

*Mateusz Rodak*

Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History  
Polish Academy of Sciences

## **Banditry in the Lands of the Former Kingdom of Poland: 1914–1918**

Banditry remained a serious social problem that influenced the quality of life in Poland during the First World War. This manifestation of crime, in which aggression accompanied theft, and resulted in the serious injury or even death of the victims of the attack, was not a new phenomenon after 1914. Incidents of robberies of traveling merchants, attacks and robberies on farms, manors, or in houses or shops located in the suburbs, remained a permanent element both before and after the war.<sup>1</sup> However, on the eve of the outbreak of the Great War and in the post-war period as the situation calmed, banditry was an incidental, gradually disappearing phenomenon. In contrast, during the war, its scale grew rapidly.

A testament to this remains, among others, the content of the wartime press – full of reports of new assaults. Publicists were terrified above all by the size of the phenomenon. They condemned the growing brutality and degeneracy of the perpetrators. They reported on the trials of criminal gang members, deploring the unhealthy interest of sensation-seeking crowds, thus effectively fueling this interest. They were happy with successes in the fight against banditry, including those achieved by the occupation authorities, and last but not least, they accepted the necessity of issuing harsh sentences.

This article is an attempt to take a closer look at the phenomenon of First World War banditry, its scale, scope and character. I am also interested in the answer to the question of who the perpetrators of the most severe, often extremely brutal, crimes were. I will also try to briefly relate the opinions of both the occupiers and the local population from that time.<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising that opinions were often similar.

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys*, Kraków and Warszawa, 2012, pp. 321–322; M. Rodak, *Mit a rzeczywistość. Przestępczość osób narodowości żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa, 2012, pp. 51–52.

<sup>2</sup> E. Rola, "Prasa lubelska okresu I wojny światowej. Świadek czy uczestnik przełomowych wydarzeń?", *Kwartalnik Historii Prasy Polskiej*, 23, 1984, p. 23.

This study is a small contribution to learning about crime during the First World War as such. Its other forms – speculation, smuggling, usury and a large group of crimes against life and body, call for a lot of research and a separate monographic analysis.

## Definition

The dictionary defines banditry concisely as “committing assaults and murders”.<sup>3</sup> Such a laconic interpretation is difficult to consider sufficient. At this point I would like to treat banditry first and foremost as a social phenomenon, the essence of which is the fact of rapid growth in a given area and at a given time of crime in its most brutal forms (murders, robberies, rapes, assaults). This is also how historians usually interpret it.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, they emphasize in their deliberations that its escalation usually occurs as a result of “weakening of social and physical control, hindering criminal behavior”.<sup>5</sup> Such situations took place and take place during wars or revolutions and in the periods immediately following them. In the period that interests me, first and foremost in the press, the term bandit was usually synonymous with: the perpetrator of a robbery and murderer, and rarely a criminal as such.

The terms “bandit” or “banditry” were used in the descriptions of brutal assaults and murders. In this way, the specific character of the crime was emphasized, which was accompanied by violence, terror, robbery, and often the death of victims. However, the analysis of daily newspapers from the First World

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/bandytyzm.html> (accessed: 15 June 2018). The colloquial term “assault” should be understood here as a synonym for the crime of robbery.

<sup>4</sup> S. Piątkowski, “Bandytyzm i inne formy przestępczości kryminalnej na obszarach wiejskich Generalnego Gubernatorstwa w początkach okupacji niemieckiej (październik 1939 – czerwiec 1941 r.)”, in: *Polska pod okupacją 1939–1945*, ed. by M. Gałęzowski, Warszawa, 2015, p. 75; M. Zaremba, op. cit., p. 317; R. Wnuk, “Bandytyzm na Lubelszczyźnie w latach 1944–1953, Propozycja typologii”, in: *Problemy bandytyzmu w okupowanej Polsce w latach 1939–1947*, ed. by T. Strzembosz, Warszawa, 2004, p. 81. Rafał Wnuk notes that this definition refers to the “banditry that a citizen encounters in a stabilized country where universally accepted moral and legal norms apply”. At the same time, he presents his own attempt to classify this phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> M. Zaremba, op. cit., p. 320. Such an interpretation coincides with the Anglo-Saxon understanding of banditry. Cf. *Collins English Dictionary* online: banditry “acts of robbery and violence in areas where the rule of law has broken down”, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/banditry> (accessed: 15 June 2018).

War era, allows us to observe the progressive devaluation of this concept, which over time includes such crimes as robberies, extortion, or even mere thefts.

Relatively late, in July 1918, by virtue of the decision of the Governor General Hans H. von Beseler, the “Regulation on Banditry” was published. In it we read that “[b]y the term gang [...] is meant a relationship, consisting of at least three people, aiming toward a goal not allowed under the legal order and threatening legal and public safety.”<sup>6</sup> The scope of the definition remained extremely broad. The provisions of the ordinance were aimed not only against ordinary banditry. Clarification, in line with the provisions of the regulation of 1918, of what comprises a bandit gang, was significant because its formation was punishable by death. However, one should remember the specific circumstances in which it appeared. The year 1918, especially its second half, was characterized by an exceptional “bumper crop” of banditry events, in their most classic manifestation. Severe regulations in principle merely thus confirmed current practice.

## The Chronological and Geographical Framework

The conclusions formulated in this article concern the phenomenon of banditry in the areas of the former Kingdom of Poland, from the period of German and Austro-Hungarian occupation, i.e. from August 1915 to November 1918.

Banditry as a universal phenomenon knows no time or geographical limits. Armed bands roamed along the roads and through forests in the lands of all three partitions before 1914, and even more so at the turn of 1914 and 1915. However, they posed the most serious social problem, as one can surmise, in the Kingdom of Poland. There the erosion of power of the authorities was most sudden, and which was only temporarily halted by the appearance of German and Austro-Hungarian troops in 1915. The changes taking place in this area, and with them the growing sense of lawlessness – the suspension of normal life – became one of the reasons why this phenomenon occurred virtually throughout the entire area of the former Kingdom of Poland.

Limiting the analysis to the areas of the former Kingdom of Poland and to the period 1915–1918 does not change the fact that most of the conclusions formulated here may also apply to the areas of Galicia and the Eastern Borderlands, where this phenomenon also occurred.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Verordnungsblatt für das General-Gouvernement Warschau / Dziennik rozporządzeń dla Jeneral-Gubernatorstwa Warszawskiego*, no. 122, 10 Aug. 1918.

## The Legal Basis and Structures for Fighting Banditry

The answer to the question concerning on what grounds people accused of participating in bandit attacks from 1915–1918 in the area of the German and Austro-Hungarian occupation were tried and sentenced seems simple. Due to the fact that those suspected of robberies were brought before both civil and military courts, including those which were of an *ad hoc* nature, the bases for sentencing were various sets of regulations. District courts operating in the German occupation area judged those accused of banditry under the provisions of the Russian Penal Code of 1903 (the so-called Tagantsev Code, §§ 589–590). Residents of the Austro-Hungarian occupation were subject to the provisions in force in the area of the Kingdom from the penal code of 1866. Both sets of laws provided penalties for banditry (actually for robbery) of no less than three years in prison (including the possibility of a life sentence or the death penalty).

Due to the fact that this crime was substantially tied to the possession and/or use of weapons, some of the accused bandits were punished on the basis of subsequent acts regulating the possession of weapons. The first regulations banning the possession of a gun under the penalty of imprisonment (using one was punishable by the death penalty) and introducing the obligation to turn them in, were announced in the Kingdom of Poland lands occupied by the German army in April 1915.<sup>7</sup> The regulations of April 1915, which together with the expanding occupation zone eventually covered the entire lands of the former Kingdom of Poland, were renewed and amended a number of times.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Summary bans on possession and use of weapons appeared in areas where warfare was taking place. "Rozstrzelania", *Nowa Gazeta*, 30 Oct. 1914, p. 2; Supreme Commander in the East von Hindenburg, Regulation on the possession of weapons, ammunition and explosives in areas subject to the Imperial-German authorities in Poland: *Verordnung betreffend den Besitz von Waffen, Munitionsgegenständen und Sprengstoffen in dem unter deutscher Verwaltung stehenden Gebiet von Russisch-Polen / Rozporządzenie dotyczące posiadania broni, przedmiotów amunicyjnych i materiałów wybuchowych na obszarach podlegających władzom cesarsko-niemieckim w Polsce*, Częstochowa, 1915.

<sup>8</sup> In May 1915, it was extended into force to areas located east of the Vistula. *Rozporządzenie dotyczące się posiadania broni, amunicji i materiałów wybuchowych na terytorium Królestwa Polsk.[iego]-Rusk.[kiego] z prawej strony Wisły*, [no place] 1915. In August 1915, along with the establishment of the General Governorship of Warsaw, the area was covered by the provisions of the regulation: *Rozporządzenie dotyczące się posiadania broni, amunicji i materiałów wybuchowych w obrębie Niemieckiego Gubernialnego Urzędu Warszawskiego*, Warszawa, 25 Aug. 1915 (signed General Ulrich Reinhold von Etzdorf, Governor of Warsaw). Subsequent

In addition to the “civil” regulations resulting from the far-reaching militarization of the occupied territories, people accused of banditry were not infrequently punished on the basis of the military penal code or the laws of war (1899). Judgments in such situations were issued by the commanders of local military units. Trials in these types of cases were usually of a summary nature: the most common sentence was the death penalty, frequently carried out immediately after its announcement.<sup>9</sup>

An important role within the broadly understood wartime legislation aimed at combating banditry, was also played by the orders, ordinances or appeals of local military or civil authorities. They were announced *ad hoc*, usually as the problem was growing.

The fight against banditry was often carried out by improvised organizations in transitional periods, such as urban or rural militias,<sup>10</sup> as well as the police appointed by the occupation authorities. In addition, the stationed army, including gendarmerie units, which in many places, also in relation to the civilian population, performed tasks reserved for police in peacetime.<sup>11</sup> The significance of this last force remains the most important in the context of the problem analyzed here. It arose from at least two reasons. First, banditry was a phenomenon that affected rural areas, hence groups of inexperienced volunteers formed in cities were rarely used to combat it. Secondly, the fight against banditry often required operating in a large area, which involved a large number of soldiers experienced in field combat. At the same time, as historians emphasize, the execution of such missions required the cooperation of military authorities with civil (including district) authorities, which in areas under acute threat of banditry coordinated so-called “banditry commissions” (*Banditenkommissionen*).<sup>12</sup> There are examples of cooperation between the

---

changes were made at the turn of November and December 1915. “Rozporządzenie odnośnie posiadania broni, amunicji i materiałów wybuchowych”, *Kurier Warszawski*, no. 330, 29 Nov. 1915, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Archiwum Państwowe w Warszawie (the State Archive in Warsaw, hereafter: APW), Więzienie Karne Mokotów (Mokotów Prison, hereafter: WKM), Akta personalne więźnia Władysława M., 1916–1925, ref. no. 3046.

<sup>10</sup> A. Stawiszyńska, “Działalność Milicji Obywatelskiej w Łodzi (sierpień 1914 – lipiec 1915)”, *Acta Universitatis Lodzianis. Folia Historica*, no. 94, 2015, passim; “W sprawie milicji miejskiej”, *Zorza*, 1 Jul. 1916, p. 440; “Konna milicja w Łodzi”, *Nowa Gazeta*, 30 Oct. 1914, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> W. Szwarc, “Uprawnienia i działalność policyjna niemieckiego zarządu wojskowego w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie Warszawskim (1915–1918)”, *Annales UMCS. Sectio G*, no. 19, 1972, p. 191.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*; “Rozstrzelanie 10 bandytów”, *Gazeta Łódzka*, 25 Feb. 1918, p. 4.

gendarmerie and the militia, in the majority of cases of which it was militia formations supporting regular troops, possibly mediating in the transmission or collection of information.

## The Scale of the Phenomenon: 1914–1918

It is impossible to precisely determine the scale of the phenomenon for the entire period examined. It remains in this situation to rely on fragmentary data, found among other places in the contemporary media. For example, in the middle of 1917, the *Ilustrowany Kurjer Codzienny* (hereafter: *Illustrated Daily Courier*) reported (which could not be verified) that about 353 bandit attacks were to have taken place in the Lublin Governorate from October 1915 to the end of July 1916.<sup>13</sup> It was added that in 127 cases it was possible to capture the perpetrators immediately, and in 68 only after some time.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, we read that in the period from the beginning of April to mid-September 1916, 72 bandit attacks took place in the Warsaw Governorate (15,000 km<sup>2</sup>). As a result of these investigations, 230 people were arrested, including 4 women.<sup>15</sup> In the vast majority of cases, however, we are dealing with information of a very general nature.

The belief in the improvement of the situation in mid-1915, which was to take place with the entry of occupying troops, was commonplace in the press. After the period of growing crime (1914–1915) along with the organization of the occupation apparatus, including law enforcement agencies, the wave of attacks, in comparison with the period when the front was shifting, was to decrease.<sup>16</sup> The authors of what proved to be an incomplete success by mid-1915, were to be both the new “administrators” of the lands of the Kingdom of Poland, abandoned by Russian troops, and the Poles themselves, who spontaneously organized self-defense (including militia units) in the transitional periods.

In one of the articles, we read: “Prussian troops are beginning to clean out the bandits. In the area around Złoczew, in Sieradz County, a gang of robbers had been prowling since mid-August [...]. The populace reported to

---

<sup>13</sup> “Trzysta napadów rabunkowych”, *Ilustrowany Kurjer Codzienny* (hereafter: *IKC*), no 151, 2 Feb. 1916, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> “Bandytyzm w gub. Warszawskiej”, *Ziemia Lubelska*, 21 Oct. 1916, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> “Bandytyzm w okupacji austro-węgierskiej”, *Ziemia Lubelska*, 1916, no. 443, p. 1.

the commander of the Prussian army, who ordered a raid. The entire gang was captured very quickly and all the thugs were shot.”<sup>17</sup>

In the following years, the number of bandit attacks increased. However, the increase was not, as one might suppose, dramatic. However, their character changed. The articles in the press were far less alarmist than before, in which the growing scale of banditry was deplored. In their place appeared dispassionately recorded information about the latest attacks. Substantial interest in the press was aroused only by exceptionally bloody events, in which large sums of money were plundered or victims of the attack were local notables.

Banditry, although nearly ubiquitous, and in several areas of the country particularly troublesome, never overshadowed with its significance problems that were becoming increasingly common with every month of the ongoing war: poverty, hunger or unemployment. However, it has been pointed out many times that the deteriorating economic situation of Polish lands, intensively exploited by the occupation authorities, was one of the most important sources of crime growth. In the literature, these processes are explained, among others, by the destruction of agriculture and, to a lesser extent, industry; leading to a lack of food products, hunger, disorganization of trade in food products, requisitions or forced resettlements.<sup>18</sup>

Among the many reasons for the rise of bandit attacks during the war, sympathy for the bandits by inhabitants of areas where the gangs were supposed to operate was mentioned. A reporter for the *Illustrated Daily Courier* wrote in December 1916: “There is also considerable culpability [for the increase of banditry] among the population of the particular areas, either voluntarily submitting to the terror of the robbers or outright sympathizing with them.”<sup>19</sup> This opinion was not isolated. The “bandits”, emerging from the people, and their activities could be treated in some environments as an element of a local myth, according to which bandits were understood as a class, in this case an “anti-noble”, rebellion.<sup>20</sup> But it seems that such attitudes were an exception. With each month of the war, robberies were feared more and more, and

---

<sup>17</sup> “Co słycać w Królestwie Polskim?”, *IKC*, no. 224, 20 Sept. 1914, p. 12; “Walka z bandytami”, *Ziemia Lubelska*, 22 Jan. 1916, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> J. Holzer, J. Molenda, *Polska w pierwszej wojnie światowej*, Warszawa, 1967, p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> T. P., “Walka z bandytyzmem w Król. Polskim”, *IKC*, 10 Dec. 1916, p. 1. Interestingly, it was also pointed out that the specifics of the terrain, e.g. the level of forestation, was conducive to the development of banditry.

<sup>20</sup> M. Zaremba, op. cit., p. 319.

the specificity of First World War banditry, which struck primarily in the countryside, was certain to confirm the views of some of its inhabitants.

After a relatively stable period in 1916–1917, when banditry was so commonplace as to give way to other problems in the press, in 1918 the phenomenon grew in strength.<sup>21</sup> The trend observed in the last year of the war may have had several sources.

Firstly, the number of weapons stored in private hands, the increase of which usually is associated with an increase in crime in general, and even more so during war, started to reach huge proportions.<sup>22</sup> The underclasses of society (but also peasants, less often the townspeople) were massively arming themselves with weapons which they found on the battlefields or bought from what were then already estimated to be tens of thousands of deserters. To some extent, the emergence of this group may have also influenced the increase in the number of attacks. Stanisław Dzierzbicki in his memoirs drew attention to another phenomenon, which in his opinion had a significant impact on the increase in crime recorded in the last year of the war. He wrote: “Robberies are an ordinary thing, because entire crowds of Russian prisoners returning from Germany roam around the country. When I was in Mława, both the town and the railway station were flooded by them. Although later they were sent by rail, there is almost no chance to control this wave. Every moment entire units of former prisoners are passing through Warsaw.”<sup>23</sup> Significantly, the topic of Russian culpability returns again, which was so intensively used to describe the phenomenon at the turn of 1915 and 1916.

The increase in the number of articles observed in the press in 1918, which might suggest a particular intensification of the phenomenon compared to previous years of war, could have had its cause elsewhere. With each year of the war, hopes were growing that its effect would be the reconstruction of the Polish state; with the breakthroughs of 1917–1918 bringing a wave of journalistic texts in which it is written directly. In this situation, alongside many problems that the authorities of the revived state would have to deal with, the phenomenon of crime, including one of its most dangerous manifestations – banditry – would have to be addressed.

In the last year of the war, an interesting thread also appears in the press, which remains a visible sign of changing the optics in commenting on the

---

<sup>21</sup> “Masowe napady bandyckie”, *Ziemia Lubelska*, no. 136, 27 March 1918, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> M. Zaremba, op. cit., p. 320; S. Piątkowski, op. cit., p. 97.

<sup>23</sup> S. Dzierzbicki, *Pamiętnik z lat wojny 1915–1918*, Warszawa, 1983, p. 325.



contemporary reality. Among the information about the latest attacks, we can find more and more references to attacks that were made on trains,<sup>24</sup> although the attacks from the beginning of 1918 were described as robbery. In the second half of the year the *Illustrated Daily Courier* asked in the title of one of its articles: “Bandit attacks or expropriations?”<sup>25</sup> Other newspapers of the day also wrote in a similar tone.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the current situation was compared to the period of the 1905 revolution.

## Perpetrators of Crimes: Attempted Characterization

An analysis of the surviving court files and criminal records of prisoners convicted of banditry during the First World War makes it possible to attempt to reconstruct the social portrait of this group.<sup>27</sup> The most numerous group of sources are the files of trials that took place in 1915–1916. The same applies to the date of the crime, but in some cases, there is no clear convergence between the two events. The smallest collection of sources is for events from 1917–1918.

---

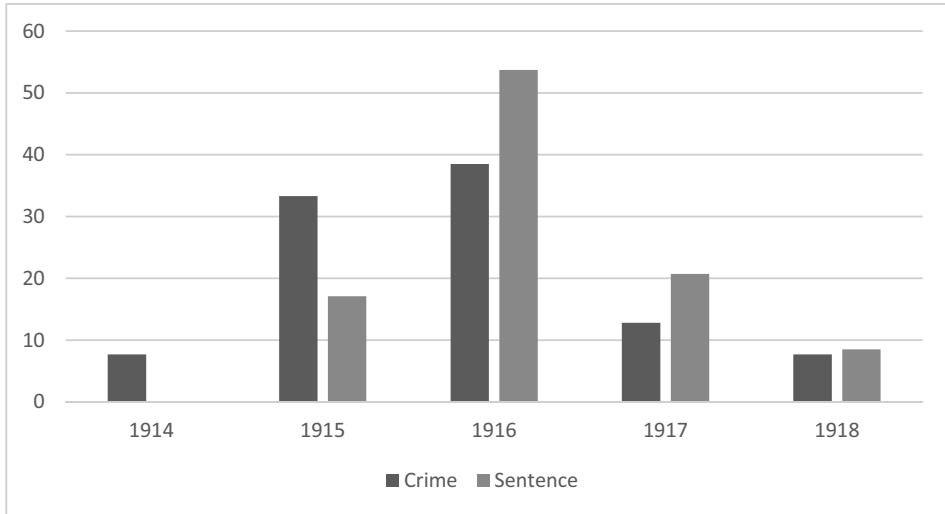
<sup>24</sup> “Walka z bandytyzmem kolejowym”, *IKC*, 15 Jul. 1918, p. 4; “Kradzieże kolejowe i napady rabunkowe”, *Piast*, 21 Jul. 1918, p. 12; “Bandytyzm kolejowy szerzy się”, *IKC*, 14 Aug. 1918, p. 7; “Bandycki napad w pociągu”, *Gazeta Łódzka*, 23 Aug. 1917, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> “Napady bandyckie czy ekspropriacje?”, *IKC*, 18 Dec. 1918, p. 5. Expropriations, i.e. robberies, whose aim was to acquire funds for activities directed against the partitioners, or occupiers, organized by militias, e.g. of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), were common during the revolution of 1905–1907.

<sup>26</sup> “Napady”, *Gazeta Łódzka*, 21 Oct. 1918, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> The basis of the research results presented here remains the analysis of court files, above all from the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi (the State Archive in Łódź, hereafter: APŁ), which include records of cases heard before the *Cesarsko-Niemiecki Sąd Okręgowy w Łodzi* (the Imperial-German District Court in Łódź, hereafter: CNSO in Łódź) and the Imperial-German Federal Court in Łódź. I also used personal files of prisoners in the Mokotów Prison in Warsaw, among which there are sentences handed down in the German and Austro-Hungarian occupation area (Warsaw, Łódź, Wieluń, Kalisz, Puławy, Płock, Radom, Opoczno, Pińczów, Kutno, Grójec, Sieradz, Skierniewice, Będzin, Garwolin, Kielce, Lipno, Konin, Łęczycza). I also familiarized myself with and to a limited extent used the case files collected in the Kingdom of Poland District Court in Lublin. The data collected as a result of archival research was supplemented with information about people convicted or accused of attacks, which can be found in the preserved arrest warrants, announcements of the carrying out of death sentences included in the *Dziennik Rozporządzeń* and in the press.

**Chart 1.** The date of the crime (sample of 39 events) and sentencing (sample of 82 verdicts).



Source: Author's calculations based on court files: the Imperial-German District Court in Łódź, the Imperial-German Federal District Court in Łódź and the Kingdom of Poland District Court in Lublin, as well as personal files of prisoners in the Mokotów Prison in Warsaw.

Some of the cases concerned bandit gangs whose activity stretched over time. The period of activity of a several-member criminal group usually lasted up to several months, with examples of rogue parties that existed for a year or more.<sup>28</sup>

The data available concerns 202 people<sup>29</sup> convicted in 1915–1918 for carrying out a robbery and more rarely for ordering it, associated fencing of stolen goods and assistance in, for example, hiding looted goods or the perpetrators of a robbery. They were basically all men. In individual cases, women appear, usually playing an auxiliary role, such as hiding criminals.<sup>30</sup> Very rarely did women participate in robberies and/or create their own gangs. In July 1916, by virtue of the verdict of the field court at the Imperial-German Provincial Office in Warsaw from 12 May 1916, Leokadia Han and Józefa Rutkowska were executed by shooting, who had “against the issued ordinances possessed

<sup>28</sup> APW, WKM, Akta personalne więźnia Juliana Karasińskiego, 1915–1921, ref. no. 2822; Akta personalne więźnia Józefa Włodarczyka, 1915–1919 (1921), ref. no. 4881; “Walka z bandytyzmem”, *Ziemia Lubelska*, 28 Jul. 1918, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> I am aware of 197 individuals by name and surname. Naturally in some of the cases of interest to me I only possess partial information.

<sup>30</sup> APW, WKM, Akta personalne więźnia Kazimierza Otockiego, 1916–1917, ref. no. 643.

weapons and carried them during robberies".<sup>31</sup> "Feminine" banditry remained an exceptional phenomenon, to the extent that every such type of case was reported as a sensation.<sup>32</sup>

As in the case of gender, the examined group remains basically uniform, if one considers the issue of religion (95 per cent are Roman Catholic). At the same time, isolated cases of Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Evangelical criminals have been recorded. In contrast, there was not even one Jewish representative in the group, even among the ringleaders.<sup>33</sup>

The average age in the studied group was slightly over 28 (the age of 121 criminals is known),<sup>34</sup> with half of the convicts under 25 years old.<sup>35</sup> The youth of the perpetrators of the most dangerous category of crimes often became the subject of press articles. Every time a bandit gang was revealed whose members were teenage boys, it was an opportunity to discuss the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency, which was said to be becoming more and more commonplace. Its main cause was thought to be the breakdown of social ties caused by the ongoing war.<sup>36</sup> The perpetrators of the attacks who were under 20 constituted 16.5 per cent of the whole group analyzed (20 people).

Banditry remained a typical phenomenon primarily in the countryside, but the perpetrators did not necessarily come exclusively from rural areas. Among 195 people (the number of those whose place of residence was known) convicted of banditry or crimes closely related to it, only 99 were from the countryside. The remaining part consisted of convicts from cities, some from Warsaw or Łódź, medium-sized cities such as Radom, Kalisz, Pabianice and from small towns, such as Żyrardów, Turek, etc. Also interesting is the fact that the people who I refer to as rural residents usually came from settlements located relatively close to larger urban centers (including the Łódź and Warsaw districts).

---

<sup>31</sup> *Obwieszczenie*, Warszawa, 1 Jul. 1916; APW, WKM, Akta personalne więźnia Adama Pietrzykowskiego, 1916–1919, ref. no. 3198.

<sup>32</sup> "Kobieta hersztem bandytów", *Zorza*, 6 Oct. 1917, p. 573.

<sup>33</sup> M. Rodak, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>34</sup> With standard deviations (SD) = 9,278.

<sup>35</sup> Mode – 24 years old. The youngest was 14. APŁ, CNSO in Łódź, Akta sprawy przeciwko Władysławowi Żurawlewowi oskarżonemu o napad, 1916, ref. no. 942; "Z sądu", *Gazeta Łódzka*, 19 May 1916, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> "Kronika sądowa", *Gazeta Łódzka*, no. 25, 1916, p. 3. "Wykrycie organizacji nieletnich bandytów", *Ziemia Lubelska*, 19 Dec. 1918, p. 2. Also, cf. the comments of T. Strzembosz and R. Wnuk on the influence of war reality on the attitudes of young people. T. Strzembosz, "Przestępczość i okupacja", in: *Problemy bandytyzmu...*, passim; R. Wnuk, op. cit., p. 83.

Only four people indicated areas outside the borders of the future Polish state as a place of residence, of which three came from Russia.<sup>37</sup> This number, especially in the context of information about the Russian origin of members operating in the former Kingdom of Poland, often appearing in the contemporary press, seems to be extremely low.<sup>38</sup> The lack of more numerous representation by former prisoners of war (mainly Russians) may result from an underestimation of data for the last two years of the war, in which a significant increase in the number of this category of people in bandit gangs was reported.<sup>39</sup>

Such a large group of criminals coming from cities that were particularly badly affected by the ongoing war (including increased unemployment and food supply problems) is not a surprise. A significant case in this context is that of the perpetrator, a Łódź inhabitant – Jan Źyciński, of a robbery which took place in May 1917 in the forest on the way to Zgierz. During the trial, the 52-year-old unemployed worker admitted that due to the hunger plaguing him, he attacked a woman carrying potatoes and bread along a road in the forest. As the victim of the robbery testified, Źyciński at first asked to share the food and only when he met with refusal, he hit the woman several times in the head.<sup>40</sup> It is difficult to judge in how many cases hunger, unemployment or poverty influenced the decision to commit a robbery. Certainly, many of them originated in the context of a clearly noticeable decline in the quality of life, but it is much more difficult to explain the fact of the increasingly widespread brutality and cruelty that accompanied the attacks.

The distinction between “professional” banditry and the committing of robberies by desperate victims of war seems to be an important element characterizing the phenomenon. Similar situations would take place during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ogłoszenie. 500 mk. nagrody*, Kalisz, 19 Aug. 1916; APW, WKM, Akta personalne więźnia Józefa Strąka, 1918–1926, ref. no. 8635.

<sup>38</sup> “Trzysta napadów...”, p. 3; “Szczegóły walki Milicji z bandytami”, *Ziemia Lubelska*, no. 119, 18 March 1918, p. 2; S. Dzierzbicki, op. cit., p. 385.

<sup>39</sup> “Krwawy napad bandycki”, *Ziemia Lubelska*, 15 Jan. 1918, p. 4; “Napad bandytów w Skulsku na Kujawach”, *Zorza*, 25 Aug. 1917, p. 503. In this case, the Russian language and the weapons they used were indicative of the nationality of the bandits. “Walka z bandytami”, *Zorza*, 5 Mar. 1916, p. 16. With time, however, more and more Russian weapons were in the hands of Poles. APŁ, CNSO in Łódź, Akta w sprawie przeciwko Adolfowi Klingspornowi i innym oskarżonym o napad, 1916–1918, ref. no. 242, n. pag.

<sup>40</sup> APŁ, CNSO in Łódź, Akta w sprawie przeciwko Janowi Źycińskiemu oskarżonemu o napad, 1917, ref. no. 2360.

The numerous, though non-dominant, group of rural residents did not fit neatly into a specific socio-professional profile. Only 15.3 per cent (29 people) of those convicted indicated farming as a basis for their subsistence. If a group of convicts from a village were to be considered, farmers would only account for about 28 per cent of them. The largest group, among convicts from the countryside and cities, was made up of representatives of workers' milieu, the vast majority of them being defined simply as workers.

Some of the residents of the countryside who were not farmers, tied their professional life to the city, and only visited their home village occasionally. Theirs most often was the community of unskilled, seasonal workers who first felt the economic effects of the ongoing war. Loss of work, problems of living conditions and growing frustration, as well as the atmosphere of war chaos, a sense of lawlessness and society in limbo, bravado, emotional immaturity and increasing access to weapons steered them directly to their home regions, and then to forest roads in search of "easy pickings".<sup>41</sup>

What is interesting and symptomatic, is that the bandits usually did not look far. In court testimonies and in the press, information about attacks in which the perpetrators and victims lived in the same or neighboring villages is common.<sup>42</sup>

In the vast majority of cases, this was the first offence (or sometimes a series of offences at once) that they committed. The criminal past of only 88 offenders is known, 75 of whom (85.3 per cent) were previously not punished. The absence of a criminal past was also manifested by the shortage of criminal "experience" (e.g. lack of organized operations, problems with the sale of stolen goods, randomness in the choice of the place and victims of attack, carelessness in secrecy), including an excessive propensity to use violence, while recidivists present in this group could also be exceptionally brutal.<sup>43</sup> They usually had leadership or organizational roles, but they did not have a particularly interesting past. There are no convicts in the examined group who had been punished more than once in the past.

Unfortunately, it cannot be determined to what extent the group studied here was supplemented with deserters or those who had any military experience. This and other information is missing in court documentation. It may,

---

<sup>41</sup> T. Strzembosz, op. cit., pp. 10–11.

<sup>42</sup> "Napad bandycki", *Gazeta Łódzka*, 3 Apr. 1918, p. 3; "Rozbój", *Gazeta Łódzka*, 2 Oct. 1918, p. 4.

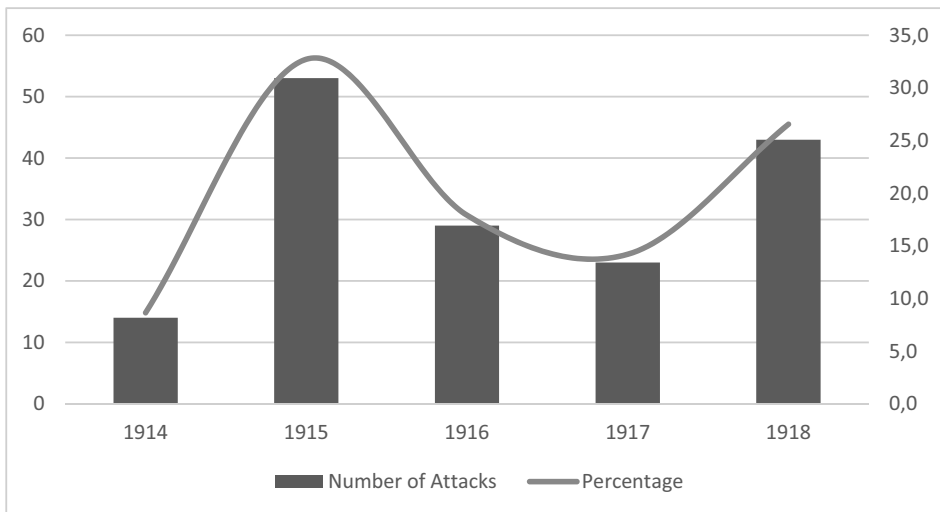
<sup>43</sup> "Napady bandytów w Radomskim", *Zorza*, 1 Jan. 1917, p. 15.

but does not have to, suggest that the vast majority were people who were not mobilized. At the same time, based on the recorded average age, which indicates that they were not very young people, it can be concluded that some of them were people who served in the military, but as deserters they avoided mobilization. As such, it would be difficult to treat their activities, for example, as the possible effects of negative experiences on the front (trauma).

The popular view is that war favors the numerical development of criminal circles.<sup>44</sup> You cannot disagree with it. The scale of crime grows – this is a fact, however, placing the responsibility for it on the pre-war underclass of society is somewhat excessive. This is clearly seen, among others, in the example of war bandits, it is difficult to find professional criminals among the perpetrators.

The author managed to collect information about 170 attacks that took place in virtually all provinces included in both zones of occupation. The most numerous group are events from the turn of 1914–1915. Another increase in the number of recorded crimes took place in 1918, but in some cases, one may have doubts about whether they were ordinary criminal offences.<sup>45</sup>

**Chart 2.** Documented bandit attacks from September 1914 to November 1918 – number and percentage.



Source: Author's calculations.

<sup>44</sup> T. Szarota, *Okupowanej Warszawy dzień powszedni. Studium historyczne*, Warszawa, 2010, passim.

<sup>45</sup> See the considerations regarding expropriations, above.

Over 85 per cent (145) of attacks were carried out in the countryside, some of them in the neighboring forest. Generally, this data refers to events that occurred outside cities (the other 25 documented robberies). The popularity of rural or suburban areas was due to several reasons. The most important of these was less policing than in the city and with it a greater sense of impunity among criminals. In places like the forest, roads running through the middle of nowhere, or in a cottage located on the edge of the village, it was difficult for robbery victims to seek help. The survivors were left to their fate, and their lives depended on the attackers' decisions.<sup>46</sup>

Among the nearly 170 documented crimes, the largest group were attacks on farms, which were usually located on the outskirts of the village.

**Table 1.** Place of the attack (sample of 167 incidents).

Place of attack	Train	Rectory	Store	Mill	Manor	Road	House/apartment
Number	2	3	7	8	10	50	87
Percent	1.2	1.8	4.2	4.8	6.0	29.9	52.1

Source: Author's calculations.

If you also include structures such as manor houses, mills or stores – usually located in the same buildings as the home – the attacks on buildings constitute more than three-quarters of attempts. Why, then, did the targets of criminals increasingly become peasants' farms rather than traveling merchants? In the vast majority of cases, the soon-to-be perpetrators of the robberies decided to attack on impulse without preliminary preparations. As a rule, it was enough to know that a more affluent farmer lived in a nearby village or that a neighbor had sold, for example, a horse.<sup>47</sup> The rumors and imaginative stories of hidden rubles<sup>48</sup> were also of considerable importance. Although it was not a rule, an attack on the road demanded some elementary effort put into preparation and, more importantly, did not always guarantee that it would end with "success". It was also often associated with being required to wait for an opportunity and related inconveniences (e.g. weather). Roads were also often patrolled. Perhaps road robberies were not reported more often. An attack on a home, whose layout and wealth of the owner (including the size of the family, its character)

<sup>46</sup> APŁ, CNSO in Łódź, Akta w sprawie przeciwko Adolfowi Klingspornowi..., n. pag.

<sup>47</sup> "Plaga bandytyzmu w Królestwie Polskim", *IKC*, 14 Jan. 1916, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> S. Dzierzbicki, op. cit., p. 232.

was usually known, could have seemed much easier. The most difficult crimes, which, however, usually brought significant benefits, were attempts to rob manor houses. At the same time, desperate landowners knew how to defend their belongings and often did.<sup>49</sup>

Regardless of their aim, attacks were usually carried out in the evening or at night. First of all, the element of surprise could be counted on, and the chances of help that could come were minimized in this way.<sup>50</sup> The attackers chose different methods.<sup>51</sup> Most often, however, under the guise of seeking, for example, accommodation – they asked for help – and once let inside started their robbery.<sup>52</sup> In other cases, without keeping up appearances, they tried to get inside (doors were forced open, windows were smashed, the roof was peeled back, the house was shot at or threatened with arson). During the robberies on the farms, the gang members were assigned tasks.<sup>53</sup> Some of them acted as security – they remained outside, the other bandits were engaged in the robbery and guarding the owners.<sup>54</sup>

Physical violence, most often in the form of beating, pushing or shouting was used very often. The victims were tied, gagged, locked in one room (usually a basement), shot at to terrify them, guns were put to their heads, hostages were taken, those stopped on the road were stripped naked, etc.<sup>55</sup> There are

---

<sup>49</sup> "Walka z bandytami...", p. 16. However, this does not change the fact that the press of that time is full of reports of assaults on manor houses, during which both members of the owners' families and servants died. See: "Napad bandycki", *Gazeta Łódzka*, 15 Oct. 1918, p. 3; "Napady bandyckie", *Nowa Gazeta*, 19 Nov. 1915, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> "Napad bandycki", *Nowa Gazeta*, 17 Nov. 1914, p. 2; "Napad bandycki", *Gazeta Łódzka*, 8 Feb. 1918, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> For example, they dressed up as soldiers or gendarmes. "Bandycki napad w pociągu...", p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> APŁ, CNSO in Łódź, Akta w sprawie Fryderyka Leddera i innych oskarżonych o mordy i rabunki, 1915–1918, ref. no. 2586; Akta w sprawie Feliksa Biskupskiego i Andrzeja Urbaniaka oskarżonych o napad, 1915, ref. no. 70; Akta w sprawie Jana Mikołajewskiego oskarżonego o napad, 1916–1919, ref. no. 1399. Here the robber took advantage of the alleged friendship with the husband of the reservist. Generally, robbery attacks on single women living with children were relatively frequent; see, among others, reminiscences from a peasant woman's diary from the district of Warsaw, *Pamiętniki chłopów*, ed. by L. Krzywicki, Warszawa, 1935, p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> APŁ, CNSO in Łódź, Akta w sprawie przeciwko Adolfowi Klingspornowi..., n. pag.

<sup>54</sup> During the attacks, faces were painted black or covered with scarves. The perpetrators of robberies in cities put on dark glasses. "Zuchwały napad bandycki", *Nowa Gazeta*, 11 Nov. 1914, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> "Napady bandyckie", *Nowa Gazeta*, 5 Nov. 1914, p. 2.



also reports of attempted and committed rapes of the robbed women.<sup>56</sup> How often such drastic methods were resorted to however is not known.

One in four of the documented attacks ended in the death of at least one person. In total, in nearly 150 robberies, for which the fate of the victims is known, 68 people died; but it should be remembered that some of the data that comes from the press requires further verification. Regardless, this number seems relatively high. Most often, homicides occurred in the case of attacks on farms (30 events), during which desperate attempts were made to defend them, which led to the exchange of gunfire and hand-to-hand combat. As a rule, the victims of road attacks (9) were much less likely to die.

The object of the robbery was usually money. It was this that bandits demanded in the first place. The criminals' plunder included both small amounts and exceptionally high sums for that time.<sup>57</sup> In general, however, in most cases, as we read in one of the press notes, the object of robbery was "literally everything, not to mention money, which represented any value."<sup>58</sup> The bandits of the First World War era were not very picky.

A characteristic harbinger of the First World War banditry was the increase in crime during the revolution of 1905–1907, hence the escalation of these types of events was already expected at the beginning of the war.

Thus, the increase in crime during the First World War was a natural consequence of the ongoing armed conflict. Effectively limiting it was a common goal, both for the occupation authorities and Polish society and its representatives. It should be remembered, however, that the crime of that time had many forms, and banditry – although "newsworthy" – was not the most important.

Undoubtedly, the activities of gangs, especially the largest ones, destabilized the local social situation to varying degrees. Their liquidation required the involvement of military, personnel and financial resources. That is why representatives of local military and administrative structures devoted so much time and effort to it. However, it is difficult to treat the phenomenon of First World War banditry as being particularly traumatic for Polish society of the time. It disappears among the reminiscences of hunger, escapes, wartime destruction

---

<sup>56</sup> APŁ, CNSO in Łódź, Akta w sprawie Karola Manala oskarżonego o rabunek i usiłowanie gwałtu, 1917, ref. no. 1074; Akta w sprawie Jana Mikołajewskiego...; "Napad bandycki i zgwałcenie", *Gazeta Łódzka*, 28 Apr. 1915, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> "Napad rabunkowy w Tomaszowie", *Gazeta Łódzka*, 21 Feb. 1918, p. 4. The robbers were said to have plundered 5,000 rubles.

<sup>58</sup> "Znów napad bandycki", *Ziemia Lubelska*, 27 May 1918, p. 2; APŁ, CNSO in Łódź, Akta w sprawie przeciwno Adolfowi Klingspornowi..., n. pag.

and loss of possessions (requisitions). At least this is how the inhabitants of the former Kingdom of Poland remember this period.

The assessment of this phenomenon, as one might suppose, changes after 1918. First of all, it becomes a threat not only destabilizing society but, above all, hindering the achievement of an overriding goal, that is, the reconstruction of the state. It is already an element of another war, the one that is already underway for a new cause. Therefore, the bandits that roam around the villages and towns lead a sabotage at the rear of the Polish and not the occupying army. Very soon they cease to be only common criminals. What is more important than before is their social origin, religion or nationality, as well as the goals that guide them. However, the reflection on what banditry was and who the bandits were in the period of rebuilding the Polish State and in the subsequent years of the existence of the Second Republic, exceeds the bounds of a single article.