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## **'Between Monuments of Winners and Graves in Rural Cemeteries'<sup>1</sup> Poland – Belarus. Reflections on Historiosophy**

*„Między pomnikami zwycięzców a grobami na wiejskich cmentarzach”.*

*Polska – Białoruś. Rozważania o historiozofii*

*„Паміж помнікамі пераможцаў і магіламі на вясковых могілках”. Польшча – Беларусь.*

*Развагі пра гістарыяграфію*

### **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to portray the ideological, political, and methodological interpretation determinants in the historiography of Poland and Belarus. As the research example, the author chose interpretations pertaining to the events from September 1939 at the borderland of the Second Polish Republic and the Soviet Union and subjected them to a comparative analysis. Belarusians contest the veracity of data from the national censuses

<sup>1</sup> The title is a paraphrase of a sentence from Damian Demski's paper (2003, p. 137) and, in the author's intention / opinion, pictures /shows/indicates/demonstrates the sustainable model of historical Polish and Belarusian studies, cf.: *A different history was taught by the monuments of winners erected in village centres and a different one by graves at rural cemeteries*. More about ideological and political determinants of commemoration, cf. paper by J. Bugajska-Więcławsk (2018, pp. 252–269).

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of the Second Polish Republic (the national composition of these lands in September 1939) and interpret the acts of the Jewish and especially the Belarusian community as an element of social justice. Poles adopt the criterion of historical borders whilst claiming the continuity of statehood in a given area in line with international law. They draw attention to the absence of precise determination, in the Belarusian historiography, of the territorial area known as 'Western Belarus'. A claim is also raised about the generalisation of the area of provinces: Vilnius, Bialystok and Navahrudak. Polish common understanding of the entire 'Eastern Borderlands' is, in turn, a generalisation of the areas of ethnic Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine and south-eastern Latvia. As a result of recapitulation, determinants of historiosophic dispute were pinpointed. Interpretations of Polish historiosophy rely on pro-state arguments: Polish and simultaneously anti-Soviet, whereas the Belarusian narrative results from the national and ethnic context supported by the Soviet/post-Soviet ideology. The methodological evolution (use of oral history in studies) in the Republic of Belarus is described. Eventually, further extension of the methodological field in historical studies is proposed regarding borderland theories. It was also decided that such a disciplinary opening could allow for bilateral mitigation of the dispute, leading to more compatibility in the Polish and Belarusian studies.

**Keywords:** Poland, Belarus, historiosophy, oral history, borderland

### Abstrakt

Celem badań jest ukazanie ideowo-politycznych i metodologicznych uwarunkowań interpretacyjnych w historiografiach Polski i Białorusi. Za przykład badawczy obrano interpretacje dotyczące wydarzeń z września 1939 r. na pograniczu II Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej oraz Związku Radzieckiego i poddano je analizie porównawczej. Białorusini podważają prawdziwość danych ze spisów powszechnych ludności II RP (składu narodowościowego tych ziem we wrześniu 1939 r.), interpretując wystąpienia ludności żydowskiej a zwłaszcza białoruskiej jako element sprawiedliwości społecznej. Polacy przyjmują kryterium granic historycznych dowodząc ciągłości państwowości na danym obszarze zgodnie z prawem międzynarodowym. Zwracają uwagę na brak ostrego określenia w historiografii białoruskiej obszaru terytorialnego nazywanego „Białorusią Zachodnią”. Pada też zarzut o generalizowanie obszaru województw: wileńskiego, białostockiego i nowogródzkiego. Polskie powszechnie rozumienie całych „Kresów Wschodnich” to z kolei generalizacja obszarów etnicznej Białorusi, Litwy, Ukrainy i południowo-wschodniej Łotwy. W wyniku podsumowań określono wyznaczniki sporu historiozoficznego. Interpretacje historiografii polskiej opierają się na argumentacji państwowowej: polskiej i jednocześnie anty-radzieckiej, podczas gdy narracja strony białoruskiej wynika z kontekstu narodowo-etnicznego wspartego ideologią sowiecką/postsowiecką. Opisano ewolucję metodologiczną (wykorzystywanie w badaniach historii mówionej) w Republice Białoruś. Na koniec zaproponowano dalsze poszerzanie pola metodologicznego w badaniach historycznych o teorie z dziedziny pogranicza. Uznano, że takie otwarcie dyscyplinarne pozwoli dwustronnie złagodzić spór a badania polsko-białoruskie zyskać kompatybilność.

**Slowa kluczowe:** Polska, Białoruś, historiozofia, historia mówiona, pogranicze

### Анататыя

Мэтай даследавання з'яўляюцца ідэйна-палітычныя і метадалагічныя інтэрпрэтацыйныя абумоўленасці ў гістарыяграфіях Польшчы і Беларусі. Інтэрпрэтацыя вераснёўскіх падзеяў 1939 г. на мяжы Другой Рэчы Паспалітай і Савецкага Саюза была абрана ў якасці прадмета даследавання, зроблены парабанальны аналіз іх асвялення ў абедзвюх краінах. Беларусы ставяць пад сумненне праўдзівасць дадзеных перапісу насельніцтва Другой Рэчы Паспалітай (нацыянальны склад гэтых зямель у верасні 1939 г.), трактуюць наяўнасць яўрэйскага, а асабліва беларускага насельніцтва, як элемент сацыяльной справядлівасці. Палякі прытрымліваюцца крытэрыя гістарычных межаў, даказваючы пераемнасць дзяржаваў на дадзенай тэрыторыі ў адпаведнасці з міжнародным правам. Звяртаюць увагу на адсутнасць у беларускай гістарыяграфіі дакладнага азначэння тэрыторыі, якая называецца 'Захоўня Беларусь'. Папракаюць беларусаў за абагульненні тэрыторыі ў віленскага, беластоцкага і навагрудскага ваяводстваў. Агульнаўпрынятае польскае разуменне „Усходніх крэсаў”, у сваю чаргу, з'яўляеца, абагульненнем этнічных тэрыторый Беларусі, Літвы, Украіны і паўднёва-ўсходняй Латвіі. Пры падвядзенні вынікаў былі вызначаны дэтэрмінанты гістарыяграфікі спрэчкі. Інтэрпрэтацыя польскай гістарыяграфіі грунтуецца на прадзяржаўных аргументах: польскіх і, адначасова, антысавецкіх, у той час як наратыў беларускага боку вынікае з нацыянальна-этнічнага кантэксту, які склаўся на базе савецкай / постсавецкай ідэалогіі. Падкрэслена метадалагічная эвалюцыя ў Рэспубліцы Беларусь (у даследаваннях выкарыстоўваецца вусная гісторыя). У заключэнні прапануецца пашырыць метадалагічнае поле гістарычных даследаванняў, уключыўшы тэорыі ў галіне памежжа. Трэба меркаваць, што такая дысцыплінарная адкрытасць абодвух бакоў дазволіць злагодзіць спрэчку, а польска-беларускія даследаванні стануть кампатыбільнымі.

**Ключавыя слова:** Польшча, Беларусь, гістарыяграфія, вусная гісторыя, памежжа

### Emancipation of National Schools Vs. Historiographic Disputes

The Fall of Nations in Europe in 1989 and subsequently the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 were a breakthrough not only for the nations and states of former socialist Europe but they also became a new opening for the post-Soviet historiographies. There was bold talk about 'white spots' in the history of the public space and work was launched to bridge the gaps. This led to a re-interpretation, in particular of the most recent history. The issue of the Eastern Borderlands which, in the period between 1944 and 1989, was an extreme case of taboo on multiple fields: political, social, and historiographic, was also brought to light. A number of memoirs and scientific works were published; international conferences were organised that offered an opportunity for Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Belarusian historians to meet. Historiographies were freed of interpretation meagreness built upon 'socialist truths' and the Russian-Soviet spirit. Nationalisation of studies and interpretations inevitably led to the confrontation of national historical schools. One of them is the Polish-Belarusian historiosophic dispute. It refers to the territory called the 'Eastern Borderlands' by Poles (their north-eastern section) and 'Western Belarus' by

Belarusians. When one considers a post-conference paper of 1995 with an introduction by Tomasz Strzembosz, we can read that:

the history of eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic between 1939 and 1941 is the whitest <white spot> in the most recent history of Poland (Giżewska, Strzembosz, 1995, p. 5).

Another speaker concedes that:

There are long periods in the relations of Belarus with (...) the neighbours which either have no reflection in the Belarusian historical literature or are shown in a very unilateral manner (Kusznier, 1995, p. 9).

The materials pertaining to the events of September 1939 after the Red Army entered the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic will be used to present the elements of the dispute. Attention will be focused on the controversies pertaining to the behaviour of people and the divergent assessments as to the independence of such conduct. Simultaneously, it is to be noted that the background of the problems seems to have been discerned by Belarusian historiography. However, it cannot be claimed with complete certainty that this problem has been processed or settled.

Based on the statements of Polish and Belarusian historians, it is possible to determine the object of the dispute and the arguments from the Polish and Belarusian sides.

Belarusians challenge the veracity of data from the national censuses of the Second Polish Republic (and the national composition of these lands in September 1939), they interpret the acts of the Jewish and especially the Belarusian community as an element of social justice, blaming the Polish side for a century-long oppression and exploitation of the land and its non-Polish citizens. It is characteristic that the Belarusian historians justify the conduct of the Belarusian community by referring to the intimidation by the Russians, whereas the defence (often by attacking the Polish side) is primarily based on the arguments about the pro-Soviet provenance (Giżewska, Strzembosz, 1995; Struniec, 2009).

Poles adopt the criterion of historical borders, relying their justification on arguments evidencing a continuity of statehood in a given area in line with international law. At the same time, they draw attention to the lack of a precise definition, in the Belarusian historiography, of a territorial area known as Western Belarus, where the accusation of generalising this area is raised; meanwhile, Polish historians notice significant differences between the Vilnius, Bialystok and Navahrudak provinces (Zaporowski, 1995). Polish understanding of the entire Eastern Borderlands is, in turn, a generalisation of the areas of ethnic Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and south-eastern Latvia. These are lands which, in the historical perspective, were defined as culturally Polish - both in the material and ideological dimensions (Ebherhardt, 1999). Ultimately, Poles clearly interpret the stances of the Jewish and Belarusian community in September 1939 in the categories of treason. These accusations also refer to the

absence of a critical analysis with respect to clearly propagandist archival materials, falsifying the reality, used in the Belarusian narratives (Adamuszkó, 1998).

It is worth emphasising that all interpretations of Polish historiography rely on pro-state arguments: Polish and simultaneously anti-Soviet, whereas the narrative of the Belarusian side results from the national and ethnic context supported by the Soviet/post-Soviet ideology.

Some limitations of the Belarusian historiography also follow from the model of studies applicable in the USSR (e.g. a prohibition on making materials available or their unilateral, critical interpretation), and some from the methodological ossification of relics of Russophilism and Marxism functioning nowadays in Belarus. This is evidenced, for example, by the historiographic discourse on the conditions and purposefulness of using the oral history and the history of mentality in studies. Accounts of witnesses and history of mentality seem to be especially dedicated research material for the model of studies of the history of Poles and Belarusians and the dialogue of national historical schools. They also offer a chance of expanding the methods onto the experiences of social and anthropological sciences<sup>2</sup>.

The Republic of Belarus is a young state, whose identity was shaped on multi-cultural and multi-ideological foundations, with its history dominated by its neighbours, with which it inclined either towards the West or the East. These phenomena are also reflected in the Belarusian historiography, which struggles with stereotypes and distortions (Smaliančuk, 2015). The problems with expertise related to the interpretation of sources were highlighted by, among others, Michał Gnatowski (1995). Stanisław Aleksandrowicz, who noted anti-Polish and anti-German interpretations of studies and historical interpretation in the BSSR (Aleksandrowicz, 2007).

## Ideological Determinants

Even though the historiography of Belarus is still strongly related to the pro-Russian, pro-Soviet and post-Soviet perspective, it is necessary to bring forward its autonomous ambitions which emerged in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most notable example of which was the 'Short History of Belarus' by V. Lastovsky (Smaliančuk, 2015). However, the Belarusian historiography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the most affected by the idea of West Russianism, which classified the eastern lands of the First Polish Republic as an area culturally identical to Russia. This direction subsequently set out the identical interpretation with respect to the political and ethnic relations of the aforementioned lands. This was consistent with the slogan: 'Eastern Orthodox Church – Autocracy – Nationality'. West Russianism was pushed forward in reaction to the January Rising of 1863. This idea also encompassed the liquidation

<sup>2</sup> <http://marcuse.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/projects/oralhistory/199xDRussellUCSBOralHistoryWorksop.pdf>

of the Greek Orthodox Church in 1839 (Tikhomirov, 2016). Denominational changes naturally transformed the cultural landscape of the Belarusian lands. The historiosophic school of Michał Kojałowicz emerged under these circumstances (Tikhomirov, 2016, p. 190). Naturally, this imperative was also taken over and propagated by the Soviet state. The Orthodox religion was replaced by Marxism and Leninism. The ideological binder was no longer religion; however, belief in common ethnic roots was sustained, reinforced by the Leninist ideas about a voluntary alliance of nations. West Russianism in the Soviet edition was also built on the common ideological and political future. Obviously, such policy was aimed at destroying the national mentality and identity and was the guarantee of Sovietisation (Kudela, 2007). Thus, West Russianism after the Bolshevik Revolution did not become a relic but was transformed/re-interpreted anew. Similarly, today, it remains an idea supported by the political centre of the state and obviously confronts the Belarusian-national trend (Waszkiewicz, 2013). Modern West Russianism is, in fact, an idea of Russophilism – it draws from the historical tradition of Russia and the Soviet Union, being opposed to pro-Western ideas. Built on the traditional (in the geopolitical sense) model of exercising power, it sustains social and denominational animosities (Waszkiewicz). A. Tikhomirov notes:

the symbolic exclusion of non-Orthodox residents from the community breaks it apart; anti-Polish and anti-Catholic theories are still used in historiography. It is considered the heritage of the shutting down of the humanities on the post-Soviet lands (Tikhomirov, 2016, p. 199).

One of the basic theses of modern West Russianism is also an assumption of the ethnic unity of Belarusians and Russians, whereas the main valuating criterion is the denomination. If one is reminded that, in line with the interpretation of West Russianism, the Belarusian language is also treated as secondary and subordinate, we receive an image of a society with a clearly marked ethnic supremacy of the Russian culture. Another element of the West Russianism idea is the specific re-interpretation of the territory of the ‘West Russian lands’ and, in fact, the lands of the former Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania. Insofar as the cultural and ethnic views described social and national structures, the territorial re-interpretations created a conflict in the context of institutions and ideas of the state. Antinomy of the Polish (today primarily Lithuanian) and Belarusian historiography was clearly marked here. For Russian interests, the Republic of Poland as a western orientation, in particular after the Union of Lublin, was meant to constitute the main factor degrading such Ruthenian-Russian-Soviet Union. The historical dominants for the pro-Russian trend included: the third partition of Poland and the synod of Polotsk; for the pro-Soviet: the outbreak of the 1917 revolution and the Red Army’s entry on the lands of the Second Polish Republic on 17.09.1939. All of these events unified or brought back the unity of ‘West Russian’ people and lands and were understood as a triumph of the idea. On the other hand, the Union of Lublin, the emergence and the entire existence of the Second Polish Republic (including the Peace of Riga of 1921) were viewed as the greatest

tragedy that contributed to the tearing apart of the 'West Russian' territories. When presenting the Russian and Soviet *raison d'état*, the historiography of the Belarusian SSR was in extreme opposition to the territorial context of the Polish historiography.

In the 1980s, under the impact of perestroika, the first voices demanding the revision of certain historical interpretations were heard in the Belarusian SSR. H. Sahanovič believes that the milieu of historians took a very reluctant stance toward them (2003). After 1989, the history of Belarus started to reinforce the identity of the citizens of the young state. Sahanovič commented on this phenomenon in the following manner: 'Preparation of a national vision of the past is related to the creation of national myths' (Sahanovič, 2003). He also notes that Belarusians need mythologisation of the history for the purpose of 'mobilising the masses'<sup>3</sup>. The author considers this phenomenon 'typical'. A brief ideological opening at the beginning of the 1990s bore fruit in the form of the preparation of the first model of an autonomous history of Belarus as a teaching subject. In 1995, a curriculum for secondary schools and in 1996 for universities was published. Sahanovič quotes the words of Mathias Niendorf about the unstable position and weak potential of Belarusian historiography in the 1990s:

without institutional and personal resources, Belarusian history was doomed for confrontation with the neighbours... [and having abandoned the Marxist interpretation]... it encountered a methodological void (Sahanovič, 2003, p. 14).

During the ideological flip-flop in the first half of the 1990s, Belarusian historiography took over the tradition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which is viewed as a Belarusian and Lithuanian political structure. It was presented as a state-related to Western culture and juxtaposed to Russia and Asia. Re-Russification of historiography started already in 1995 when President Alexander Lukashenko withdrew from use, textbooks published between 1993 and 1995 (Sahanovič, 2003, p. 22). Strong anti-Polish and pro-Slavic accents, modelled on the old Russian-Soviet interpretations, have re-emerged.

## Methodological Opening

In this place, it should be remembered that in the very period that was marked by the resignation from the empowerment of Belarusian historiography, the oral history was in its infancy in the Belarusian Republic. Therefore, it is clear that in the context of revisionism, it was not only in opposition but also in ardent conflict with the official dogmatic history. Already Sahanovič emphasised the deep opposition of both historical visions (2003, p. 5).

Witness accounts were used by Justyna Owłasiuk (2016) in her studies. Eventually, the issue of the condition of the oral history in the Republic of Belarus was tackled

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the author also reveals the entanglement in the socialist definition tradition, cf.: *ibidem*.

more comprehensively by Aliaksandr Smaliančuk (2015), who presented the path of development and barriers in the studies on oral history. This author drew attention to the quite belated career of this area of studies on Belarus, pointing to the beginnings in the early 1990s. It is worth noting that the issue of the history of mentality and an opportunity for interdisciplinary research was recognised, particularly in historical and sociological studies:

More and more often, its methods are applied as a tool in research on social memory, identity and mentality (...) Apart from this, oral history has great potential as a platform for interdisciplinary co-operation among scholars of various social sciences and humanities (Smaliančuk, 2015, p. 233).

At the same time, a concession was made that such potential tends to be poorly used by the official/ traditional history:

even today Belarusian historians still confront problems well-known to those who began their academic career in the Soviet times: a lack of freedom in historical research, the ideological dictate of government officials, inaccessibility of certain archives or archival sources (Smaliančuk, 2015, p. 233).

One of the first research works that makes use of oral history is referenced in Smaliančuk's paper:

The beginning of oral history as a research method in Belarus is associated with the name, Mikalaŭ Ułashchyk (1906–1986), a pre-eminent figure of national historiography. His historical-ethnographic article published in 1989, 'Byla takaia vioska' (There Was a Village) (Улашчык, 1989), was one of the first historical works applying the method of oral history. In this essay, which he wrote in the 1970s, Ułashchyk widely used oral sources – stories told by his relatives during his childhood and preserved in his memory (Smaliančuk, 2015, p. 233).

One of the pioneers was also mentioned, namely historian Nina Stuzhinskaya who, at the end of the 1990s, ran a project about the Stalinist times entitled 'The History Absent in Textbooks'. A. Smaliančuk notes that at the same time, the Belarusian Historical Association in Poland collected witness accounts from the end of WWI in Podlasie. They were published in 2000 as 'Bezhanstva 1915 Hoda'. Even though A. Smaliančuk appreciated the publication, he criticised it for the weak methodological framework, in particular the failure to include the original questionnaires. The author also claims that the Belarusian translation of the paper of Gwyn Prins, published in 2000, has contributed to the popularisation of knowledge about *oral history*. Eventually, A. Smaliančuk himself started to tackle oral history at the end of the 1990s (memories about Roman Skirmunt). The following ascertainment was made in the paper:

In fact, the whole development of oral history in Belarus stems from the activities of several non-governmental academic and public organisations and research centres. Observing the thirty years of oral history's presence in the scholarly and cultural life of Belarus, we can highlight some stages in its development, as well as evaluate its future prospects (Smaliančuk, 2015, p. 233).

Therefore, we learn that international initiatives have sprung up, for example, research and educational / promotional type projects: Polish 'Borderlands of Belarus: History, Culture and Language', Belarusian-German-Jewish focusing on collecting accounts from the Minsk ghetto, or German-Belarusian 'Living History of My Motherland', Belarusian and Ukrainian 'Transformation of Daily Adaptive Practice: Soviet and Post-Soviet Period. Belarus, Ukraine' or Russian and Belarusian: 'Transformation of Daily Life of Soviet Citizens Between 1930 and 1950'. A reference was also made to the studies on the community of the war-time Mir. However, in this case, the fate of the Jewish community was reconstructed based on the accounts of their neighbours: Poles, Belarusians, and Tatars (Smaliančuk, 2015, p. 137).

## Towards Interdisciplinarity

It seems that the proper context of studies is the multi-aspect phenomenon of 'borderland'. It is necessary to delve into this subject, expand the terminology and arguments of the discussion, based on the accomplishments of other sciences examining this area. Here, the concepts of 'private homeland' or 'ideological homeland' are functioning on which the people of the North-Eastern Borderlands / Western Belarus often relied on for their identity choices, deciding to stay in the land of their forefathers or to repatriate to the motherland - the country of their ancestors. It has to be noted that in the case of Belarusian people, we cannot speak about repatriation. We can, however, speak about accepting or rejecting both the ideological and the political motherland. When the majority of theories are included in the studies on population, which 'have at their disposal various possibilities of domination' (Bobryk, 2005, p. 127) with respect to minority - joint studies will become more objective, irrespective of the space, time and objects that are analysed. This also refers to, for example, the position of Poles who remained behind the Bug River and who, after 1945, usually belonged to the second category of citizens in the Belarusian SSR and are currently often considered Polonised Belarusians (Janowicz, 1999), in line with the theory that people of peasant origin in Belarus were only 'Ruthenian' and people who considered themselves Polish were subjected to the process of acculturation in the Polish culture.

Studies devoted not only to the borderland, but the context of the borderland seems to be very much justified. They can refer, among others, to the territorial noblemen's Polish Republic and the Second Polish Republic as multi-ethnic and multi-national states. It is usually believed that territorial borders are always cultural borders. Lands of north-eastern Borderlands / Western Belarus were subjected to very dynamic

delimitations and this definitely predisposed them to become ‘borderlands’. For such a political construct, cultural anthropology and sociology have worked out a number of theoretical models, describing borderlands not only as territorial phenomena but also linguistic and national phenomena. Sociological theories even cast away the context of political territoriality when speaking of a social borderland which, however, historiography cannot afford to do (Wojakowski, 2013). Wojciech Opiła (2014, p. 40) describes yet another category of ‘inner borderland’ *with the use of which multicultural regions are analysed, where the nature of a borderland is determined more by the migration or historical (relic) borders than by the present-day state border*. Thus, borderlands tend to be defined and understood as a hybrid phenomenon with respect to a state. Analysis of the stances and choices of borderland residents in sociological sciences is made through the categories of hierarchy and the status of individual groups, where the strongest accomplishes a dominant position and imposes its culture on the rest (see the interpretation of the events of September 1939) (Wojakowski, 2013). Adopting such a perspective would improve a historiosophical dialogue between Poland and Belarus, mitigating the unnecessary tensions and emotions accompanying the national and political versions of history (Demski, 2003). Certainly, an assumption has to be made that such an imperative is applied symmetrically and to the entire period of mutual contacts, also after 1939 and 1991.

Obviously, sociological theories should be set in the context of historical studies. For example, it is claimed that borderland residents are under the impact of the neighbouring lands and frequently – despite clear differences – share common values (with the advantage of the sociological dimension of the borderland over its territoriality) (Demski, 2013). In the case of extreme ideological conflict and antinomy of values between the Polish and Soviet lands in the north-eastern borderlands / Western Belarus, such dependence does not occur. Similar claims are possible with respect to the description of the time and space of north-eastern borderlands in the territory of the Second Polish Republic. Based on witness accounts, a conflict of values recognised and embraced on both sides of the Polish-Soviet border becomes clear:

Гэта была Польшча, гэта была царква, гэта прызнавалі Бога. А там не, там сатана (Heta byla Połšča, heta byla carkva, heta paznavali Boha. A tam nie, tam satana)<sup>4</sup> (Ivanova, 2015, p. 89).

Political interference in an obvious, and sometimes total manner shapes the image of the borderland. Such totality grows especially with respect to the intense liquidity of borders and an acute ideological conflict. An example may be provided by the propaganda machine launched officially in the first moments after the Red Army entered the areas of Western Belarus / north-eastern Borderlands. Its brutality and primitivism guaranteed its efficiency. References were made to feelings and mentality, converting the existing world of values into a model worked out in the

<sup>4</sup> ‘It was Poland, it was the Church, it recognized God. And there is not, there is Satan’.

USSR. An example of such procedures is an appeal of General Mikhail Kovalov, commander of the Belarusian Front, to the people of Western Belarus. Analysis of the logical structure of the document shows us elements of the created myth/ dogma compliant with the policy of the new authority. Common human fears were used in this respect. In the description of the reality of the Second Polish Republic, the following phrases were used: 'hunger', 'poverty', 'Polonisation' (including Polonisation of children), 'ruins', 'plagues', and 'misfortunes'. Poles were described in a pejorative manner (settlers, military men, and colonists): 'dogs'. The society was clearly split into the elite and the 'common people': 'Ministers and generals crammed themselves with gold and fled, cowardly leaving the army and the nation to their own devices, they abandoned you at the threat of total ruin and destruction' (Adamuszko, 1998, p. 91; Struniec, 2009, p. 114). A special message was prepared for the soldiers of the Second Polish Republic and the following terms were used: 'rowdy war', 'ignominy', 'failure to control and defend the country', 'robbery', and 'cowardice'. The personal situation of the soldiers was described with the use of words such as: 'left to their own fate', 'defeat', 'death', 'annihilation', and 'bloodshed'. The propaganda of the USSR reality relied on slogans such as: 'liberators', 'freedom', and 'happiness' (Adamuszko, 1998; Struniec, 2009).

The efforts of the Red Army propagandists may be interpreted with the use of the category of 'narrative identity' (group), which is understood as *internalised and developed history (...) or a myth (...) which unites the reconstructed past, the perceived present, and the foreseen or expected future* (Gocół, 2014). Building an identity by a group (here, the authority of the USSR) takes place by *defining an area of their own world and creating a distance from other groups*. At the same time, voluntary or forced (depending on the represented potential) divisions among groups (here, winners and residents) of the conquered lands take place. *Whether the separation is voluntary or forced depends on the place of the group in the social context, its political situation, prestige, etc.* (Waszczyńska, 2014, p. 55). In this case, we can speak about the myth of a state and idea, whose clear presentation was aimed at creating individual and collective identities and setting out the perspective of socio-political development (Gocół, 2014). Such an extended perspective allows for deepening the analysis of the historiosophic conflict with respect to the stances of residents of the borderlands in 1939 (Demski, 2003, Gocół, 2014).

## Recapitulation

Difficulties in describing the Polish and Belarusian and Belarusian and Polish history were affected, as mentioned above, by the dominance or even supremacy of the Russian and Soviet historiography, built in the name of the *raison d'état* of the Russian Empire and the USSR both in the ideological and methodological layer. National-historical or rather community-based and ethnic thinking of Belarusians exerted an equally strong mark. It seems that this very paradigm gained a superior position in

Belarusian historiography. In the most acute form, it can be perceived as ideas aimed at the re-interpretation of the identity of nationalities, e.g. Polish or Lithuanian in the direction of White Ruthenisation (Snyder, 2009). The atmosphere of the 1990s was meant to foster dialogue and offer hope for overcoming prejudice, myths, and stereotypes (Mironowicz, 2005). Nevertheless, it seems that such an objective was not within reach of contemporary historiography, primarily on account of methodological models, dysfunctional with respect to each other: Polish and Belarusian. Today, Belarusian historiosophy is trying to combine various threads of old theories / historiosophic schools with roots reaching to the Russian-Soviet traditions (Tikhomirov, 2016). It is intriguing that Jadwiga Staniszkis described an analogous phenomenon when dealing with social, political, and cultural models of the post-Soviet borderland:

The institutional and mental tissue of the borderland unites (...) the deformed elements of various traditions (and - as in the case of post-communism - multiple historical epochs) [and elsewhere] the feature of institutional and cultural systems of the borderland is usually the lack of capacity for (...) self-identification (Staniszkis, 1999, pp. 1244–1245).

It is also worth quoting another passage from Staniszkis, where she makes an assessment that:

Lack of acuity and identification unanimity (within the meaning of political and cultural codes) reinforces categories based on ethnicity and denomination in the borderland areas (Staniszkis, 1999, p. 1245).

Eventually, she concludes:

The characteristic phenomenon of the borderland is the neo-traditionalism, which leads to a selective use of the elements of tradition (cultural and institutional heritage) in the building of the 'strategy of contemporaneity' (Staniszkis, 1999).

The analysis of determinants of selected elements of the dispute proves that its basic source is the application by researchers from Poland and Belarus, two diverse historiosophic matrices. The context of the state which asks for seeing the history of Belarus as a part of the Republic of Poland or a part of Russia (after the partitions) and subsequently as a part of the USSR after 1945 (Polish historiography) and ethnic and Western Russian context (Belarusian historiography). In this perspective, Belarus is treated either as a buffer-borderland territory (territorial context) or as a borderland area in the cultural sense, related to the Ruthenian-Russian culture (also called 'Russkiy mir') and after the 1917 revolution as Soviet, at the risk of disintegration by the political attempts at the hands of the West and, specifically, the Republic of Poland. Here, the Belarusian perspective resembles Polish thinking about the lands of the First Polish Republic during the partitions which, even though broken apart, remained in historical and ideological

unity. Nevertheless, the problem consists in the fact that the Polish statehood formally existed at least since 966, whereas no such claim can be made about Belarusian statehood. Belarusian historiography traces the beginnings of geopolitical statehood from the Duchy of Polotsk. It seems that the continuity and evolution of this entity relied on the community idea, whereas the formally non-existent political community was replaced by a cultural community.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it became possible to treat at least the Riga Treaty of 1921 as the partition of 'Belarus' understood as a semi-political entity and, in fact, a community-based construct. On the other hand, the territory inhabited by such a community tends to be and is currently interpreted as a cultural phenomenon at the border of the Latin and western world (Janowicz, 1999).

Ideological assumptions, as noted above, generate misunderstandings and an acute interpretation conflict. On the other hand, research embedded in the 'borderland' context always sets out the Polish perspective. Some historians consider it to be colonial (Ladykowski, 201; Bekus, 1999). In Belarusian historiography, the Polish North-Eastern Borderlands are called Western Belarus. Such a perspective is obviously inclined to perceiving both parts of the Belarusian land, western and eastern, as an integral research territory. Both stances favour one of the historiosophical and political centres. The addresses at joint Belarusian and Polish / Polish and Belarusian conferences referenced in the paper clearly show that the speakers are emotional, which confirms that the historians themselves, both Polish and Belarusian, are unable to reach the raw form of analysis and remain mentally (historiosophically) entangled in their interpretations.

Would supplementing the official history with hybrid features in the Republic of Belarus with oral history studies be sufficient to make the message objective? It could definitely mitigate it slightly and by bilateral subjectivism, it suggests a similar research field. A. Smaliančuk claims that oral history may offer *a true window into the past*, even without the historian's commentary (Smaliančuk, 2018). One cannot agree with this opinion. Without a professional historical and methodological approach, oral history would be subject to the same, if not greater, over-interpretations than the standardised model. Making use of such sensitive research material requires critical and multi-aspect studies. Otherwise, it is going to be limited to 'naive' theories which, even though valuable and sometimes compelling, cannot become a model of historical interpretation.

The opening of historical studies onto sociological theories pertaining to borderlands offers a chance for gaining interpretation distance with respect to, for example, anti-Polish stances and choices (in the ethnic or identity-related meaning) of residents of the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic in September 1939. It allows for a slight loosening of the Polish pro-state optics directing the studies to valuation based on the compulsion of loyalty. Expanding the model of studies onto determinants of the history

<sup>5</sup> Eugeniusz Mironowicz (2005), trying to separate national groups, Poles and Belarusians, in the areas of Western Belarus / North-Eastern Borderlands, defined them as *national communities formed on the basis of cultural and linguistic separateness*. He also claimed that in this case, it was impossible to speak about ethnicity.

of mentality and sociological studies allows for deepening the analytical layer of research and opening up new paths of interpretation. It is worthwhile asking, like D. Gocół:

Have (and if yes, to which degree) the oral history accounts become subjected to individualisation after experiences unifying social thinking and functioning to such an extensive degree [in the conditions of the post-Soviet world] ...? (2014, p. 123).

alternatively, which purpose would generate their re-interpretation? Therefore, the introduction of imperatives worked out by sociological sciences into historiography seems to be an indispensable procedure. It is impossible to interpret, or even prepare, questionnaires for residents of the north-eastern borderland / Western Belarus without the knowledge about the matrices of group behaviour in borderland conditions. If thanks to oral history, the official and normative historiography is subject to 'authentication' (e.g. supplements the research field) (Bartmiński, 2014), the context of the borderland optimises its potential even more and introduces a certain distance into the Polish-Belarusian historiosophic discourse. It seems that the studies conditioned by theories from the borderland area would offer a greater chance for transforming the dispute into a dialogue and thus an opportunity for deeper reflection and mutual inspiration for the historical national schools.

*Translated into English by Lingua Lab s.c.*

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