Ethnologia Polona, vol. 46: 2025, 45–65
PL ISSN 0137 -4079, DOI: 10.23858/ethp.2025.46.3976

"WESTERNERS" VS "EASTERNERS": SOVIET-POLISH BORDERLAND IN THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF BELARUSIAN HISTORY[1]

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This article deals with the phenomenon of the Soviet-Polish border in Belarus in 1921–1939 as a factor that influenced the regional identity construction and development of mutual stereotypes among the Belarusians who found themselves within the Polish state and within the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Particular attention is paid to the analysis of oral history materials recorded in 2000–2010 in the area of the former Soviet-Polish borderland. The geopolitical rift of the ethnic territory and the low level of Belarusians' national identity became the basis for new forms of identity of the population of Western and Eastern Belarus ("Westerners" and "Easterners"). During the functioning of the Soviet-Polish border, the mutual representations of "Westerners" and "Easterners" are vague and are shaped mainly by state ideology and propaganda, where the image of an external "enemy" prevails.

A detailed filling of the images of "Westerners" and "Easterners" with social, economic, and ethnocultural characteristics occurs after the physical (1939) and actual (1944) elimination of the Soviet-Polish border. During the Nazi occupation (1941–1944), and especially in the post-war years, communication between the population of Western and Eastern Belarus became intense. The massive labour migration, as well as the flows of beggars from the devastated areas to the relatively prosperous Western region of the country in the early postwar years, also signified the formation of informational flows in both directions. According to the author, mutual stereotypical ideas of "Westerners" and "Easterners" were finally formed after the end of the Second World War. The core of these ideas is the antinomy of "prosperity–poverty", as well as a set of related connotations: "individual farmer–collective farmer", "hardworking–idler", "believer–atheist", "policeman–partisan", "individualist–collectivist" and "secretive–communicative".

KEYWORDS: Soviet-Polish borderland, Belarusians, identity, sociocultural stereotype, "us-them", traditional culture, local rural communities.

1 The article was produced within the framework of the EU4 BELARUS-SALT II programme with the financial support of the European Union.

The phenomenon of the "border" in any form of its representation (physical, mental, symbolic) is a relevant subject of research for various humanities and disciplines, since the "border" to a significant extent concretises and formalises the basic antinomy of culture, "one's own–another's". The exceptional significance of the "border" in the structuring and functioning of the semiosphere was emphasised by Yuri Lotman:

> Every culture begins with the division of the world into internal ("one's own") space and external ("theirs"). How this binary division is interpreted depends on the typology of culture. However, this division itself belongs to universals. A border can separate the living from the dead, the settled from the nomadic, the city from the steppe, have a state, social, national, religious or some other character. (2001, 257)

Almost all studies in the field of studying the picture of the world, ritual (symbolic) forms of behaviour, inter-ethnic and social relations in various cultural communities invariably appeal to the concept of "border" in all possible variants of its configuration. At the same time, it is important to consider that the categories of *miazha* (boundary) and *granitsa* (border) differ in folk culture. While a symbolic boundary status in the traditional worldview can be attributed to a house threshold, a fence, a crossroads or a riverbank, the concept of *granitsa* refers to state-political realities.

> In the oral narratives of the inhabitants of the former Soviet-Polish borderlands, there is a significant difference between the concepts of *miazha* (boundary) and *granitsa* (border). While the former could be perceived as an abstract concept and was not always identified by respondents, the latter was usually understood as a specially designated piece of territory that separated one state from another, or one group of people from another. (Ivanova 2015, 81–82)

Anthropological understanding of state-political borders, from the point of view of the generation and construction of new cultural meanings and identities among the borderland population in post-Soviet historiography, represents a certain gap. In particular, the situation where the border is a significant factor not in inter-ethnic but in intra-ethnic relations is poorly studied. According to Lorina Repina, in recent times, the study of the images of "ours" and "alien" has been reduced almost exclusively to inter-ethnic issues, "while the broader layer of mutual reflections at the level of social groups and subcultures remains poorly studied" (2011, 252).

The subject of this study is the Soviet-Polish border (1921–1939) in the structure of the Belarusian cultural landscape as a factor and mechanism for the formation of regional identity and mutual stereotypes of "Westerners" and "Easterners". The factual

basis of the work is made up of expeditionary materials recorded in the period 2000–2020 by the Centre for Oral History and Field Research of Polotsk State University in the zone of the former Soviet-Polish borderland in the Vitebsk region. The geography of the research covered both the Western areas of the former borderlands (Braslavsky, Gluboksky, Dokshitsky and Miorsky) and those located in the Eastern part of the studied zone (Verkhnedvinsky, the Eastern part of Dokshitsky, Polotsky and Ushachsky).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Field research was conducted in the format of comprehensive ethnographic expeditions, which were stationary in nature and lasted 15–18 days. The field research team consisted of 2–4 lecturers and 10–14 students from Polotsk University. The comprehensive nature of the expedition meant that the field research focused not only on the issue of borders but also on other topics, such as ritual practices, folk medicine, sacred geography, folk healing and witchcraft, ethnic stereotypes and more. The research was conducted using a radial principle, where field groups (two people each) initially interacted with the local population in nearby settlements and later in those farther from the base camp. Dialogue with people took place in the format of thematic but unstructured conversations. Biographical interviews were used only partially, as they proved to be of low effectiveness for most ethnographic topics. Initial processing and systematisation of materials were carried out promptly at the base camp, followed by transcription of audio recordings and their analysis in laboratory conditions. The majority of respondents were women born in the 1920s and 1930s, local natives, Belarusian, with primary or secondary education, mostly former agricultural workers (collective farm workers) by profession and belonging to Orthodox (80%) and Catholic (20%) denominations, which generally reflects the current ethno-confessional situation in the studied area. The predominance of women among the interlocutors largely ensured the informational richness of the meetings, as the female narrative, compared to the male one, always stands out as more sincere, substantive, vivid, emotional and free from borrowings uncharacteristic of tradition, as was noted back in 1927 by the renowned Belarusian ethnographer Ales Shlyubsky (1927, 1).

Most of the field materials, including those recorded by the author, are being published for the first time. Sources on this topic published in the last decade by the Belarusian Archive of Oral History were also used (Smaliančuk 2015, 2019; Ivanova 2015). The methodological approach to this problem can be figuratively presented as the work of an anthropologist who creates an ethnographic story (Engelking 2012, 37), thanks not only to field research, but also to the scientific interpretation of the memories of rural residents using the methods of sociocultural anthropology, ethnography, ethno-semiotics and history.

Various aspects of the relationship between Western and Eastern Belarus have recently been actively examined by both Belarusian and foreign researchers (Voĺha Ivanova, Eduard Maźko, Aliaksiej Radziuk, Iryna Romanova, Alieś Smaliančuk, Elżbieta Smułkowa, Anna Engelking, etc.). Most works postulate an "anthropological turn" in historical research, which in the methodological dimension means a special role for "oral history". The idea of an "anthropological turn" in historical science and the "rehabilitation" of narrative have been actively discussed and implemented in American and Western European historiography since the 1970s (Lawrence Stone, Franklin Ankersmit, Jim Sharp, Paul Thompson and others). The subject field of the "new historians", as Lorens Stone designated it, includes issues that were considered the classical "domain" of cultural anthropology, ethnology and ethnography.

> Views on youth, old age, illness and death; sex, marriage, concubinage; birth, contraception and abortion; work, free time[…], the relationship between religion, science and magic as models for explaining reality[…], family, clan, community, nation, clan and race; the power and significance of ritual, symbol and custom as ways of strengthening community. (Stoŭn 2008, 19)

In this sense, the proposed study is an attempt at an anthropological analysis of the sociocultural and mental response of rural inhabitants in northern Belarus to the establishment and functioning of the state border between Poland and the USSR. This occurred when a relatively ethnoculturally homogeneous population was forced to become an actor in the existential and worldview antinomy of "us-them".

1921–1939: THE SOVIET-POLISH BORDER IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE BELARUSIAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

According to the terms of the Riga Peace Treaty (18 March 1921), which marked the end of the Soviet-Polish War of 1919–1921, a significant part of the Belarusian ethnic territory with an area of over 112,000 km^2 and a population of about 4.6 million people was included in the Polish state. Soon, the Belarusian lands within Poland were unofficially called "Western Belarus" (Kasciuk et al. 1995, 214–215). The border of 1921 marked not only the division of the Belarusian ethnic group based on the principle of inclusion in two different state organisms, absolutely antagonistic in socioeconomic and ideological terms, but also served as a kind of catalyst for the processes of self-identification, when the image of the other living on the other side of the border played a significant role. The antinomy of "us–them" was

apparent and concrete in the border zone, for whose population the "border" category had no abstract meaning but real and concrete content. The geographical position of the border in the structure of the local landscape, its attributes (border posts, outposts, control and tracking strip), and character code (border guards, smugglers, defectors, people on "the other" side) have significance only in a border situation. The geopolitical rift of the ethnic territory and the low level of Belarusians' national identity became the basis for new forms of identity of the population of Western and Eastern Belarus ("Westerners" and "Easterners").

In the context of the Belarusian peasantry's low level of national self-awareness, the state-political split of the ethnic territory led to the formation of new forms of identity: the local population became "Westerners" and "Easterners" faster than they recognised themselves as Belarusians. It is significant that in the memories recorded on both sides of the former Soviet-Polish border, Poland and Soviet Russia (the Soviets) most often appear as the main state actors in the pre-World War II period, while Belarus is absent as a subject of history:

> And the border went the way the road goes from the village, right through the neutral zone. They were there, and we were here. This is Poland, and the Soviets are there. (FA PSU 2009–23; W. 1932[2])

> This was the border. It went near here. We belonged to Poland, the Poles. Under Poland, as we lived then, as the Poles were here. And after the war, there was only Russia. (FA PSU 2019–25; W. 1933)

> After all, we were in Poland, and the Polotsk district was in Russia. (FA PSU 2019–27; W. 1935)

The geographical and geopolitical antinomy "West–East", especially in the border zone, has acquired such self-sufficient significance that it has become fertile ground for self-identification of the local population: "Yes, this is the Dvina River, it used to be the border. We were the Easterners, and here, in Disna, were the Westerners" (FA PSU 2019–3; W. 19375). A similar form of self-identification was characteristic of the residents of Western Belarus, and in some cases, it has remained relevant to this day.

> And right here, the border was nearby: this side was Poland, and over there was Russia. And then, when the Russians came, that border disappeared. That's how we used

2 The respondent's gender (W/M) and year of birth are indicated.

> to say: we are the Westerners, and you are the Easterners, that's how it was called. (FA PSU 2010–1; W. 1928)
>
> We considered ourselves the Westerners, and they were the Easterners. (FA PSU 2018–3; W. 1929)

This type of self-identification vividly highlights the blurred, "half-formed" nature of national consciousness. The primary significance lay in a person's belonging to a local community, a specific state and its institutions, as well as to a particular religious denomination (Orthodoxy – "Russian faith" or Catholicism – "Polish faith"). The "flickering identity" which was not stable and could change depending on political, religious and socioeconomic circumstances becomes especially clear in the attempt of a rural person, born and raised in Poland but now living in modern Belarus, to define their national affiliation:

> (And how do you consider yourself?) Well, sort of, Polish. (Because you go to church?) Well, no. We lived under Poland, were born there. And in our youth, we spoke Polish. Here, everyone is like that — neither fully Polish, nor fully Belarusian, neither a candle to God nor a poker to the devil. Half-and-half — we're not truly Belarusian, nor are we Polish. Our language isn't purely Belarusian. For example, we say "глядзелі" (looked), but in Belarusian, it's "бачылі" (saw). (FA PSU 1993–14; W. 1924)

In cases where an Eastern respondent identified their own cultural affiliation as Belarusian, their compatriots across the border were unequivocally considered "Westerners" or "Poles", "Pshieks" (a colloquial term for Poles). "You are Poles, you are Westerners – that's what we call you. This is Western Belarus. And we, Belarusians, are Easterners, from Eastern Belarus" (Maźko 2009, 346). In turn, if a "Westerner" identified as Belarusian, then the "Easterners", in their view, were representatives of another people – "Russians". "Well, when they would scare us at school [Polish school – U.L.], I would come home and ask my father: "So, what are those people like? Are they like us or not?" – "They are people just like us, only they are Russians, and we are Belarusians" (Za pieršymi savietami 2019, 196).

The Soviet-Polish border, which in 1921 divided the Belarusian cultural landscape into Eastern and Western parts, became both an object and a subject of semiosis, especially in the border zone. The concept of the "border" as a zone of dynamic semiosis was developed by Yuri Lotman, who understood the border as a mechanism for translating texts of foreign semiotics into the language of "our" semiotics, a place where the "external" is transformed into the "internal" (Lotman 1996, 183).

In a practical sense, the borderland as a zone of generating new meanings, active linguistic and cultural contacts, specific forms of identity, and inter-ethnic interaction, exemplified by the Belarusian-Polish borderland and the Braslav district of Belarus, was studied by Elżbieta Smułkowa, who emphasised both the cultural situation in the border zone and the methodology of its study with the term *novum* (new) (Smułkowa 2016, 16).

In the context of a traditional rural society and a relatively homogeneous cultural landscape, the sudden emergence and institutionalisation of a new state border also gave rise to new meanings which shaped various connotations (socioeconomic, cultural, mythological, ideological) of the fundamental opposition "us-them".

A border, in any of its material representations (threshold, house fence or state border), in traditional mentality, can model the opposition of "one's own–someone else's" world, where the latter always represents a potential danger, including of a mythological nature, but at the same time possesses extraordinary resources and potentials. The border between worlds and its crossing as a way to achieve the desired result is a common line of behaviour for fairy-tale heroes. A successful journey to the other world allows one to obtain what (fame, wealth or high social status) is practically impossible to achieve through ordinary labour in the human world. This folklore scheme had a very real embodiment in the widespread practice of cross-border smuggling, the total volume of which in the Belarusian section of the Soviet-Polish border between 1921 and 1939 amounted to about 100 million roubles (Kuz'mich 2019, 58). The delivery of scarce goods from Poland brought the participants in illegal activities fabulous profits (up to 200–400%) (Naščyniec 2018, 95).

In the minds of the peasants of Western Belarus, the Soviet borderlands were associated with the idea of incredible, albeit extremely risky, enrichment, the equivalent of which in folk culture was traditionally gold. The supposed profits of smugglers were folklorically exaggerated and measured by nothing less than "bags of gold":

> And some people carried gold in sacks, my mother used to tell me. Well, they did. And our grandfather went too. Look, he got frostbite on his fingers when he went on St. Nicholas' Day[…] And they were chased, and they left that gold behind, and everything else. (FA PSU 2019–7; W. 1934)

> They brought gold. One person brought back a full sack and went again but never returned. (FA PSU 2010–9; W. 1926)

In the perceptions of the local rural community, the state border could be interpreted in a mythological sense even after its physical removal, acquiring the status

of a dangerous, demonic place. A telling case is when a village witch was buried not in the cemetery but at the "Border" – a site where the Soviet-Polish border passed before the war, that is, in a place where a village cemetery could not be.

> There was a woman who did witchcraft, and she said, "Well, when I die, I'll come back to visit you!" But she didn't die a natural death — she was struck by lightning[…] She was buried, but she came and showed herself to people. And then her nephew came here to fish and asked, "Uncle Petya, can you take me home? After all, that's where the 'border' is. Where Staroselye was, there was Poland, and here was Russia[…]" And he said: "Mishka, you're already an independent person and you're afraid to go without me." — "Don't you know that Aunt Volya meets everyone who comes to the 'border'? There was a border there, and this place is still called the 'border'". So, do you know what people did? Everyone got tired of her[…] They went at night, dug her up, cut off her head and put it at her feet, then buried it again. (FA PSU 2009–3; W. 1926)

In the 1930s, a time marked by the collectivisation of agriculture (liquidation of private farms and their unification into collective farms – *kolchoz* – controlled by the state), mass political repressions (arrests, expulsions) and the final consolidation of a totalitarian state-political apparatus in the USSR for the Eastern part of Belarus, the image of "Easterners" in the minds of the residents of the Western borderlands changed significantly. Agricultural activities on both sides of the Soviet-Polish border were carried out close to the demarcation line, creating conditions for close visual contact between the inhabitants of the two states.

The most frequent theme in the memories of the residents of the Western part of the borderland is the inexplicable "silence" and "blindness" of the Easterners when working near the border. The categorical unwillingness of Soviet peasants to speak or even look in the direction of their relatives, acquaintances and former neighbours caused the "Westerners" to feel deep bewilderment and confusion about what was happening:

> And right here, a chapel used to stand, right in front of the border. We always went there to pray on holidays, along with the priest and all the believers. But those Easterners would dry hay there in the summer or something, and as soon as they saw us, they would quickly leave everything behind and flee into the bushes. They were hiding. Because they weren't allowed to speak. If anyone talked or said anything, those people would be punished. (FA PSU 2018–11; W. 1934)

The demonisation of the bourgeois foreign countries in the 1920s–1930s was an integral part of Soviet state ideology, which had a distinctly mobilisation-oriented character. After the end of the Civil War in Russia (1918–1923), the West (the capitalist countries of Europe) gradually acquired a stable characteristic as an external, "dark" zone located beyond the directly developed territory, a zone of danger where forces hostile to humanity operate and dominate. Unsurprisingly, the image of the border (first and foremost, of course, in its everyday sense) was an important component of the mass consciousness of those years (Golubev 2019, 114).

The image of the "fearsome enemy" living in Soviet Russia was also constructed in Polish schools during the pre-war period.

> When we lived in Poland, we were scared by the Bolsheviks at school, they said they had horns (laughs). But who saw them (Bolsheviks)? No one saw them. We were so afraid of them![…] When we were afraid at school, some were afraid to even look in that direction, not even to see what was abroad. (Za pieršymi savietami 2019, 196)

The fear that "Westerners" and "Poles" instilled in the residents of the Soviet part of Belarus was driven not so much by the ideological and propagandistic clichés of the state, but by an instinct for self-preservation in the context of mass political repression and surveillance. The "Westerner" represented a deadly danger for the Soviet citizen in the case of any contact or connection with them. First and foremost, those suspected of espionage in favour of "bourgeois Poland" included those who had relatives in Western Belarus.

> They were quickly arrested, even those who had sisters who married Poles before this war. So, those brothers were taken and imprisoned. They were sent into exile somewhere, and they served time in prison. I know about these brothers — there were three of them, and their sister was married to a Pole in Poland, and they were taken away. (FA PSU 2019–13; W. 1930)

People with relatives in Western Belarus (Poland) were considered likely spies and anti-Soviet elements. In the absence of real relatives abroad, NKVD[3] officers fabricated their presence in order to fulfil plans from above to identify "Polish spies".

3 *Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del* (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs), the main repressive organ of the Soviet state in the 1930s.

> In 1937, they took (my father), I hadn't even started school yet[…] Well, they falsely claimed we had relatives in Western (Belarus). My father was a tractor driver, and even today, we still don't have those relatives. The border was close to us back then. Someone reported, wrote something, and that was it — they took him away. I remember my brother and I were running, crying. But they, the NKVD, were "kind": "Children, don't cry, your father will be back by evening." And he's still coming, my father. (FA PSU 2019–36; W. 1929)

The NKVD's purge of the Soviet section of the border zone from "unreliable elements" was carried out both through arrests and by mass deportation of rural families to remote regions of the USSR[4]. The Soviet-Polish border in the 1930s was guarded much more strictly than in the previous decade, which largely sealed the tragic fate of those who tried to escape to Poland: "There was all sorts of things. People were crossing. At the border, they even shot some of our people, killing two. They were fleeing from here because they didn't want to join the kolkhoz" (Za pieršymi savietami 2019, 213).

In Western Belarus, many wanted to enter the "Soviet paradise". The "Eastern Borderlands" (*Kresy*) were the most economically backward region of the Polish state, where unresolved agrarian issues (such as the problem of small landholdings) were compounded by social and national-cultural discrimination against Belarusians and Ukrainians. Between 1936 and 1939, Belarusian schools, organisations and newspapers were completely shut down (Vabishchevich 2011, 11).

Stories of people crossing into "Soviet Russia", mostly young people who believed in communist propaganda, are now recorded in nearly every village located in the "Polish" part of the borderlands. However, those who crossed into the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) in search of a better life disappeared forever from the lives of their relatives and fellow villagers, or they returned many years later with tragic life experiences from Stalin's labour camps.

> I had two brothers who crossed the border. One ended up all the way in Magadan. He was tortured there for a year and a half, and that was the end of him. He crossed the border dressed well, in a suit. He had high-quality boots, and he also had matches because he smoked. He had matches with him. They labelled him a spy. He went to find a better life, but they decided he was a spy. The other brother crossed the border and spent eight years in prison. (FA PSU 2009–17; W. 1925)

4 In the summer of 1935, the NKVD of the BSSR conducted a "cleansing of the border districts and regions" of the republic, resulting in the deportation of "600 families to Northern Kazakhstan and 1,400 families to the Northern Region" (Politburo 2006, 436–438).

In the context of sociopolitical terror, the reaction of peasants in the Soviet borderlands to the appearance of defectors from the Polish side was predictable. In this case, a "Westerner" was clearly associated with an "enemy" (spy), and any contact with them carried a deadly threat. It is no coincidence that in the memories of defectors, they are often described with "animalistic" characteristics, which were the result of the mental impact of Soviet propaganda:

> There was a border; it was the Dvina River here. The border was harrowed, about two metres wide, and then soldiers would watch for defectors. And Poland was on the other side. They, those sly foxes, knew how to cross — they would walk backwards. They crossed backwards like this, but the defectors were caught[…] There was one farmer in our village, in Zamoshye, who woke up and came outside. And there, lying on the hay, was a defector. He grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and took him to the border outpost. (FA PSU 2019–13; W. 1930)

In the childhood memories of Western Belarus residents about the search for and exposure of "Bolshevik spies", these events are often perceived as a kind of game or adventure, rather than the strict fulfilment of government demands:

> I remember there were stones here under the cemetery, and an old woman sat on those stones. We, as kids, were running around, running[…] Then the old woman went to where our police station was. She went, sat near the border outpost, and prayed. They shooed her away and said, "This isn't a church, go pray elsewhere." They kept shooing her away, but she still came back. We also noticed that this old woman had a man's hands. We were kids and said that her hands were like a man's. Well, they took her away, and it turned out she was a spy, a Bolshevik spy. (FA PSU 2019-15; W. 1929)

Children on the Polish side of the border had a similar attitude toward the state border itself – it both scared and attracted them. Crossing the border was not seen as a crime but as an adventure, a test of courage, something unimaginable for an adult in terms of motivation. A telling example is the case where girls cross to the Soviet side to see if the ritual "beard"[5] they left on the harvested field is visible to the Bolsheviks:

5 A "beard" is a bunch of the last ears of grain in the field, decorated in a certain way and intended to ensure the harvest of the next year; an obligatory ritual attribute of the end of the harvest in the northwestern regions of Belarus.

> I remember my cousin sister and I went to finish reaping the rye. We went to finish reaping and made a "beard". You know, when you finish reaping the rye, you need to tie the "beard" and put bread and salt there. So, we decorated this "beard". And I said, "Rosa, let's cross to the other side. Can the Bolsheviks see our beard?" And we just climbed over to that side, and suddenly, there he was from the bushes – a Soviet soldier. "Oh my God, we flew back over that wire!" (FA PSU 2010–9; W. 1926)

Despite seeming lighthearted, children's descriptions of the borderlands were contrasting and symbolic. They highlighted the difference between the overgrown, unkempt Soviet territory and the order on the Polish side. This emphasised the fundamental opposition between "nature" and "culture".

> We used to take our cows to graze there — it was all overgrown. You see, under Poland, wow! There was order on the streets, and the fields were neat, the meadows and little forests — everything. But there, when we crossed over, it was overgrown. The road was overgrown, and there were just random bushes. It surprised us. That territory, compared to ours in Poland, was wild and untended. (FA PSU 2019–29; M. 1934)

The oral history material suggests that from 1921 to 1939, mutual perceptions of life on either side of the Soviet-Polish border, by both "Westerners" and "Easterners", were rather vague and undefined. Judgements about life across the border were a complex blend of personal impressions gained in the border zone, their folkloric or even mythological interpretations and ideological constructs imposed by state propaganda.

"WESTERNERS" AND "EASTERNERS" DURING THE NAZI OCCUPATION AND POSTWAR YEARS

Despite the incorporation of Western Belarus into the BSSR in the fall of 1939 and the formal elimination of the Soviet-Polish border, in reality, an insurmountable barrier between the two parts of the country continued to exist until the beginning of the war between Germany and the USSR and the arrival of the German army. Until 1941, contacts between the populations of Western and Eastern Belarus were actively suppressed by the Soviet authorities. "Free movement was prohibited. Soviet border guards remained at the old outposts" (Smalenchuk 2015, 18).

The reaction of the population of Western Belarus to the establishment of Soviet power is not the subject of this study. However, in this case, the perception of Red Army soldiers and officers, who became representatives of the "Easterners" and the Soviet state as a whole, is particularly symbolic. In almost all childhood

memories of encounters with Soviet soldiers, attention is drawn to seemingly trivial external details: uniforms, gear, weapons, vehicles and even the smell of the previously unseen army.

> Polish soldiers were well-dressed: uniforms, boots, but when the Russians came[…] We asked our father, "Papa, what are Russian soldiers like?" He said, "They're just like ours." But when we saw them, we were frightened! The Russians were used to quilted jackets, while our soldiers had little jackets, round caps like they wore in Poland, but the Russians had *pilotkas* [side caps] so we didn't know what that was. (FA PSU 2019–23; W. 1933)

The appearance of Soviet soldiers shaped a corresponding perception of life on the Eastern side of the border. "The residents of Western Belarusian lands perceived the appearance of people arriving from the Soviet Union as a kind of civilisational code, the deciphering of which led to disheartening conclusions" (Yelenskaya 2011, 117).

The actual opening of the Soviet-Polish border, which had already disappeared from the political map, occurred during the Nazi occupation of Belarus. From this time onwards, the former state border acquired the status of a "phantom border", which, although existing only in people's perceptions, "play[ed] an important role in the mobilisation of ethnic and other groups, as well as in the reinforcement or transformation of their identity" (Kolosov 2017: 5).

During the war, the first visits to "Poland" began from the burned and devastated villages of the Eastern regions. As a result of direct contact between "Westerners" and "Easterners", the previously vague division of "us versus them" began to take on a more concrete meaning:

> We went there during the war (to Western Belarus), when the Germans headed to Moscow[…] Those Poles, those from the West, they aren't like us. Ours will give you something, and they'll invite you into the house, take you by the hand, and lead you in. And whatever they have, maybe some broth — they'll say "eat until you burst". They weren't good people. They were greedy and didn't respect us. (FA PSU 2019–20; W. 1928)

However, under the conditions of Nazi terror, partisan resistance and punitive actions by the occupiers, the mobility of the rural population was quite limited, and it is difficult to speak of widespread contacts between "Westerners" and "Easterners" during this period. The only exception is the interaction between the people of Western Belarus and Soviet partisans. By the fall of 1942, only 6.7% of Belarus's total number of partisans were operating in the Western regions. To remedy the situation,

the Belarusian Headquarters of the Partisan Movement (BHPM)[6] intensified the deployment of partisan units to the Western areas (Musial 2018, 221–222). However, the attitude of Soviet partisans toward the "Westerners" was far from ideal. BHPM documents reveal numerous instances of looting, extortion, murder and rape, often committed by partisans under the influence of alcohol (Musial 2018, 435–441). Similar incidents are recounted in oral history materials: "When the partisans were with us, they came and looted, took things. They came from the East, robbed people and left. They came to us and killed our pigs. In winter, they'd come, take and carry everything away" (FA PSU 2008–22; W. 1934).

Such incidents created a negative image of partisans among the civilian population, which in turn could be extrapolated to all "Easterners", including women and children.

> We went begging with my mother[…] We came to one house — it was so clean! I remember it so clearly; it was clean, with a white floor and clean rugs[…] "Well, why have you come? Where are you from?" My mother said we were from the (Eastern) side. "Oh, you're partisans! Get out of the house!" I remember that so well. "Get out of the house!" My mother cried. When my mother cried, I cried too. And so we left. (FA PSU 2018–11; W. 1937)

The analysis of historical sources shows that the main factors influencing the formation and preservation of mutual sociocultural stereotypes between "Westerners" and "Easterners" were World War II and the scale of its consequences for the residents of Western and Eastern Belarus. In the Vitebsk region, the Soviet-Polish border during the war had a "reincarnation" as the border between the rear area of the Wehrmacht Army Group Centre and the General District of "Belarus", which almost literally coincided with its predecessor. This is not about a formal territorial division carried out by the German administration but about fundamentally different living conditions during the Nazi occupation in the former Polish and Soviet areas of Belarus. In the first case, the occupied territory was under strict military control. The "Belarus" General District had a civilian administration that was more loyal to the civil initiatives of Belarusians. The active partisan movement in the Eastern region also had the tragic consequence of large-scale punitive actions by the occupiers, who employed a "scorched earth" tactic[7]. The Western districts also suffered dur-

6 The Belarusian Headquarters of the Partisan Movement is a republican body of military leadership of the Soviet partisan movement in occupied Belarus, created in Moscow in September 1942.

7 All 36 regions of the BSSR recognised as having suffered the most from the Nazi occupation belong to the Eastern, "Soviet" part of Belarus (NARB: F. 4-p. Op. 29. D. 267. L. 10).

ing the occupation, but most of the major Nazi punitive operations (*Winterzauber* [Winter Magic], *Waldwinter* [Forest Winter], *Schneehase* [Snow Hare], *Greif* [Griffin], *Frühlingsfest* [Spring Festival], etc.) were carried out specifically in the Eastern part of the region, where the partisan movement was particularly intense. The only salvation from starvation for the population of war-devastated areas was the mass pilgrimage to the more prosperous Western Belarus, where any seasonal work, exchange of the last possessions or begging served the same purpose: to obtain food.

It was precisely in the postwar years that a basic stereotype formed in the collective consciousness on both sides of the former Soviet-Polish border regarding the wealth, abundance and prosperity of the "Westerners" compared to the poverty and destitution of the "Easterners". In most cases, the residents of the Western side treated the suffering visitors from the East with compassion, understanding the reasons for their destitute situation – the collective farm system and the horrific losses inflicted by the war: "Easterners would come to us, poor things. Their villages had all been burned. As soon as they stepped over the threshold of our house, they would bow to the floor, to the waist and cross themselves: "I can't cross myself with my right hand – I've got this injury here" (FA PSU 2018–9; M. 1926).

At the same time, there were not infrequent instances of harsh and even cynical attitudes toward starving people, which reinforced their belief in the saying "the full do not understand the hungry", and also formed a negative image of the "Westerner" in each specific situation:

> They came from Rossony, begging for alms. My father never refused anyone; he gave a little potato or something. And there was a neighbour who told these people: "Let Stalin feed you". And the people were poor[…]. (FA PSU 2019–15; W. 1929)

The manifestation of compassion and unrequited giving on the part of the "Westerners" did not cancel, but only strengthened the sociocultural and mental distance between them and the "Easterners". "Hospitality based on the principle of unrequited giving demonstrates a special relationship with the 'other', the essence of which is that no community arises with the 'other', allowing the 'other' to remain 'other'" (Pakholova 2011, 32).

The radical difference between the devastated East and the relatively prosperous West of Belarus required interpretation in the collective consciousness of the inhabitants of the devastated Eastern regions. The explanation for the well-being of the "Westerners" in the context of a horrific war was built quite straightforwardly: the Germans did not touch those who were loyal and served them. The antinomy of "us-them" in the consciousness of the "Easterners" acquired a new formulation: "partisans–police", where the image of the "other" was equated with the category of "enemy".

> But still, when the Germans came, they treated the Westerners better. They did not beat them there[…] They burned the village before retreating, before the front, but they did not touch the people, unlike us. In our country, they burned both people and everything. Here, there were partisans everywhere, and there — only police. (Radziuk 2008, 112–113)

Intensive contacts between the "Westerners" and "Easterners" significantly supplemented their mutual perceptions with characteristics of an ethnocultural nature; differences in everyday life, rituals, language and religious practices became significant. In the mythological sense, the "danger" emanating from the "Westerners" was reflected in ideas about their inclination to harmful witchcraft. "Well, beyond the Dvina there were many witches. Well, here, in Leonpol, right beyond Leonpol. They cast spells[…]" (FA PSU 2018–14; W. 1927). The stereotype about the witchcraft abilities of the "Westerners" persisted in the post-war period, when a native of Western Belarus had to move and live among the "Easterners": "And she knew how to cast spells, she was from the West, this woman" (FA PSU 2017–4; W. 1943). Such ideas had a stereotyped, generalised character in areas remote from the Soviet-Polish border, where personal experience became less relevant than a stereotypical understanding of the difference between Western Belarus and its residents: "There, in the West, they do more magic" (FA PSU 200–1; W. 1924).

In the case of witchcraft, when residents of the Eastern regions accused "Westerners", the action of the "mirror stereotype" becomes obvious, which conveys more about the mentality of its bearers than about those it describes. It describes the "otherness" of another sociocultural group through cultural categories relevant to the local community, where the symbolic marker assigned to residents of Western Belarus may not reflect reality but successfully forms a stereotypical idea of "Westerners" through familiar definitions.

Familiarity with the ritual traditions of their "foreign" neighbours strengthened mutual perceptions of differences in ritual practices, especially those significant for the rural community.

> We go to the graves on Easter[…] But the Westerners only go on *Radonitsa* [the Orthodox memorial day for the dead]. (FA PSU 2011–5; W. 1935)

> And I was at one wedding there in the West; it wasn't like ours. They didn't treat people well. They gave gifts to the bride and groom. But they have this law: the groom must give gifts to his mother and father, then to his brother and sister-in-law, then to his sister and her husband, and then to the uncle and aunt. I told them directly: "You're just robbing people! For us, it's all about the newlyweds!" We were so surprised. That's how weddings are over there. (FA PSU 2009 – 24; W. 1940)

The persistence and resilience of the mental antagonism between the "Westerners" and "Easterners" are evidenced by the fact that subjective perceptions of the counterpart's "otherness" are reinforced not only by memories but also by references to facts that supposedly exist in contemporary reality.

> (How are the Easterners different?) There were lazy people there. (Lazy people?) There were lazy people; my son-in-law is from there. Oh, they don't want to work! They're no good people. (FA PSU 2019–21; W. 1937)

> (How are Easterners different from Westerners?) Well, maybe they aren't baptised […] My daughter said there's a village near Vitebsk where all the people are unbaptised. There's never a priest, and they never bury anyone with a priest. They take a person, lower them into the grave, and that's it, like an animal, and they bury them with dirt. But we don't do that. No one is ever buried without a priest. (FA PSU 2019–18; W. 1931)

A common denominator indicating the modality of mutual grievances between the "Westerners" and "Easterners" is "dislike", which evidences the opponents' absence of basic human feeling.

> For some reason, they don't like us. They called us Easterners *vastygals* [вастыгаламі][8], and we called them "Poles". (FA PSU 2007–12 W. 1927)

> No one liked us. And to this day, do you think the Westerners like us? (FA PSU 2019–14; W. 1937)

> Well, they also called us "Westerners". We were considered the worst under the Soviets. (FA PSU 2009–6; W. 1930)

Thus, an analysis of narratives recorded in both the Eastern and Western regions of Belarus shows that the mental divide in the worldview of Belarusians, inspired by the state border between Poland and the USSR from 1921 to 1939, significantly intensified during World War II and the early post-war years. The division into "Westerners" and "Easterners" was finalised and acquired distinct sociocultural contours. Mutual perceptions evolved from relatively unreliable, semi-folkloric assumptions into stable stereotypes that retained their viability even in the early twenty-first century. The relevance of the opposition "Westerners" and "Easterners"

8 The word "Easterners" distorted into a swear word.

among the inhabitants of the former Polish-Soviet borderland is currently confirmed by research by other scientists.

> The "Westerners", as residents of the territory west of the former Soviet-Polish border, are attributed with cultural distinctiveness, industriousness and piety. They are still considered wealthier today. The "Easterners" are usually characterised as less cultured, materially poorer and generally non-religious. This difference, to a greater or lesser extent, is still evident in various regions of Belarus today. (Ivanova 2015, 92)

In turn, residents of the Eastern regions attribute traits such as individualism, secrecy, lack of collectivism and mutual assistance, greed and even a tendency towards witchcraft to the "Westerners".

A distinctive feature of the studied region is that the phantom Soviet–Polish border has acquired its real reincarnation in the form of administrative boundaries between the Western (Hlybokaye, Myory) and Eastern (Verkhnedvinsk, Polotsk, Ushachy) districts of the Vitebsk region. These administrative boundaries, which were finally established between 1944 and 1962 and follow the configuration of the former state border, are completely transparent and unmarked in physical space (except for road signs), yet they remain important for local communities both in a practical sense (district systems of trade, healthcare and social services) and in a symbolic sense – as the current administrative division reinforces the memory of the now non-existent (phantom) Soviet–Polish border.

> We lived under Poland. Over there, that's the Polotsk district, and here is ours, the Myory district, on this side. There was a border, and along the Dvina, there was a border too. Well, we lived under Poland[…]. (FA PSU 2019–18; W. 1931)

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that the "phantom border" does not exist by itself, but only becomes relevant when, in the mental map, it distinguishes two groups of residents of the imagined borderland who perceive real or imagined differences between themselves. In the absence of such differences, the meaning of symbolic demarcation disappears.

CONCLUSION

The concept of "Belarusianness" in its modern sense began to crystallise in the nineteenth century during the national revival movement, which, however, was

fragmented and faced the policies of Russification, and later Polonisation and Sovietisation. Notably, for many rural inhabitants, identity remained local and confessional rather than national in the modern sense of the word. The main basis that unites the various historical and regional versions of Belarusian identity is the shared linguistic and cultural heritage and the collective experience of life in an inter-state borderland. An important component is the ethnographic and folklore tradition, which, through language, song culture and the folk calendar, allowed the sense of distinctiveness to be preserved even in the context of imperial or Soviet unification practices.

A second core element is the common historical narrative, which in the twentieth century became increasingly linked to the traumatic experience of partitions, wars, repressions and the collective memory of them. Against this backdrop, the division into "Westerners" and "Easterners" represents an adaptation of this common identity to the different political and social regimes that existed in both parts of the territory between 1921 and 1939.

The state border, which existed for only eighteen years, significantly changed the sociocultural landscape of Belarus. In the context of the not yet formed national consciousness of the Belarusian peasantry, the border acted as a trigger for a new regional identity, where the geographical antinomy of "West-East" was only a formal marker of the difference between "Westerners" and "Easterners". The substantive content of this difference covered several important aspects: different historical experiences of communities (living in Poland and in the BSSR), completely different socioeconomic models of life (private farming in the West and collective farming in the East), different levels of religiosity of the population and differences in ritual and everyday culture.

In the "West", Polish state and cultural influence dominated, with a strong Catholic and Polish-language component, which contributed to the formation of an identity closer to the Western European discourse of nationhood. In the "East", the Soviet project of Belarusisation initially took the form of cultural development within the USSR. Later, it became increasingly subordinated to the ideology of the Soviet "new historical community".

Thus, the "Westerners" and "Easterners", in a sense, represent two models of integration into different civilisational spaces: one more connected with the Polish and Catholic context, the other with the Soviet and Orthodox – and in some cases secular, atheistic – narrative. Yet both groups retain a common cultural and linguistic "foundation", which provides grounds to speak of a shared Belarusianness despite its internal fragmentation.

However, mutual stereotypes are most characteristic of the older generation, especially those who still remember the Polish-Soviet border and its significance as a "phantom border" during the Nazi occupation and the early post-war years.

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