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OSTROŁĘKA OVER THE CENTURIES. SELECTED ISSUES

OSTROŁĘKA NA PRZESTRZENI WIEKÓW. WYBRANE ZAGADNIENIA

In the Small Encyclopedia of the National Scientific Publishers (PWN) there is a laconic entry concerning Ostrołęka: “Ostrołęka, a district town on the Narew river, 52 thousand inhabitants, the center of food industry, mainly meat and dairy, moreover, paper mills, construction materials, wood products, non-ferrous metals foundry, a thermal power plant (720MW), a railway node, a tourist resort (the Narew waterway), city rights before 1373; 26 May 1831 Polish troops under command of J. Skrzynecki lost a battle against the Russian army commanded by T. Dybicz, a church and a Bernardine monastery (17th, 18th c.)”. The note is thus very brief, rather outdated and with some errors¹.

My aim is not, by any means, to create a new, extensive encyclopedic entry, nor will it be a shorter outline of the town’s history, but a concise synthesis describing only some freely-selected problems. Therefore, the content of the article includes only particular issues related to the history of the town in a wider sense, i.a. the attempt of periodization of the history of Ostrołęka, demography, selected economic issues, the influence of the Narew river on the town’s development and the lives of the inhabitants, as well as some social problems, but it omits political issues and the functioning of the local government. As far as possible, the development of the town will be shown in comparison to other nearby towns, e.g. Ostrów Mazowiecka, Łomża and Pułtusk. As regards the time frame, it incorporates the period from the beginning of the town in the 14th century to the present day.

The article is based on sources from the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, the Archives of the Capital City of Warsaw and the Warsaw Voivodeship, and its departments in Pułtusk and Otwock (the 20th century), the Archive of New Files, Russian sources (Pamiętniaja kniżka łomżinskoj guberni), statistic materials and publications on the history of the town. The most important is the piece of work written by Zofia Niedziałkowska Ostrołęka. Dzieje miasta

1 The outdated information refers, among others, to the fact that Ostrołęka is no longer a district city (since January 1999), it is basically not a railway node any more, and the incorrect information is the one about a non-ferrous metals foundry, which has never existed in Ostrołęka and about the name of the Russian chief commander in the battle of Ostrołęka – Dybicz (it should be “I” as the first name was Iwan, not “T.”).

(Ostrołęka. The History of the Town). During the fifty years since its release, there have already been four editions, each one improved and completed, two by the author, the last ones by the editorial team². Another two Ostrołęka's monographs, both, however, concerning only a particular period of time, are Janusz Gołota's publication related to the inter-war period Ostrołęka. Miasto i powiat w okresie międzywojennym (Ostrołęka. Town and District in the Inter-war Period) and Jerzy Kijowski's publication – Dzieje Ostrołęki 1944–2000 (The History of Ostrołęka 1944–2000). Two more publications, modest in volume, are Zofia Niedziałkowska's Kronika najważniejszych wydarzeń z dziejów miasta Ostrołęki (The Chronicle of the Most Important Events in the History of Ostrołęka) and Zarys historyczny dziejów miasta Ostrołęki do 1945 r. (Historical Overview of the Town of Ostrołęka until 1945) as well as Jerzy Kijowski's Obraz powiatu ostrołęckiego w okresie międzywojennym (The Image of Ostrołęka County during the Inter-war Period).

Let us begin with the attempt of periodization of the town's history. The basic division is in accordance with the history of the entire country and it consists of four parts. Thus, there is the period of the First Republic of Poland, the partition times and the First World War, the inter-war Republic and World War II, as well as the post-war period. Significant differences between the history of Poland and Ostrołęka are seen when dividing the town's history in detail. Therefore, during the First Republic period three sub-periods may be distinguished: the first one – before the foundation of the town, that is from the earliest history to the establishment in the 14th century, the second – the period of affiliation to the ducal Mazovia (until 1526) and the third – since the incorporation to the Crown until the end of the First Republic (1795). The partitions period is divided into the affiliation to the Kingdom of Prussia (1795–1806), the Duchy of Warsaw (1807–1814) and to Congress Poland (1815–1915), with possible separation of the time until the January Uprising and after its fall. The period of the Second Republic of Poland is between 1919–1939 as well as the proceeding, short but so tragic to the town and the entire country, period of World War II and the occupation.

In the period after World War II, we may distinguish five sub-periods. The years 1945–1948 – the reconstruction of the town after a damaging war, 1949–1956 – Ostrołęka on the threshold of industrialization, 1957–1967 – the first stage of the industrialization of the town, 1968–1975 – the second stage of the industrialization and Ostrołęka as the capital of the Kurpie sub-region, 1975–1998 “voivodeship” Ostrołęka, and the years from 1999 to the present day – Ostrołęka as an urban county next to the second rural county of Ostrołęka.

As a preliminary point, let us try to refer to the earliest history of Ostrołęka. The exact date of granting Ostrołęka its city rights is not known but the commonly accepted year is 1373. As Hipolit Gawarecki, a famous researcher of the privileges

2 The first edition of the city's monograph, *Ostrołęka. Dzieje miasta*, was issued in 1967, the second in 1975, the third in 1983 and the fourth in 2002.

of Mazovian towns, claimed: “Ostrołęka Town, on the Narew river, the capital of Ostrołęka County, when was established cannot be stated for certain, its original privileges were burned during the fire of the town on 9 February, 1817”³. It was actually on 12 May, 1373, in Wyszogród when Siemowit III, Duke of Mazovia, gave voytship in Ostrołęka to Świętosław, called Roma. In that document the term “Ostrołęka Town” (*civitas ostrolensis*) was used, the inhabitants were called townspeople and they received the privilege to use the Chełmno Law. Ostrołęka was one of the eldest towns in Mazovia. So, for instance, when it comes to granting city rights, all other nearby towns received them later, except for Płock (city rights in 1237, then again in 1255). For example, Różan in 1378, Pułtusk in 1380, Ciechanów in 1400, Łomża in 1418, Maków Mazowiecki in 1421, Przasnysz in 1427, Ostrów in 1434. In the second half of the 15th century, a local government started functioning in Ostrołęka, including the City Council, a mayor and members of the city council (“rajcowie”). The city had its own seal with an emblem, in which there was an image of a bear.

Also, most likely in the second half of the 14th century, Ostrołęka County was established. It was an element of a territorial division system combining administrative (state) and judicial functions⁴. The county consisted of two parts, completely different in terms of physiography and social structure, separated by the Narew River. The northern part, and, in relation to the Narew, its right-bank part in the central river course, is the area of the Green Kurpie Forest, with very poor soils and large-scale afforestation. Until the first half of the 17th century, it was basically not inhabited, permanent settlement started only after the “Swedish Flood” (The Deluge). It used to be inhabited by Puszczaczy (forest dwellers), later called Kurpie. They constituted a professional group directly dependent on the duke and then the king. The Kurpie people conducted various forest “industries”, among which especially important was beekeeping. An overall authority and the judiciary were administrated on behalf of the ruler by land writers. They also organized the collection of due public levies. There was, however, some kind of autonomy, which may be called a particular form of self-government, as a writer could nominate among beekeepers a so-called “starosta bartny” (a beekeeping starost). His responsibilities included organizing work, appointing particular people with beehives as well as judgments over beekeepers in minor cases⁵.

The southern part, on the other hand, with relatively good soil, was inhabited by a great number of impoverished gentry; there were also, up until the end of

3 H. Gawarecki, *Pamiętnik historyczny płocki*. Warszawa 1828, pp. 37–38.

4 H. Samsonowicz, A. Supruniuk, *Dzieje polityczne (połowa XIV – początek XVI w.)*, [In:] *Dzieje Mazowsza*, Vol. I. Ed. H. Samsonowicz. Pułtusk 2006, pp. 319–320.

5 More information on beekeepers in the Kurpie Forest in: J. Rafacz, *Regale bartne na Mazowszu w późniejszym średniowieczu*. Lwów 1938; R. Żukowski, *Bartnictwo w Zagajnicy Łomżyńskiej w okresie od połowy XVI do połowy XIX w.* Białystok 1965; A. Markowski, *O barciach i bartnikach w Zagajnicy Ostrołęckiej w wiekach XVI–XVIII*. Ostrołęka 1980 r.

World War II, quite numerous land properties. The beginning of the settlement dates back to the 11th–13th centuries and it was the so-called first Mazovia colonization.

Particularly favorable for Ostrołęka were the years 1526–1563. The beginning was the incorporation of the Duchy of Mazovia lands to the Crown⁶. Ostrołęka was back then one of the important towns in the north-east Mazovia, located on the Warsaw–Vilnius route, and it was the capital of the largest county in Łomża region. Trade and craft developed well, the inhabitants' wealth increased. By the Omulew River, a trade resort was established, in which a mill, brewery, a sawmill and a fulling mill ("folusz") were located⁷. Ostrołęka was given new, very advantageous privileges from Polish rulers – Zygmunt Stary, Zygmunt August, Stefan Batory and August III⁸. In 1563 there were approximately 2 thousand inhabitants and 337 houses in Ostrołęka⁹. Zofia Niedziałkowska, the author of the monograph on Ostrołęka, when describing the years 1526–1563 in the history of the town, used an expression "the golden age of Ostrołęka"¹⁰. Similar "golden ages" were noted in the nearby towns of Mazovia, i.a. Łomża and Ostrów¹¹. Unfortunately, their up-and-coming development was drastically interrupted by fires, epidemics, wars with the Swedish, the so-called "Deluge", and the first northern war, so the second half of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century were really unfavorable for all Mazovian towns, including Ostrołęka. It influenced the rapid, five times' decrease in the number of the inhabitants from 2 thousand in 1563 to 400 in 1676¹².

6 In 1524, Stanisław, the Duke of Mazovia, died and in 1526 his brother, Janusz. Joining Mazovia to the Crown took place by the decision of the Mazovia parliament in Warsaw in 1529, legitimized by the Piotrków Privilege (27 December, 1529), and eventually solving the Mazovia case in 1537.

7 Fulling mill was a machine for fulling cloth.

8 Particularly important was the privilege of Zygmunt III dated 15 March, 1597, according to which i.a.: "[...] Ostrołęka's townspeople, when being townspeople, not peasants, were not used for peasant works, with letters from the Starost they went, hay and other things delivered, or they should not go to the manor, again the Starost, in order not to require beer from townspeople, he took the belonging fines from the townspeople in decent time on St. Martin Day, he allowed cutting dry wood, not used on beehives, he let the Mayors take the punishment called «bykowie»".

9 *Dzieje Mazowsza za panowania książąt przez F. Kozłowskiego*. Warszawa 1858, p. 394.

10 Z. Niedziałkowska, *Ostrołęka. Dzieje miasta*. Ostrołęka 2002, p. 50.

11 A. Dobroński, in his monograph on Ostrów *Dzieje Ostrowi Mazowieckiej do 1914 r.*, when writing about the town in the 16th–17th centuries, entitles one of the chapters "Golden Age" of Ostrów.

12 A rapid decrease in population was noted in actually all the Polish towns and cities, including, and perhaps even particularly, Mazovia. For instance, in Łomża, the decrease in population at that time was from 3300 to 300, in Nowogród from 1800 to 150, in Kolno from 1600 to 100, in Pułtusk from 3000 to 350, and in Różan from 2000 to 100. So, as we can see in the data, the towns in the neighbourhood of Ostrołęka and Ostrów noted even greater population loss, because from nearly tenfold (Pułtusk) to twentyfold (Różan). As

The turn of the 17th and the 18th centuries, and then the 18th century was the time of significant progress in the development of Ostrołęka, which could be reflected in the number of inhabitants. In 1777, there were 279 houses in Ostrołęka but the vetting carried out in this town in January 1792, together with the first personal as well as property census, and the street names, showed that in the town and the suburbs there were 1,480 inhabitants and 359 properties (in Ostrów in the same year there were 130 houses and 867 people). When comparing these numbers to the 1676 figures, we can note an almost 400% growth in the population of Ostrołęka, whereas in Ostrów it was 90%. Further in time, Ostrów again outnumbered Ostrołęka but approximately only in the half of the 19th century. "A town built up with wooden houses", – that is how Zofia Niedziałkowska, a conscientious researcher of Ostrołęka, described it at the end of the 18th century – "out of which only 25 were «decorated» with brick chimneys, gave an impression of a big, quite neat village. The central part was a spacious compact square. From the corners of the square, in the middle of which there was an also wooden town hall, the main streets were coming out at right angles. 3 imposing buildings in the town are 2 churches and a monastery"¹³.

The majority of Ostrołęka's inhabitants at that time were farmers, quite many were craftsmen. A comprehensive and consistently implemented plan of organizing towns and cities, primarily the royal ones, resulted in a clear economic recovery as well as changed the appearance and living conditions of the inhabitants. Ostrołęka then went down in Polish history because of its active participation in the Bar Confederation, the 1794 "black procession" in Warsaw and the Kościuszko Uprising (Madaliński's army marching out of Ostrołęka towards Cracow and a six-month defense of the town against Prussian troops).

The beneficial for Ostrołęka decisions of the partitioning Prussian authorities were related to a new administrative division because a large Ostrołęka County was established; it belonged to the Płock department, in a newly formed Province of New East Prussia (Neu-Ostprussen), which incorporated the areas of three former counties of Ostrołęka, Nur and Ostrów. It was an enormous county of approximately 1500 km² with as many as seven towns: Ostrołęka, Ostrów, Andrzejewo, Brok, Czyżew, Myszyniec and Nur.

The period of the autonomous Kingdom of Poland in the years 1815–1830, and particularly the last decade, was a successful time for Polish economy. Industry was developing and there was an increase in the population of towns, including Ostrołęka. As a result of the authorities' protective policy, various actions were taken in order to expand and rebuild towns. For that purpose, a special City Commission was established in 1820. The number of Ostrołęka's inhabitants increased significantly from 1195 people in 1810 and about 2000 in 1820 to 3030

a consequence of the population loss, Ostrów became the most populated town in the region, slightly ahead of Ostrołęka.

13 Z. Niedziałkowska, *Zarys historyczny miasta Ostrołęki do 1945 r.* Ostrołęka 1989, p. 16.

inhabitants in 1827, so within a dozen or so years there was a nearly threefold growth in the number of residents¹⁴. In the classification of the cities in Mazovia in terms of population Warsaw kept the lead (131 484 inhabitants) ahead of Płock, Kutno, Maków and Pułtusk (each had over 4,000 residents). Ostrołęka, with 3,030 people, was eleventh. Continuing the demographic aspect, it must be stated that after the November Uprising Ostrołęka noted a catastrophic decrease in the number of inhabitants, which was a consequence of mainly two reasons. The first one was the damage during the Polish-Russian war and, particularly, in the battle of Ostrołęka on 26 May, 1831. The artillery attacks and the fire caused the loss of over a half of all the houses, the most magnificent buildings, i.e. the parish church, the monastery and the Bernardine church were also destroyed, as well as a just-started construction of a factory and an artisan settlement. The second reason was a raging cholera epidemic, which claimed many lives not only among the Tsarist and Polish army but also among the civilian population of the town.

The year 1866 was the time of important administrative decisions of Russian authorities, but less favorable to Ostrołęka. New governorates were established, including the Governorate of Łomża. Ostrołęka County was seriously reduced as it no longer incorporated the areas of Ostrów and Nur Counties, therefore the importance of the town itself significantly decreased.

At the end of the 19th century, there was an economic growth of Ostrołęka caused mainly by two circumstances. The first one was gaining and expanding important road and railway connections, and the second was building large new barracks and forming a military garrison. There was an important trade route leading through Ostrołęka at that time: Warsaw–Ostrołęka–Łomża–Suwałki–Petersburg. Also, Ostrołęka gained three railway connections (to Łapy through Śniadowo, to Pilawa through Tłuszcz and to Małkinia through Ostrów). On the other hand, the significance of the Narew water route decreased. Moreover, building a railway involved locating a Tsarist garrison in Ostrołęka. For the Russian army needs – regardless of the previously existing so-called Benedon barracks – there were new barracks built in Wojciechowice, along the road to Łomża. The construction lasted from 1892 to 1900 and, in total, there were 21 military objects built. Three regiments were quartered there- The 5th Niżegordzki Dragoon Regiment, The 6th Głuchowski Dragoon Regiment and The 21st

14 I. Gieysztorowa, A. Zahorski, J. Łukasiewicz, *Cztery wieki Mazowsza*. Warszawa 1968, p. 303, Annex: *Ludność miast mazowieckich*; A. Dobroński, op. cit., p. 57; The data concerning the number of inhabitants in Ostrołęka differ from the findings of Z. Niedziałkowska (*Ostrołęka. Dzieje miasta...*, p. 149, 153), according to whom in 1826 Ostrołęka had 2562 inhabitants (1337 men and 1225 women), out of which in the town itself there were 1506 people (783 men and 723 women), but in 1829 – 2883 inhabitants, including 1720 people in the town.

Muromski Infantry Regiment as well as the 10th Battalion of Sappers, the Divisional Staff of the 6th Infantry Division and the command of the 1st Brigade¹⁵.

World War I and intense German-Russian fighting taking place here in 1915 caused enormous losses in the town's economy¹⁶, which was followed by a transfer of various goods to Russia (machines, devices, livestock and equipment) and an absolute confiscation policy of the German occupant.

Ostrołęka in the inter-war period was an agricultural town due to the inhabitants' professions and it reflected in their appearance. So, as Henryk Samsonowicz, an outstanding Polish historian, rightly stated in the preface to the publication on Mazovian towns: "[...] apart from craft and trade, services (well-known was the Mazovia beer, and, from some time ago, also booze in Mazovia taverns), they were inhabited by farmers, gardeners and cattle breeders. Townspeople-farmers is a profession and a social type known around Europe, but in Mazovia it was particularly frequent"¹⁷.

According to the first census in 1921, the population in Ostrołęka was 9 145 and in 1931 there were 13 341 inhabitants. Thus, the number of residents was clearly lower than in Łomża (22 014 inhabitants in 1921, 25 065 in 1931) as well as in nearby Ostrów (13 425 people in 1921, 17 600 in 1931). However, the percentage of the population growth in the decade between the censuses (1921–1931) was the highest in Ostrołęka as it reached 45,8% whereas in Ostrów 28% and in Łomża it was only 15%¹⁸. At the end of the inter-war period the population in Ostrołęka in 1937 was 13 500¹⁹ and in September 1939 there were approximately 14 thousand inhabitants, in Ostrów the number of residents before the outbreak of the war fluctuated around 18 thousand and in Łomża the population was about 28 thousand.

Similarly to the situation before the war, as well as during the inter-war period, a significant influence on the town's life had the army. It concerned both the economic and cultural sphere. In Ostrołęka it was The 5th Regiment of Zaslav Uhlans stationing in the town since 26 May, 1921 and The 12th Mounted Artillery Division (both units were located in Wojciechowice in former Tsarist barracks). The benefits related to economic issues were mainly the sales of food and industrial goods to the army as well as providing various services. Due to orders

15 A. Dobroński, *Walory wojskowe guberni łomżyńskiej przed I wojna światową*. Rocznik Białostocki 1976, Vol. XII, pp. 247–248.

16 For instance, damages of buildings reached about 75% and they were one of the greatest in the entire Kingdom of Poland.

17 H. Samsonowicz, *Introduction*, [In:] *Mazowieckie miasteczka na przestrzeni wieków. Wybrane zagadnienia rozwoju gospodarczego, społecznego i kulturowego*. Ed. A. Stawarz. Warszawa 1999, p. 8.

18 The results of the censuses in 1921 and 1931, own calculation. For example, at the same time, the number of Łomża inhabitants increased from 22 014 to 25 100, so barely by 14%.

¹⁹ Z. Niedziałkowska, *Kronika najważniejszych wydarzeń z dziejów miasta Ostrołęki*. Ostrołęka 1989, s. 27.

from the army, such craftsmen as shoemakers, tailors, saddlers, blacksmiths and builders did well. A positive influence was also on local farmers who provided the army units with agricultural products – potatoes, bread, vegetables, fruit, dairy products and meat for the soldiers as well as feed for horses²⁰. Even bigger was the influence in the patriotic-cultural and sports sphere, and here there was the main difference between the impact of the Tsarist army in the previous years and the Polish army, because the Polish army organized numerous patriotic and historical celebrations with the participation of the town's inhabitants. Apart from celebrating national holidays, such as the 3rd May, the 11th November and the 15th August (the Polish Army Day), it was first of all a regiment holiday for The 5th Regiment of Zaslów Uhlans on 23 September, i.e. an anniversary of a victorious battle of Zaslów in 1920. The 5th Regiment owned two rooms for the screening of films and a platoon of trumpet players, but it was particularly distinguished by sports activity, especially horse-riding.

Great achievements were also made in education. Apart from primary education (general), there were junior-high schools – female and male, which were then merged in 1932, as well as a sewing school for girls and an Artisan and Industrial School for boys. Jewish education was also developing well. However, due to serious underdevelopment from the period of the annexations and war as well as not completely universal teaching (reaching about 70% in 1930), it was not possible to completely eliminate illiteracy, although it decreased significantly (e.g. in Ostrołęka, in the years 1921–1931, from 30% to 20%). The development of education was followed by the development of readership, which was proved i.a. by creating networks of libraries. They were built near cultural and educational associations, cultural institutions and schools, and in 1936 the Municipal Public Library was opened in Ostrołęka. There were two cinemas – a private one, “Uciecha”, which belonged to the Lendowie family, and the other in Dom Kolejarza (The Railwayman's House) at the station.

In conclusion, it may be stated that inter-war Ostrołęka was a town which was the center of administration, trade and service for the county, without much chance of becoming a bigger center on its own merits.

During the occupation, Ostrołęka County was divided into three parts. The Town of Ostrołęka and northern communes were incorporated to the Third Reich, in Ciechanów Region, southern communes of the county to the General Government and some of them were incorporated to the Soviet Union.

Significant changes, whose effects can be seen until the present day, happened after World War II, starting from the turn of the 40s and the 50s. Ostrołęka was freed of German occupation during the so-called summer operation of the Red

20 J. Dziewirski, J. Kijowski, H. Maćkowiak, *5 Pułk Ułanów Zaslowskich* (2nd ed. improved and expanded). Ostrołęka 1994, p. 86.

Army in 1944, under the codename “Bagration”²¹ on 6 September, 1944. The post-war beginnings of Ostrołęka were really difficult. Actual recovery of normal life in the town happened only at the turn of January and February 1945, as within several months (September 1944 – January 1945) the life in Ostrołęka almost completely ended. Soviet soldiers took control over the town and on the other side of Narew there were Germans, permanent shooting and bombing took place, and the people were expelled mainly to nearby communes.

World War II, and especially the months from the beginning of September 1944 to the half of January 1945, caused enormous damage of the town and the county, including mainly the areas on the Narew River. Figuratively speaking, there were no unspoiled buildings in Ostrołęka, and many were completely burnt or demolished. In comparison to the situation in 1939, the general damage of Ostrołęka reached about 55%, and in the financial aspect, it was approximately 15–20 million pre-war zlotys²². Although war damage in Ostrołęka during World War II was much lower in percentage terms than during World War I (85%), it was still one of the biggest, not only in Mazovia but also in the entire country. Industrial plants in the town and the county, only few and not too big, completely collapsed. Entirely destroyed were i.a. two power plants, brick factories, sawmills and a watermill.

There were also major overall losses in population. According to estimated statistical data, in 1945 there were 7 950 inhabitants in Ostrołęka²³, thus the decrease in population during the occupation was approximately 7 thousand (almost 50%). It happened as a result of various reasons, and the most important was the decline in Jewish population²⁴. During the first post-war years, an increase in population was noted, e.g. in Ostrołęka from about 9 279 inhabitants in 1946 to 10 745 at the end of 1947, mainly because of the returns from the war, camps and compulsory works. Over the following several years there was stagnation in number of inhabitants²⁵. As there was no work in Ostrołęka, some inhabitants emigrated mainly to the Recovered Territories but also to Warsaw and other urban centers. According to estimated data, 349 families and 1091 people had left

21 The name of the operation “Bagration” derives from the surname of a Russian commander, Piotr Bagration (1765–1812), Georgian duke, general of the Tsarist army, renowned in the Napoleonic Wars in 1805, 1806–1807 and 1812, who fell at the battle of Borodino.

22 Bigger damage in Warsaw Voivodeship was only in Maków Mazowiecki (85,6%), The National Archives of the Capital City of Warsaw (APW), The Warsaw Provincial Office (UWW), War Compensation Department, sign. 40.

23 *Powszechny Sumaryczny Spis Ludności dated 14.II.1946 r.* Warszawa 1947, p. 25.

24 Before the war, out of approximately 15 000 inhabitants (1939), 1/3, so 5 000, were Jewish.

25 In 1945, the population in Ostrołęka was 7 950, increasing to 9 279 in 1946 and to 10 745 in 1947, whereas in 1949 it was about 10 600, in 1949 approximately 10 500, in 1950 – 10 409, in 1950 – about 10 700, and only in 1951 it exceeded the number of 11 000.

Ostrołęka by 31 January, 1946²⁶ (12% of the town's population). That decrease in population was slightly compensated by the returns of repatriates from the Soviet Union. In the years 1947–1951, there was basically no population growth in Ostrołęka (10 745 in 1947 and 10 700 in 1951), in the years 1952–1960 it was several hundred persons per year. It is also worth noting that, in terms of demography, the pre-war number of inhabitants in Ostrołęka was reached only in 1960 (15 216).

The first post-war years were dedicated to rebuilding the town after a damaging war. At the beginning of February 1945, municipal and county authorities, established in the southern part of the county, returned to Ostrołęka. The town hall, churches, shops, craft workshops and apartments were rebuilt. Within a few months all four primary schools and three secondary schools were opened, health care and social care were organized, sports and cultural activities started. Political parties, youth, union and social organizations started their functioning.

Particularly important for the development of Ostrołęka and having great impact on its future were the decisions made by central state and party authorities, concerning the objectives and then the implementation of the 6-Year Plan (1950–1955). As part of industrializing the country and equalizing the differences in economic development of Poland (well-developed Poland “A” on the left side of the Vistula and poorly-developed Poland “B” on the right side), the decisions to build a cellulose and paper factory as well as an electrical power and heating plant were made²⁷.

It was related, among other things, to the necessity of expanding the cellulose and paper industry, which declined in over 50% during the war, and at the same time to a deepening shortage of paper, cardboard and packages. Thus, the central authorities made a decision to build from scratch big cellulose and paper conglomerates. The first one was supposed to be the Ostrołęka's Cellulose and Paper Factory. The initiative to build it started with the authorities of Ostrołęka, but the decision carried a political and economic aspect. Building a paper factory in Ostrołęka together with an electrical power and heating plant was treated as an experimental field for other designed factories of this type (Kwidzyń, Świecie on the Vistula River). What determined its location was the weak industrialization of this region, labor force surpluses, the abundance of water, raw materials and

26 The Archives of the Capital City of Warsaw and Warsaw Voivodeship (APW), the Warsaw Provincial Office (UWW), the Information and Propaganda Office (UI i P), sign. 478; Further on the resettlement action from the Ostrołęka County to the Recovered Territories in: J. Kijowski, *Przesiedlenia ludności Kurpiowszczyzny na Ziemię Odzyskane po II wojnie światowej ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem powiatu ostrołęckiego (pogranicze mazursko-kurpiowskie)*. Olsztyn–Ostrołęka 1998, pp. 92–104.

27 Initially, it was supposed to be a power plant only for the needs of the cellulose and paper factory, later it turned into an electrical power and heating plant for the town and the region's needs.

railway connections. The construction was located in the Wojciechowice district, on the area of former Tsarist, then Polish barracks. The conglomerate was designed mainly according to foreign documentation and was aimed at producing different kinds of paper, cardboard, boxes, cellulose and paper bags. The factory was commissioned in 1959 (the first stage). It was equipped with the latest, at that time, on a European and global scale, machines and production devices.

The second stage of building the factory lasted from 1961 to 1966. It was mainly the time of constructing and starting-up the pulp mill, which took place in 1966 and resulted in opening the Ostrołęka's Cellulose and Paper Mills (OZCP). After a complete start-up in 1967, there were approximately 2600 people working in the factory, and an estimated annual value of OZCP production was 2,3 billion zlotys.

Building the Ostrołęka's Cellulose and Paper Factory was closely related to constructing Elektrociepłownia Ostrołęka (the Electrical Power and Heating Plant Ostrołęka). It was also located in Wojciechowice, which was going to become an industrial district of Ostrołęka in the future. The construction of Elektrociepłownia Ostrołęka, which lasted over three years, ended on 21 July, 1956. The first boiler OP-100 was also placed in service, followed by others. Elektrociepłownia Ostrołęka (later Zespół Elektrowni Ostrołęka) together with the Cellulose and Paper Factory (later Ostrołęka's Cellulose and Paper Mills) created a new industrial landscape in Ostrołęka and changed the inhabitants' lives. At the same time, there were also established: a worker cooperative "Narew" and "Przyszłość", the District Cooperative Dairy (Okręgowa Spółdzielnia Mleczarska), the National Machinery Center (Państwowy Ośrodek Maszynowy). In trade, there was the Popular Grocers Cooperative "Społem" (Powszechna Spółdzielnia Spożywców "Społem"), the Urban Retail Trade (Miejski Handel Detaliczny) and agricultural cooperatives (Municipal Cooperatives "Samopomoc Chłopska").

Due to the fact that since 1956 the electrical power and heating plant had been functioning and since 1959 – the Ostrołęka's Cellulose and Paper Factory (OFCiP), and the number of their employees was increasing, it also influenced the rise in the town's population. For instance, in 1955, Ostrołęka was inhabited by 12 105 people and Ostrów by 12 705²⁸, so basically the number of inhabitants in the two towns was equal, then Ostrołęka gradually but successively started to outnumber Ostrów.

Another impetus towards the economic development was given in 1968. At that time, in accordance with a resolution of the Council of Ministers, the implementation of a development plan, prepared by a work group of Sub-regional Plan of the city of Warsaw and Warsaw Voivodeship, called "The Principles of Warsaw Region Development until 1985", was started. The plan assumed creating spatial arrangement, working against an influx of people to Warsaw and its

28 M. Bartniczak, *Podziały administracyjne w powiecie Ostrów Mazowiecka*, [In:] *Ostrów Mazowiecka. Z dziejów miasta i powiatu...*, p. 305.

suburban zone, as well as establishing strong sub-regional centers. It was assumed that five sub-regional centers would be functioning (Warsaw, Płock, Siedlce, Ciechanów and Ostrołęka centres), and particularly rapidly developing were supposed to be the capitals of those sub-regions, thus also Ostrołęka. The second stage of the industrialization of Ostrołęka started at that time and, as it turned out later, it was the largest investment programme in the whole history of the town, and, most importantly, it was almost entirely implemented²⁹. The most important investments in Ostrołęka completed within the years 1968–1975 were: Power Plant “B”, Meat Factory, Sand and Lime Plants, Cellular Concrete Plants “Prefabet”, Factory of Large-Panel Building Elements, a greenhouse conglomerate and a powdered-milk factory. In general, the investment costs in Ostrołęka in the years 1960–1975 were 10 billion zlotys, half of which was spent during the five-year period of 1970–1975³⁰. The investments were carried out by large companies, such as: Warsaw Company of Power Station Construction and Industry “Beton-Stal”, Warsaw Industrial Construction Company “Kablobeton”, Mounting Power Plants and Industrial Devices Company “Energomontaż Północ”, “Elektrobudowa”, as well as an Italian company “Techno-Petropol” (the construction of the powdered-milk factory).

Industrializing Ostrołęka influenced the population growth of the town, which reached 22 160 inhabitants in 1970³¹ so, within 15 years, the number of residents in Ostrołęka increased by over 10 thousand (about 45%), whereas in Ostrów the population was 15 010, so it increased by nearly 1700 (about 14%).

A further distinctive deepening of the difference between Ostrów and Ostrołęka, both in terms of economic development and population, took place in the period of 1975–1998. By the decision of central authorities, changes in administrative division of the country were made, from three-stage to two-stage (municipalities, voivodeships), liquidation of counties and creating 49 voivodeships instead of the 16 existing so far. The capital of one of the newly-established voivodeships was Ostrołęka, which increased the importance of the town. Ostrołęka did not carry out any significant industrial investment at that time, though, as it was the second half of Gierek’s rule and, because of the necessity to repay the loans (whose interest rates, in fact, rapidly increased from about 7% to 21%), the investment boom in the country finished. On the other hand, housing and accompanying building in Ostrołęka were developing rapidly, which actually had impact on the town’s population growth. Ostrołęka, during its “voivodeship”, grew in the number of inhabitants from approximately 28 000 in 1975 to 55 271 in 1998, so the population actually doubled within less than a quarter of a century. The

29 Planned but not implemented at that time investments in Ostrołęka were: i.a. building a shredding mill and a granary, a textile and clothing factory, a factory of precast units for industrial construction as well as a factory using bark from OZCP.

30 J. Kijowski, *Dzieje Ostrołęki 1944–2000*. Ostrołęka 2002, p. 480.

31 Ibidem, p. 688, Annex No. 10: *Ludność Ostrołęki w latach 1945–2000*.

number of inhabitants of Ostrów at that time increased by a little more than 38% (from 16 000 to about 22 000).

Political and economic transformation at the turn of the 80s and the 90s of the 20th century was quite lenient for Ostrołęka. The biggest workplaces remained, e.g. Ostrołęka Cellulose and Paper Factory and Ostrołęka Power Station, the others were transformed and only a few were closed down.

To sum up, a number of general comments. A few centuries long history of Ostrołęka was and is related to Mazovia, the central district of Poland, additionally “honored” with the capital of the country – Warsaw. Ostrołęka went through difficult years (wars, fires, epidemics) as well as good ones. It went down in the history of the region and the country for many times, mainly due to political and military events, less frequently economic. The central authorities’ decisions influenced such situation as they decided to “make Ostrołęka happy” by carrying out two investments of significant importance: the electrical power and heating plant as well as the Ostrołęka’s Cellulose and Paper Factory, and then other investments crowned with the promotion of the town to the capital of the voivodeship. Happiness, however, did not last long, less than a quarter of a century, but the advantage remained.

Long was also the list of planned projects which were never completed. Some of them were: building in Ostrołęka a windmill with a milling quality of 150 tonnes per 24 hours and a granary of 20 thousand tones capacity, a factory of precast units for industrial construction, a textile and clothing factory (mainly to employ women), a plastic parts factory and a factory using bark from OZCP.

Investment costs for Ostrołęka in the years 1970–1975 reached 5 billion zlotys, whereas the last two five-year periods, i.e. 1960–1970, were in total almost 4 billion zlotys. Industrializing Ostrołęka was so fast and extensive that other aspects of social and economic life, i.a. housing and accompanying building, education and culture as well as healthcare, fell far behind. Several big construction companies were brought to Ostrołęka, including “Beton-Stal”, “Kablobeton” and Ostrów Construction Company. At the opportunity of constructing the production sites, there were other facilities built: a post office, a sports stadium, Dom Sportowca (Sportsman’s House) and a bus depot.

Industrializing Ostrołęka increased the number of the town’s inhabitants. In 1970, the population in Ostrołęka was already 22 160³². So, within 15 years, there had been an increase in population by over 10 thousand people (approximately 45%).

One of the characteristics of the Kurpie region development was the concentration of industrial investments, and then the production sites, in Ostrołęka itself, almost entirely excluding the county’s area, so a peculiar “Ostrołęka-centricity”. Apart from Communal Cooperatives “Samopomoc Chłopska”, the only factories located outside the town were: Dzięwiarska Spółdzielnia Pracy (Knitting

32 Ibidem.

Worker Cooperative) “Pełta” in Myszyniec, which was a branch of the Cooperative from Pułtusk³³, Zakłady Przemysłu Torfowego (Peat Industries) in Karaska (Municipality of Kadzidło) and Zakłady Cegły Silikatowej (Silicate Brick Factory) in Kruki (Municipality of Olszewo-Borki). Ostrołęka County varied from other nearby counties because, e.g. in Maków County, the production sites were not only in Maków but also in Różan, in Ostrów County – in Małkinia, and in Przasnysz County – in Chorzele.

Following the industrial development, the number of Ostrołęka’s inhabitants grew rapidly. In 1960, the population was 15 216, increasing within over 10 years until 1970 by about 50% and reaching the number of 22 160, and then, within the next five years (1970–1975), the population growth was almost identical to the one in the previous decade, i.e. by nearly 6 thousand people, reaching 28 040.

Significant changes also took place in the demography of the county. Following the population growth in the town, the number of inhabitants in communes systematically decreased. In 1970, the overall population in the county was 90 000, including 22 000 in Ostrołęka and 68 000 in villages, but in 1975 the total number of inhabitants was 94 600, including 28 000 in the town and 66 600 in villages. Thus, along with the population growth in the town by nearly 6 000 people, the number of rural inhabitants decreased by 2 000 people. Population loss was noted in every commune. The major “cause” of the decrease in the number of rural inhabitants was Ostrołęka’s industry which absorbed workforce, but still, next to a relatively big group of peasants-workers, more and more workers settled in the town within occupational, cooperative and individual building schemes. With some simplification, it can be stated that the town’s population growth equals the number of inhabitants “taken over” from communes, natural growth and persons from outside the county. In terms of demography, my obligation is to mention two more factors, one positive – reduction in mortality (particularly infants) and negative – decrease in natural growth.

Industry development was accompanied by numerous economic and social phenomena, both positive and negative. Thus, for instance, labor force surpluses, mainly in the northern part of Ostrołęka County, with poor soil of the Green Forest, were successfully managed. Plus, a relatively numerous category of peasants-workers was created. Combining farming and working in industry had impact on the irregularity of work and low workforce productivity in factories. Agricultural production, trade and services did not keep pace with the industrial development. The extent to which Ostrołęka was equipped with technical infrastructure was not sufficient. Summing up the period after World War II, it must be admitted that the years 1945–1998 were one of the best or even the best years in the entire 644-year history of the town, being a kind of the second “Golden Age” in its history.

33 Worker Cooperative “Pełta” in Myszyniec was established in the middle of the 70s, using the premises after railway workshops of a closed narrow gauge railway.

An important role in the history of the town played the Narew River, one of the longest rivers in Poland³⁴. It was pointed out by prof. Adam Dorobiński in the Introduction to a publication titled *Narew w dziejach i współczesności Mazowsza i Podlasia* (The Narew in the history and the present times of Mazovia and Podlasie), in which he wrote: “[...] The Narew River, along with the valley, determined the direction of settlement but also joined various tribes and, in later centuries, ethnic groups, nationalities, religions with their different culture and customs. This river decided on the career of boroughs and towns, had a significant impact on defining trade routes on land, contributed to the development of some crafts and branches of industry, influenced municipal or urban engineering, it was also used to mark borders in administrative divisions and war planning”³⁵.

The meaning of the Narew River in the history of Ostrołęka was also described in the same publication by Jerzy Kijowski in his article *Rola Narwi w dziejach Ostrołęki oraz mosty ostrołęckie* (The role of the Narew in the history of Ostrołęka and Ostrołęka’s bridges). Between the 14th and the 19th centuries, it was a positive function (waterways transport, protection from enemies, fishing, building watermills), with hardly any threat of flooding (numerous oxbows, forests and marshes absorbing excess water). In the 20th century, the fact of the town’s location on the river caused major damage in both world wars because the Narew River was the borderline between two enemies. It had, however, a positive impact on the decision to build the electrical power and heating plant as well as the paper and cellulose factory because the abundance of water was one of the main arguments for building those plants.

It is rather difficult to assess the economic situation of Ostrołęka in the latest years, i.e. since 1999 until the present day, because a short time distance from those events does not allow their complete objective assessment, but some conclusions and reflections may be already drawn. Nowadays, the pace of Ostrołęka’s development is unfortunately poor. No new investments are undertaken (apart from the investments within Stora Enso Company), residential construction, especially multi-family housing, has basically stopped, more and more young educated inhabitants of the town are looking for a place for themselves in nearby Warsaw or in much further European countries, and only new supermarkets, megastores and other shopping malls pop up like mushrooms. The railway nod in Ostrołęka has actually collapsed. One of the most concrete facts of this collapse is the demographic data, which clearly indicate the stagnation of Ostrołęka. In the years 1998–2000, the population of Ostrołęka basically remained stable, or even increased a little (in 1998 – 55 271, 1999 – 55 511, 2000 – 55 658) and since 2001

34 The Narew River, the 5th largest river in Poland (after the Vistula, the Oder, the Bug and the Warta), nearly 450 km long. It flows out of marshy areas of the Białowieża Forest in Belarus and it has a basin of approximately 75 thousand km².

35 A. Dobroński, *Introduction*, [In:] *Narew w dziejach i współczesności Mazowsza i Podlasia*. Eds. A. Dobroński, W. Grębocka. Łomża 2004.

the number of inhabitants has been gradually decreasing (in 2001 – 55 390, in 2005 – 54 543, in 2010 – 53 390, and in 2012 – 52 877). Two factors influenced and have influence on that situation: lower natural growth and negative migration balance (the natural growth in Ostrołęka and the county was systematically increasing during the post-war period, reaching almost 20 per mils, and nowadays it has dropped to only a few per mils). It was a result of, among other things, the loss of Ostrołęka's "voivodeship", which was not only a failure in prestige but also meant specific economic and social losses. The most significant was the decrease in employment by about 5 thousand people, who so far worked in widely understood voivodeship administration. At the same time, in the recent years, we may notice economic slowdown of the town and the decrease in population. The amount of the funds spent by the town on investments can be given as an example. In 2010, it was approximately 60 million, in 2015 – 20 million, and in 2016 – barely 9 million (3% of the budget). In the Ostrołęka county budget, for instance, annually about 30-40% was allocated for investments (in 2014, 36% of the budget funds was spent). Relatively big – but safe and in accordance with regulations – was also the indebtedness of Ostrołęka because, in the recent years, it oscillated around 100 million zlotys (in 2015 – 108 million, in 2016 – 99 million). Certain signs of improvement in investments occurred in the 2017 budget of Ostrołęka, mainly due to external funds on building voivodeship roads running through the town.

On the other hand, school and sports premises have improved, a new hospital has been put into use (after "only" 25 years from the beginning of the investment!), a water park, a mausoleum of the November Uprising, new public buildings, e.g. the College of Public Administration, the Marshal Office and municipal buildings. The number of churches has also increased (from three to six), banks (from three to approximately thirty), cars, streets, pavements, but the number of bike paths, unfortunately, remains steady. The educational attainment rates have significantly increased, the percentage of people with higher education is growing systematically and the percentage of people without secondary education is decreasing at a similar pace. We have two higher-education institutions – one private (School for Higher Education in Public Administration), the other social (Higher School of Economy and Sociology), unfortunately no public ones.

The most important problems to be solved are creating new workplaces, which would have impact on decreasing unemployment rates, actually quite low right now – about 8–10%, building a bypass road of the town with the third bridge on the Narew River, building a road to Warsaw through Goworowo – Wyszaków, improving road condition, building bike paths, decreasing pollution and developing the areas by the Narew.

Conclusively, some reflections, comparisons and generalizations. Let us begin with Ostrołęka's location and its role over the centuries, particularly in relation to the surrounding areas. It was basically a leading role all the time. Ostrołęka was, both formally and actually, the center of the region. Formally, it was the seat of

Ostrołęka County, with the borders of the county actually remaining the same. The exception was the period from the partitions of Poland to 1866, when the county included three former counties (of Ostrołęka, Ostrów and Nur) as well as the years 1975–1998, when the Ostrołęka County was dissolved but the voivodeship of Ostrołęka was established. All the major industrial factories, institutions, schools, especially secondary, were located in Ostrołęka, and since 1976, also higher education, a hospital, cultural and sports centers.

Comparing Ostrołęka to nearby towns, mainly from north-east Mazovia, varied over the centuries. Let us first refer to Łomża. For several centuries it was superior to Ostrołęka, as the capital of Łomża Land, which used to include, among others, Ostrołęka County, later the capital of the governorate (1866–1915). Additionally, in 1925, occurred the ecclesial dependence of the Ostrołęka parish on a newly-established Łomża Diocese. Therefore, Łomża has actually always outnumbered Ostrołęka in terms of population. In the period of the greatest development of towns in Mazovia, in the 16th century, Łomża was inhabited by approximately 3000 people and was the largest town in the Mazovia voivodeship, just after Warsaw and Przasnysz. Ostrołęka at that time had about 2 000 inhabitants.

Interesting is the comparison of the population of five towns from north-east Poland, which were voivodeship towns in the years 1975–1998 (the comparison does not include “old” voivodeship cities, i.e. Olsztyn and Białystok). The data covers the years from 1946, so from the end of World War II, to the present day (2015).

Table 1

Comparison of the population of five towns from north-east Poland

Nb.	Year	Ostrołęka	Ciechanów	Łomża	Suwałki	Biała Podlaska
1	1946	9 279	13 588	14 173	13 670	15 496
2	1950	10 409	16 237	15 272	15 456	13 689
3	1960	15 216	20 803	19 253	19 868	20 486
4	1975	28 040	27 349	29 006	30 558	31 765
5	2000	55 818	47 607	65 112	69 092	58 958
6	2015	52 611	44 506	62 737	69 370	57 414

Source: Statystyka miast i osiedli 1945–1965. GUS, Warszawa 1967; Rocznik Demograficzny z lat 1976, 2001, 2016.

Definitely, Ostrołęka had the worst start, with 9279 inhabitants, whereas the other four towns quite clearly outnumbered it, from approximately 30–35% (Suwałki, Ciechanów, Łomża) to over 40% (Biała Podlaska). After several years

(data from 1950), Ciechanów noted the biggest increase by 2645 people, Suwałki – by 1786, Ostrołęka – by 1130 and Łomża by 1099, whereas in Biała Podlaska the population significantly decreased – by 1807 people. Another 10 years (1950–1960) was the period of an increase in the towns' population: the biggest increase was in the former outsider, Biała Podlaska, by 6777, the lowest in Łomża (3981), and Ostrołęka was the second in this table (population growth by 4801). Within the years 1960–1975, so the last 15 years of “county” Poland, Ostrołęka reached a record level of population growth (12 284), ahead of Biała Podlaska (11 279), Suwałki (10 690), Łomża (9753) and Ciechanów (only 6546). The period of voivodship of those towns, so, as we assumed to simplify, the years 1975–2000, instead of 1975–1998, was the time of an increase in population, in Suwałki – by 38 534, in Łomża – by 36 106; Ostrołęka at that time increased in the number of inhabitants by 27 778, in Suwałki it was almost the same (27 293), and the lowest increase was in Ciechanów (20 358).

The last fifteen years (2000–2015), for the majority of the discussed towns, brought a decrease in population, and the biggest was in Ostrołęka (3207 persons), then in Ciechanów – 3101, Łomża – 2475 and Suwałki (only 1544), Biała Podlaska was the only town which noted relatively small but still an increase in population (78 people).

The nearly six-and-a-half-century history of Ostrołęka has been running in a sinusoidal manner. The periods of prosperity intertwined with the times of stagnation, but the breakdowns happened as a result of both – and most often – external reasons and, less frequently, internal ones, specific only to Ostrołęka. It was usually related to wars taking place in the country, such as the “Swedish Deluge”, the First Northern War, the November Uprising, the First and Second World Wars as well as fires, epidemics and the liquidation of the Ostrołęka voivodship in 1998. The periods of prosperity, however, were usually related to beneficial for Ostrołęka decisions of superior authorities, most often central. Such was the situation with, for instance, the decision to incorporate Ostrołęka, as part of Mazovia, to the Crown in 1526, and then the implementation of the 1823 so-called plan of the Minister of the Treasury, Ksawery Drucki Lubecki, interrupted relatively quickly and rapidly by the outbreak of the November Uprising and the Battle of Ostrołęka on 26 May, 1831, the adoption of the 6-year plan (with two major investments in Ostrołęka – the electrical power and heating plant and the cellulose and paper factory), as well as the administrative division changes in the country in June, 1975, which resulted in establishing Ostrołęka voivodship.

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SUMMARY

The article deals with certain issues selected from the entire, over 600-year-old, history of Ostrołęka. Particularly highlighted are such problems as: periodization, demography, some economic and social issues as well as the role of the Narew River in the development of the town. As far as it is possible, the indicators of Ostrołęka are compared to the indicators of other nearby towns. Various historical, archival and printed sources are used, as well as publications. Relatively interesting, perhaps controversial, is the discussion on the present times (since the Ostrołęka voivodeship liquidation in 1999 to the present day).

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł traktuje o wybranych zagadnieniach z dziejów Ostrołęki w całej jej ponad 600-letniej historii. Szczególnie wyeksponowane są takie problemy jak: periodyzacja, demografia, niektóre sprawy gospodarcze i społeczne oraz rola rzeki Narwi w rozwoju miasta. Na ile to możliwe, wskaźniki ostrołęckie porównywane są ze wskaźnikami innych, sąsiednich miast. Wykorzystane są różnorodne źródła historyczne zarówno archiwalne, jak i drukowane oraz opracowania. Dość ciekawe, być może kontrowersyjne, są rozważania dotyczące czasów najnowszych (od likwidacji województwa ostrołęckiego w 1999 r. do chwili obecnej).

Key words: Ostrołęka, history, economy, the Narew River, investments, demography

Słowa kluczowe: Ostrołęka, historia, ekonomia, Narew, inwestycje, demografia