowieckie through the Narew River up to the Zabłudów Forest) and the Tykocin part (reaching the borders of Prussia). At the beginning of the 17th century the Voivodeship of Podlasie was broadened by the surroundings of Rossosz, Konstantynów and Międzyrzec Podlaski in the south. It means that historical Podlasie also contains the area of the Voivodeship of Brest to the south of the Bug river,

which seems reasonable since originally (1520–1566) this area belonged to the Voivodeship of Podlasie⁷.

3. The Union of Brest as a forming factor of Podlasie

As has already been indicated, the Union of Brest was an important factor shaping the distinctive character of Podlasie in terms of religion, ethnicity as well as culture.

The Union enabled the Ruthenian population of Podlasie to preserve their own identity by being a part of a particular religious community, which – though in communion with Rome – distinguished itself with its own tradition and customs. On the one hand, the Union blocked a rapid process of polonization and latinization of Podlasie and on the other hand, it expressed the independence of the Ruthenian population of Podlasie from Moscow, which appeared to be of particular importance during Partitions. This diversity of Podlasie was destroyed with the abolition of the Union by the Partition administration and consequently due to the prohibition of restoration of the Uniate Church after the Act of Toleration (1905)⁸.

Nonetheless, the Union of Brest, despite being abolished, left significant traces in the material and spiritual culture of Podlasie. It is worth noticing that the former Uniate churches, which became Latin or Orthodox churches, show traces of the penetration of influences of architecture and sacred art of the Christian West and East in this region. There are also Uniate icons still being worshipped today. A very important monument of the Union is Grabarka, the mountain that is a spiritual centre for the Polish Orthodoxy⁹. The Union left numerous smaller material monuments, particularly of the sacred art, that deserve to be commemorated.

At the same time the existing religious and ethnic diversity of Podlasie (significant Orthodox population, a significant group of inhabitants identifying themselves with Belorussian minority¹⁰) is the evidence of the history of this region, in which the Union of Brest played a crucial role.

However, it is important to notice that historical and religious processes and particularly the division of Podlasie during the Partitions (into Western and Southern parts belonging to the Kingdom of Poland, and Eastern and Northern

⁷ Por. *Źródła dziejowe*, vol. 17, part. 2, *Polska XVI wieku pod względem geograficzno-statystycznym*, 2, 13–14.

⁸ J. ŁUPIŃSKI, *Dzieje grekokatolików w Królestwie Polskim po powstaniu styczniowym*, 211–214.

⁹ J. MAROSZEK, *Dziedzictwo unii kościelnej w krajobrazie kulturowym Podlasia 1596–1996*, Białystok 1996, 22.

¹⁰ K. PODLASKI, *Białorusini. Litwini. Ukraińcy*, Białystok 1990, 22–26.

parts belonging to the Russian Empire) as well as the abolition of the Union (in 1839 in the Empire and in 1875 in the Kingdom)¹¹ heavily influenced the differences that divide Podlasie nowadays. The religious and ethnic diversity of Podlasie practically disappeared in Western Podlasie (the Sokołów Podlaski land), it is extremely weak in Southern Podlasie (the Siedlce and Biała Podlaska lands) but it is still present in Eastern and Northern Podlasie (the Bielsk Podlaski land, southern Białystok region). It seems, therefore, that particular emphasis should be put on the elements of the heritage of the Union of Brest in those areas where the cultural diversity of Podlasie was not preserved (the Sokołów Podlaski land).

As has been pointed out, the initiative of the union of the Orthodox Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with Rome came from the Orthodox hierarchy¹². This union initiative had as its aim the preservation of the ecclesiastical and cultural heritage of the Kievan Rus' in view of the increasing importance of the Grand Duchy of Moscow amongst other Ruthenian lands. The choice of the place of the union synod (Brest upon the Bug river), from which the name of the union is derived (the Union of Brest), is meaningful in itself. This city was the main centre of the Northern part of the Vladimir eparchy that was in a sense autonomous. The Brest Officialate comprised the whole Voivodeship of Podlasie within its original borders from 1520¹³.

Implementation of the Union of Brest did not happen without difficulties in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and included some opposition from the Orthodox hierarchy and its followers, which resulted in the acceptance of 'Disuniates' (that is the Eastern Church that did not acknowledge the Union), during the reign of Władysław IV¹⁴. Nonetheless, the Union in Podlasie was a great success. Despite some polonization and latinization tendencies taking place before the Partitions (and which are, according to the newest research, overestimated)¹⁵ The Union of Brest enabled Podlasie to preserve its cultural and ethnic diversity, which was particularly apparent beginning the dissolution of the Union and Russification of North-Eastern Podlasie initiated by the Russian authorities. The Uniates considered themselves Catholics, faithful to the Holy See and at the same

¹¹ E. LIKOWSKI, *Dzieje Kościoła Unickiego na Litwie i Rusi w XVIII i XIX wieku*. Warszawa 1906, 101; M. SKŁADANOWSKI, *Współpraca duszpasterska parafii obrządku łacińskiego i wschodniego jako znak skuteczności Unii Brzeskiej. Przykład Bielska Podlaskiego*, 431–432.

¹² Por. H. DYLĄGOWA, *Unia Brzeska. Geneza – dzieje – zagłada*, 14–15; J. MAROSZEK, *Dziedzictwo unii kościelnej w krajobrazie kulturowym Podlasia 1596–1996*, 19.

¹³ Por. *Źródła dziejowe*, vol. 17, part 2, *Polska XVI wieku pod względem geograficzno-statystycznym*, 21.

¹⁴ M. SKŁADANOWSKI, *Współpraca duszpasterska parafii obrządku łacińskiego i wschodniego jako znak skuteczności Unii Brzeskiej. Przykład Bielska Podlaskiego*, 428

¹⁵ J. MAROSZEK, *Dziedzictwo unii kościelnej w krajobrazie kulturowym Podlasia 1596–1996*, 66–67.

time separate from the Latin Catholics, in terms of both ethnicity and rituals they observed. The Russian opposition to the Union destroyed a lot of elements of the identity of Podlasie. Nonetheless, its traces in material and spiritual culture of the region can still be detectable even nowadays.

4. Conclusions

A serious mistake, which has been made by some modern Catholic ecumenical activists, is belittling the Union of Brest and the positive impact it had from the religious perspective (as an practical indication of pursuit for the unity of Christians) as well as the cultural perspective (as the means to preserve the identity of ethnic minorities and save them from the political and religious pressure). It seems that the critical standpoint towards the Union of Brest is adopted by these people who have not experienced its actual influence and do not have any connection with the regions whose culture and tradition have been shaped by the Union.

Meanwhile, in view of the abovementioned facts one could claim that Podlasie is the region where the Union of Brest fulfilled the expectations of its creators, at least before it was finally forcefully dissolved by the Russian authorities. The Union proved in particular that the peaceful co-existence and church unity of two ethnic groups – Polish and Russian ones – observing two separate rites of the Catholic Church is possible. Secondly, the Union shaped contemporary Podlasie – the region that is culturally and ethnically diverse, and whose people, despite ongoing cultural changes, are primarily attached to Christianity and Christian way of life. Finally, the long-term influence of the Union of Brest on Podlasie, seen in its spiritual and material culture, enabled the region to preserve its distinctive cultural character.

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