

ARTICLE

## Cross-Border Movement in Interwar Polesie as a Manifestation of the Local Population's Indifference towards the State

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### Abstract

The present article addresses how the local population of the Polesie Voivodeship perceived the establishment of the Soviet–Polish state border that separated them into two nations. This article focuses on their co-existence, through the prism of the evolution of the reason for cross-border movements. It aims to show that national indifference is not based on the same attitude towards a modern institution as a result of only a vague knowledge of modern society, but is, very often, the result of a conscious choice in the conditions of the need to live and co-exist with ‘alien’ institutions of power. This article, contributing to a growing literature on how ‘ordinary’ people living near state frontiers both resist and appropriate these demarcations of state sovereignty, is largely based on cross-referencing local state archival material with oral testimony from residents of the time and their descendants.

### I

Fully controlled external borders, along with a strong state – and national – identity of the population living in the borderland, are relatively new phenomena; products of the modern world.<sup>1</sup> For thousands of years of human history, the lack of a strong and consistent sense of belonging to one state has been the most common phenomenon within the relationship between the individual and the state, especially in frontier territories. The dawn of the modern state system brought an end to this. The nationalization of history has erased even the memory of it from the historical narrative, but at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, scholars finally turned their attention towards it within the framework of a border study.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978* (Basingstoke, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Caitlin Murdock, *Changing places: society, culture, and territory in the Saxon–Bohemian borderlands, 1870–1946* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2010); Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: the making of France and Spain*

The main goal of the article is the conceptualization of the reaction of the interwar Polesie population to the establishment of the state border that separated them into two societies. Their acceptance of it, through the prism of the evolution of reason for cross-border movements, will also be analysed. Special attention is devoted to comparing the development of state territorial awareness in the mentality of the population of the Soviet and Polish parts of the region and reflections on the topic from the perspective of the local response to the establishment of state power in the frontier zone. To characterize the lack of a sense of belonging to one state, this article consistently uses the term ‘state indifference’; thus, this term is a kind of state-oriented modification of the well-known concept of ‘national indifference’.<sup>3</sup>

The final aim of the article is to describe the results of a study on how the inhabitants of a deeply rural region of Eastern Europe reacted (or did not react) to the division of the region between the USSR and Poland after the First World War in such a way that it could interest not only historians of Eastern Europe but also everyone interested in the broad question of studying the history of the evolution of relations between the state and the individual. The Polesie case may attract their attention with its peculiarity: a well-documented case of how ‘ordinary’ people living near state borders both resist and appropriate these demarcations of modern state sovereignty.

According to the topic, the article is expected to cover the time span from the first day of the establishment of the inter-state border – the Treaty of Riga – to the last day of its existence: the start of the Second World War. This article is based mainly on oral histories<sup>4</sup> from the region<sup>5</sup> and district-level officials’ documentation.<sup>6</sup> All quotes used in the text are part of interviews that were collected by myself during research conducted in 2014–20. Some of them are second-hand memories based on family oral traditions; some belong to people born in the 1920s and 1930s, and even 1910s. Furthermore, during the study, local newspaper interviews with elderly local

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*in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, CA, 1989); Alexander Horstmann and Reed L. Wadley, eds., *Centering the margin in Southeast Asia* (New York, NY, 2006); Kathryn Ciancia, *On civilization’s edge: a Polish borderland in the interwar world* (Oxford, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> For example, James Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and national indifference in a central European borderland* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2008); Tara Zahra, ‘Imagined noncommunities: national indifference as a category of analysis’, *Slavic Review*, 69 (2010), pp. 93–119; Morgane Labbe, ‘National indifference, statistics and the constructivist paradigm: the case of the Tutejsi (“the people from here”) in interwar Polish censuses’, in Maarten van Ginderachter and Jon Fox, eds., *National indifference and the history of nationalism in modern Europe* (Abingdon, 2019), pp. 161–79.

<sup>4</sup> On the limits of oral history as a source of information, see E. Jessee, ‘The limits of oral history: ethics and methodology amid highly politicized research settings’, *Oral History Review*, 38 (2011), pp. 287–307.

<sup>5</sup> The recollections of the memories were collected during research, my own as well as of other historians; for example, Aliaksandr Smalianchuk, ed., *Vosen’ 1939 h. u historychnai tradytsyi i vusnai history* (Minsk, 2015); Aliaksandr Smalianchuk, ed., *‘Za pershymi savetami’: Pol’ska-belaruskai pamezhzha 1939–1941 gg. u vusnyh uspaminah zhyharow Belarusi* (Minsk, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Mostly, State Archive of the Brest Region (SAotBR) and Zonal State Archive in Mozyr (ZSAiM).

people, which had been published mainly in the 1990s, were actively used.<sup>7</sup> The critical reflection on the existing literature on state and national identity and, more broadly, on the historiography of European nationalism and the history of mentality<sup>8</sup> were used to reorient our understanding of border-making and state-formation processes from the state-centric to the perspective of the ordinary person.<sup>9</sup>

On the whole, there is no clear definition of Polesie. It depends on how it is understood: as a natural, cultural, or historical region.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the region's borders have changed over time, even the natural one. Thus, for the sake of clarity, in the article, Polesie should be understood as two administrative structures that existed in the interwar period within the Second Polish Republic: the Voivodeship of Polesie and the Polesie district of Soviet Belarus. These two administrative units covered the swampy areas of central Polesie, also known as the Pinsk Marshes, and were very often considered to be the core of Polesie. Within the framework of the article, however, the social aspect is much more significant than the geographical one, as well as the fact that the majority of the inhabitants were represented by the rural population with a 'tutejszy' (a man from here) self-identification.<sup>11</sup> Thus, hereinafter, the term 'Polesie' is used in its interwar politico-administrative meaning.

For describing the population of the region, the term 'Polesians' has been used. The term is a convention, because the local inhabitants' cultural identity was mainly local and rarely ever went beyond the boundaries of one village. The only thing in common that 'Polesians' all around the region had was the understanding of belonging to the Polesie area or rather the Polesie marshlands.

## II

For centuries, Polesie remained one of the most hermetic areas in Europe due to its impassable terrain. Within the Russian Empire, it was considered as being one of the least-developed regions.<sup>12</sup> It did not have any significant cities or

<sup>7</sup> The significance of these sources, which are not commonly used in studies of this kind, can be explained by the fact that they represent the point of view of an older generation, one that had already attained adulthood at the time when Polesie was divided.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism* (London, 1997); Paul James, *Nation formation: towards a theory of abstract community* (London, 1996); Miroslav Hroch, *European nations: explaining their formation* (New York, NY, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there are a significant number of works devoted to other regions of the world, for example, James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Heaven, CT, 1985); James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Heaven, CT, 2009); Jeffrey Herbst, *States and power in Africa: comparative lessons in authority and control* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Kate Brown understood it as the Chernobyl zone. See Kate Brown, *A biography of no place: from ethnic borderland to Soviet heartland* (Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Anna Engelking, 'Old and new questions concerning Belarusian "local" identity', *Sprawy Narodowościowe*, 31 (2007), pp. 131–43.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Mihail M. Litvinov, *Litovskaya oblast', Poles'e i strana k yugu ot Poles'ya: zapiski oficerov starshego kursa Nikolaevskoj akademii General'nogo shtaba, sostavlennye po lekciyam ad'yunkt-*

industrial centres. Local infrastructure was almost non-existent, and, very often, only local residents were able to move freely. Consequently, the region's population links with outsiders and non-Polesian communities were sparse and occasional. Most of the local inhabitants not only had never travelled outside their home county in search of seasonal work, but even rarely had gone a few dozen kilometres away from home.<sup>13</sup>

The daily life of its inhabitants in the period before the First World War had not significantly changed compared with pre-modern times; in some aspects, even with the medieval period. In general, the life of the rural population revolved around the agrarian calendar, with most of the time spent working the land to grow enough food to survive another year.<sup>14</sup> The main element of the local group consciousness was belonging to 'here', linguistic and religious factors were regarded as being of lesser importance; there was no place for modern national or state identity.<sup>15</sup>

The First World War and the following Polish–Soviet military conflict should be considered a turning point in the development of local mentality and identity. Initially, as in many other conflicts, it was not expected that this war would influence the lives of the local population. However, the failures of the Tsarist Army on the Eastern Front not only closed the frontline, but also provoked the bureaucracy of the Russian Empire to begin a scorched-earth campaign. This meant, among other things, the displacement of the population out of the region and the destruction of any infrastructure potentially helpful for the Germans. Russian imperial propaganda of the exodus from the 'cruel Teutonic occupants' was mainly directed at members of Polesian Orthodox community. Some of the local inhabitants believed the propaganda and voluntarily left their own land, becoming refugees in the central and eastern regions of the Russian Empire. Others, along with suspicious social-religious groups (mostly Poles, Germans, and Jews), were forced to leave their homes by the tsarist's military and bureaucrats.<sup>16</sup> Most of them, of course, stayed at home, ignoring the efforts of the tsarist authorities, which were absolutely alien to them.<sup>17</sup> There is no exact data on the scale of wartime refugee activity in the region, because, within the Russian Empire, Polesie was divided between different administrative governorate units. Nevertheless, the existing estimates for the entire Russian Empire put the number of refugees at around 5 or even

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professora M. Litvinova v 1883–83 g. (Saint Petersburg, 1883); *Statisticheskij Vremennik III (12)* (Saint Petersburg, 1886); *Sbornik statisticheskikh svedenij (1884–90 g.)* (Saint Petersburg, 1892).

<sup>13</sup> Aleksandr Sierzputouski, *Paliesuki-bielarusy: etnagraficzny narys* (Minsk, 2017), esp. pp. 5–12.

<sup>14</sup> This was repeatedly noted by contemporaries who visited the region, for example, Leon Wasilewski, *Wspomnienia 1870–1904 (1914): fragmenty dziennika 1916–1926, dziariusz podróży po kresach 1927*, ed. J. Dufurat and P. Cichoracki (Łomianki, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> The same situation applied in Southern (Ukrainian) Polesie; see Brown, *A biography*, pp. 1–4.

<sup>16</sup> Irina Belova, *Vynuzhdennyye migranty: bezhency i voennoplennyye Pervoj mirovoj vojny v Rossii. 1914–1925 gg* (Moscow, 2014), esp. pp. 3–55, 61–3.

<sup>17</sup> For what was important, despite all the tsarist efforts to nationalize them, see Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and state in late imperial Russia: nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (DeKalb, IL, 2008).

15 million, and, according to sources, most of them were from the territory of modern Belarus and Eastern Poland.<sup>18</sup>

During the war, Polesie refugees lived all over Russia, in regions that the majority had only a vague knowledge of before their exile. As was noted by a refugee's daughter, 'My grandpa and his family reached the Urals during the First War. They settled near a big city and soon found a good job. There were a lot of us [people from Polesie].'<sup>19</sup> Thus, that exodus of the population became a mass phenomenon in Polesie. Both oral and documentary sources are proof of that, especially in the western part of Polesie. For a better understanding, the Polish commission on wartime losses in the Polesie Voivodeship estimated its losses at more than 30 per cent of the pre-war population.<sup>20</sup>

The lives of those who did not leave their homes with the withdrawing Russian Army did not change on the same scale as their countrymen-refugees, not least because they continued to live in their homeland. Regardless, years of war, completely alien to the locals, had significantly affected them and their lifestyles.<sup>21</sup> Soldiers of the fighting armies drifted back and forth, the existing regional links were demolished, countless requisitions of livestock, food, working hands, and conscripts took place.<sup>22</sup> As a result, a number of residents of the region were at permanent risk of starvation, so they were forced to actively wander in search of food and work. Therefore, constant movement, an atypical phenomenon for the local culture, became a part of the local lifestyle. The period of the Great War's instability in the region was prolonged by the collapse of the Russian Empire shortly before the end of the war. Poland gained independence, and a civil war began in Russia itself.<sup>23</sup>

For Polesians, residents of rural, hard-to-reach areas, the First World War and the Soviet–Polish conflict were their first experiences of mass confrontation with modern societies; the first experience of state intervention in their daily lives on such a scale. For the first time, the people of Polesie met non-hypothetical 'others', those who clearly defined themselves as 'Germans', 'Russians', and 'Poles'.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, the above-described perturbations had caused significant changes in the psychology and behaviour of these people: their perception of the world had changed. The concept of national and state belongingness had become part of the local mentality, however, so far only in relation to outsiders.

<sup>18</sup> Nikolai A. Mihalev and Sergey A. P'yankov, 'Bezheny Pervoy mirovoj vojny v Rossijskoj imperii: chislennost', razmeshchenie, sostav', *Ural'skij istoricheskij vestnik*, 4 (2015), pp. 95–105.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with eighty-year-old woman, Pinsk, 12 June 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Estimates of losses in Brest, SAotBR record group 54, and in Pinsk, SAotBR record group 2125.

<sup>21</sup> Borislav Chernev, *Twilight of empire: the Brest-Litovsk Conference and the remaking of East Central Europe, 1917–1918* (Toronto, ON, 2017), pp. 3–12.

<sup>22</sup> See Eugeniusz Mironowicz, *Białorusini i Ukraińcy w polityce obozu piłsudczykowskiego* (Białystok, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> For the wider historical context, see Timothy Snyder, *The reconstruction of nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven, CT, 2004), esp. pp. 215–32.

<sup>24</sup> See Vejas G. Liulevicius, *War land on the Eastern Front: culture, national identity, and German occupation in World War I* (Cambridge and New York, NY, 2000), pp. 1–12.

Six years of war had left the region neglected and plundered and had accustomed the population to endless changes of regime.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, it taught them to be mobile and able to leave home if necessary. The region's society and identity began to change, although this was a long-term evolution rather than a revolution, especially because most of the locals wanted to return to the pre-war style of life as soon as possible.

### III

The Treaty of Riga meant not only the end of the Polish–Soviet War, but also the establishment of a completely new border between two states and the division *de facto* of previously undivided Polesie into two parts: Soviet and Polish.<sup>26</sup> However, drawing a border on a map did not mean that it immediately appeared in reality. On the terrain, it still was not clearly defined and demarcated; moreover, it did not change the state of mind of the local inhabitants, most of whom still had only a vague knowledge of the nature of the modern state, and even less so about what an external border was.<sup>27</sup> The process of the establishment of a frontier mentality took several years and was closely linked to the strengthening of the state's agency presence in the region.<sup>28</sup>

Archival and oral sources reveal that, immediately after the end of the Polish–Soviet War and for several years thereafter, the central governments had only limited control over their borderlands with impassable terrain, i.e. Polesie.<sup>29</sup> During this period, control of the region by both states was based on the control of strategic points (such as main towns, logistic centres, and inter-regional roads) rather than the border line or area. The border itself was not an impenetrable demarcated line with a strong border guard presence, but a theoretical concept of the territory and its population belonging to the state.<sup>30</sup> Thus, any presence of the state in this situation was declarative, and this was obvious to the population, who ignored the boundaries of political entities.

Abundant confusion in the local perception of the new status of the Polesie land was caused by the state actors. Both states – Polish and Soviet – tried to use every opportunity to undermine the former enemy's military potential, infiltrate its administrative structures, and arouse social tensions.<sup>31</sup> For this

<sup>25</sup> Jochen Böehler, *Civil war in central Europe, 1918–1921: the reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford, 2018), esp. pp. 59–146.

<sup>26</sup> Davies Norman, *White Eagle, Red Star: the Polish–Soviet War, 1919–1920* (London, 2003), esp. p. 399.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Savchenko, *Belarus: a perpetual borderland* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 69–116.

<sup>28</sup> The situation was similar in the rest of the Polish–Russian frontier; see Vital Luba, ed., *U novaj ajchyne: Shtodzyonnae zhyccio belarusau Belastochchyny u mizhvaemny peryjad* (Białystok, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Dennis P. Hupchick, *Conflict and chaos in Eastern Europe* (London, 1995), p. 210.

<sup>30</sup> On the everyday life in the Soviet border zone, see Sabine Dullin, 'The interface between neighbors at a time of state transition: the thick border of the Bolsheviks (1917–1924)', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 69 (2014), pp. 255–86.

<sup>31</sup> Wojciech Materski, 'The Second Polish Republic in Soviet foreign policy (1918–1939)', *Polish Review*, 45 (2000), pp. 331–45.

reason, in the first years of the border establishment, state authorities often used the civilian population as agents for all kinds of subversive activity, such as propaganda, sabotage, and intelligence.<sup>32</sup> In some cases, this subversion went far beyond subtle actions and meant support for full-scale military formations, or at least a significant armed gang. On both sides of the border, the activities of such gangs were formally directed at officials and the newly created administrative apparatus. In addition, class enemies became the object of bandit activity on the Polish side of the border, and party activists on the Soviet side. However, such terror in post-war societies was very often only declarative, because, in reality, after the peace agreement, both governments' control diminished further from both state core regions. Non-state armed groups, in actuality, did not obey any central structures and moved freely from Polish to Soviet Polesie and vice versa in search of victims who were not bothered by their nationality or political issues. Consequently, both states ceased this policy; however, the Soviet Union did so just after an unsuccessful attempt to professionalize this activity.<sup>33</sup>

The study of the attitude of the Polesie population, in terms of potential nationality and the prospect of the border, vividly reveals the breadth of the phenomenon of state indifference among them. According to oral and archival sources, initially, most of the local inhabitants agreed with – or rather did not bother with – the establishment of the Polish–Soviet border and accepted their new nationality without any hesitation. This is evidenced by the fact that, in the beginning, there was no significant intraregional migration movement between the two parts of Polesie, which seems very strange given the fairly fluid movement across these borders in the 1920s. Such behaviour undoubtedly indicated the disinterest of local residents in the issue of state affiliation. They certainly associated themselves with their own land and community, but not the nation or state. A good example here are the local Poles from Eastern Polesie. Traditionally, this local ethnic group, in contrast to the originally East Slavic peasants, was regarded as representative of the population with a strong national identity.<sup>34</sup> Theoretically, in the situation of restoring Poland's sovereignty, this should have encouraged them to change their place of residence to the Polish part of the region. However, they remained passive and did not leave their homes, albeit there were many opportunities to become state-recognized returnees.

Moreover, there were no remarkable protests or evidence of civil disobedience, even in communities divided into two halves. For the local population, the drawing of the border was secondary; much more important were the everyday travails.<sup>35</sup> A peasant woman born in the interwar period in a village

<sup>32</sup> Reports of Polish Intelligence Service, SAotBR, 1/10/137–9.

<sup>33</sup> David R. Stone, 'The August 1924 raid on Stolpce, Poland, and the evolution of Soviet active intelligence', *Intelligence and National Security*, 21 (2006), pp. 331–41.

<sup>34</sup> Aleksandra Gurko, Igor' Chakvin, and Galina Kasperovich, eds., *Etnokulturnye processy Vostochnogo Poles'ya v proshlom i nastoyashchem* (Minsk, 2010), esp. pp. 3–22, 45–8.

<sup>35</sup> On the topic of everyday life peasant communities in Kresy, see Olga Linkiewicz, 'Peasant communities in interwar Poland's eastern borderlands: Polish historiography and the local story', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 109 (2014), pp. 17–36.

divided by the border into two parts notes, 'My parents only found out about the border when the [Soviet] authorities came to the village [in the summer of 1921] and said that they are now Belarusians. Before that, they knew about the peace treaty but were not interested in what state they belonged to.'<sup>36</sup> In other words, they perceived global issues through the prism of pre-national, purely personal interests and, evidently, believed that political changes in the region would not affect their daily lives. For example, after the treaty agreement, some of the peasants were formally separated from their lands, which now belonged to another state. In theory, these issues should have been solved by government compensation and/or exchange of properties. However, in reality, most local residents did not refuse to cultivate their land that turned out to be in another state. In the first years, they used it exactly the same as always, 'because there were no real state restrictions and my parents [formally residing in Poland at that time] were free to cultivate their field abroad [located in the Soviet Union]', a person who was born in a family whose land allotment turned out to be in a neighbouring state noted.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, such people did not even show interest in relocation. 'Why should my family change residence? We have lived here for generations and our land has always been behind the forest. And our house always stood by the river. Can you ask them to move the border to get my land back?': the description of this conversation was conducted by Polish officials.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, this state indifference can be explained by the foreignness of both newly created political entities – Polish and Soviet – for the majority of the local population.<sup>39</sup> However, documentary and oral sources indicate the true reason: the Polesians still had the pre-modern mentality; for them, non-local issues did not exist. This is evidenced by the fact that the 'people from here' did not show interest in creating any power structures, even in the most favourable conditions of the German–Austrian occupation and the Russian Civil War. Furthermore, there were no prerequisites for such activities, since there were no elites with a strong regional identity. Any local political or social activity during the wars (i.e. the creation of self-defence forces, reconstruction works, etc.) ended at the village or town level. The Ukrainians and Poles are two minor exceptions to the rule, but even their activities were strongly limited and, in most cases, strongly related to the situation outside the region.

Further remarkable proof of this is the nature of the repatriation and cross-border movement during this time period. Despite the already mentioned fact of the absence of any intraregional migration movement (i.e. population exchange between Polish and Soviet Polesie), there was an alternative flow of migrants from 1921 to 1924. A crucial reason for this was the exchange of population and prisoners of war between the Soviet Union and the Second

<sup>36</sup> Interview with ninety-one-year-old woman, Łuniniec, 3 Apr. 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with eighty-five-year-old man, Wierześnica, 14 June 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Pinsk County monthly report on 'The situation in the county', Jan. 1921, SAotBR, 1/9/48.

<sup>39</sup> Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Ojczyzna nie tylko Polaków: Mniejszości narodowe w Polsce w latach 1918–1939* (Warsaw, 1985), pp. 4–26.



Polish Republic.<sup>40</sup> Both activities were, as a rule, disorganized, with minimal state participation in the process and constant violation (or ignoring) of state borders by its participants. This was especially true for those who returned to their homes from the inner Russian regions. Most of them started their return journey on their own and completely lacked government support. What is more, they were not even interested in it. Consequently, they crossed the border without any trace in the administrative databases.<sup>41</sup> 'In 1922, my family finally returned from exile [to Polish Polesie]. Just like a short walk. No official [in Poland or in Soviet Russia] even knew about it. Then there was no border, no border guard', a person born during the forced relocation stated.<sup>42</sup>

The scale of the movement is revealed by official administrative documents in which region-level officials noted 'it is even hard to estimate the scale of movement because we do not control the border at all',<sup>43</sup> and described the situation in the region as 'extremely unstable throughout the territory due to conflicts between those who were returning home and those who did not leave'.<sup>44</sup> As the main reasons for such conflicts in the Soviet and Polish Polesie, officials most often stated unlawful occupation of land and the theft of refugees' property during their absence. Numerous instructions to local authorities reveal the attitude of central governments to this phenomenon: 'as long as this [cross-border movement of returnees] did not treat the control over the territory, just ignore it and concentrate on more important questions'.<sup>45</sup>

The situation was somewhat different with prisoners of war and demobilized soldiers. Both states tried to control their movement at least *post factum*, and this is not surprising: they were young and physically strong men with real military experience. However, even discrete tracking of such elements during this time period was problematic. In numerous reports, the local authorities informed the regional authorities: 'there is no real way to understand what each man did during their absence or to separate them from the civilians'.<sup>46</sup>

The actions of this group of returnees, a group that could, undoubtedly, better understand the nature of modern nationalism, accentuated the deep roots of state indifference in their consciousness. After several years of living and fighting abroad, they still tried to return to their homeland, ignoring the question of to which state it belonged. According to official documentary sources, a significant number of demobilized Red Army soldiers (based on my own estimates, up to 6,000),<sup>47</sup> originally from Western Polesie, left the Soviet Union and

<sup>40</sup> The National Historical Archive of Belarus, Belorusskij nacional'nyj komissariat, 4/1/55.

<sup>41</sup> A series of interviews with the descendants of immigrants in 2016–18 in Brest and Homel districts.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with ninety-eight-year-old woman, Żabinka, 2 July 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Polesie Voivodship annual report, 1922, SAotBR, 1/9/47/8.

<sup>44</sup> Polesie Region's NarKom annual report, 1922, ZSAiM, 463/3/2–6.

<sup>45</sup> SAotBR, 1/9/109–10, 128.

<sup>46</sup> Mozyr County IspolCom report, Nov. 1921, ZSAiM, 463/1/7/8, 10–11.

<sup>47</sup> In the calculation, I used documents created by the local Polish authorities, often representing lists of persons, suspected of serving in the Red Army. However, such estimates are extremely inaccurate.

returned to their homes in bourgeois Poland. Even communist propaganda that created the image of an enemy of the peasants and Eastern Slavic folk for Poland or the fear of repression could not stop them.<sup>48</sup>

Other reasons for cross-border movement were more prosaic and based on the periodic pendulum motion: namely, economic and family reasons. Due to the division of the region into two parts, a number of families found themselves separated by the border. People who lived along the border had close relatives living on opposite sides, and there was frequent movement in both directions. Such movements were illegal for the Soviets and Polish authorities, but, due to the very provisional state control over the territory, these journeys were not just possible, but were part of local everyday life. A good example is marriages between the then citizens of different countries, albeit the notion of citizenship was rhetorical. Based on oral sources, until the establishment of a relatively solid border and the development of power at the local level in the second half of the 1920s, this practice was widespread throughout the region. Undoubtedly, the scale of such a phenomenon is extremely difficult to assess based on the official state documentation. It mentioned only cases of prosecution of specific individuals for illegal resettlement. However, according to oral sources, every tenth marriage in territory located at a distance of 50 km from the border was of this nature. Moreover, during this period, all family celebrations were a great opportunity to gather all the members of a 'big family' together, very often consisting of more than 200 members from the two Polesies.<sup>49</sup>

Economic reasons were also very important in cross-border movement. Villagers on both sides of the border continued to actively use the borderland area as they had before the Soviet–Polish peace treaty. In the post-war reality, many landless peasants were forced to start seasonal migration during the harvest period in search of work.<sup>50</sup> The border or state affiliation of the employer remained completely unimportant to them. In a single harvesting season, one hired reaper could travel more than 250 km in search of new contracts, and, for natural reasons, for example, the maturation period, such movements usually began in the south-western part of the Polish Polesie and ended in the north-east of the Soviet one.<sup>51</sup> Villagers who lived in the frontier area, and, according to the Treaty of Riga, were separated in two societies, also continued the tradition of co-operation in agricultural work, i.e. harvesting.<sup>52</sup>

Interestingly, cross-border smuggling at that time practically did not exist. There was one main reason for this. The two parts of Polesie were severely damaged by the military conflict, and there were simply no goods that could have been of interest for trade exchange between them. Additionally, the locals

<sup>48</sup> The National Archives of Belarus, 4/1/53, 55–7.

<sup>49</sup> A series of interviews with the descendants of immigrants in 2016–18 in Brest and Homel districts; furthermore, this was noted in the following works: Smalianchuk, ed., *Vosen'*, pp. 1–16; Smalianchuk, ed., *'Za pershymi savetami'*, pp. 2–26.

<sup>50</sup> The number of such a class, according to my estimates, could reach up to 5–8 per cent of the total population.

<sup>51</sup> SAotBR 1/10/144–5.

<sup>52</sup> Reports of the local raiispolkom (District Executive Committee), 1922, ZSAiM, 178/5, 7, 10–13.

did not know the nature of smuggling. As the granddaughter of a smuggler punished in 1924 noted, ‘My grandpa said that the first charges of smuggling were out of the blue: no one even knew what “smuggling” meant, or why they [the local Polish authorities] were so angry. [They accused him of smuggling] one loaf of bread!’<sup>53</sup>

Of course, the situation described in the above section was unacceptable for the Soviet Union and the Second Polish Republic. The frontier between the two states was too important just to ignore it. Within the modern European state, there was no longer space for territories with only illusory government control over them. In the years that followed the peace agreement, both states sought to change the situation by developing an institution of power and strengthening military control in the region. All in all, it took roughly four years to establish functional administrative control over the region and partial control over the border. Albeit, marshlands with a sparse settled population and a few towns required another kind of policy to establish effective control, not primitive, but based on the creation of a new consciousness of the local residents and their political and national indoctrination.<sup>54</sup>

#### IV

In the second half of the 1920s, both states finally abandoned the actively aggressive policy of carrying out a guerrilla war against the authorities of the neighbouring state; countless gangs were destroyed or at least forced to end their illegal activities; the most convenient paths of inter-regional movements were blocked on both sides by the army and security services. As a result of these actions, state control over the population in the region became more stable. However, the situation in Polesie was strongly influenced by the situation in the Soviet Union and Poland: any instability in either of the states had an immediate and visible impact.<sup>55</sup>

The most characteristic element of cross-border movement in Polesie through the years from 1924 to 1935 was its mass character and chaotic nature.<sup>56</sup> This shows that various social groups on both sides of the border left their homes in search of a better future and/or trying to escape state oppression. According to my own estimates, based on official documentary sources,<sup>57</sup> up to 30–5 per cent of the region’s population was involved in one or another form of illegal intraregional movement (it should be noted that, for the average citizen, there were not too many opportunities for legal movement between states). It was most popular in the border counties, where up to 70–80 per cent of the population on a permanent basis violated

<sup>53</sup> Interview with eighty-one-year-old woman, Turaw, 4 Apr. 2017.

<sup>54</sup> On the topic, see David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the masses: modern state practices and Soviet socialism, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, NY, 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Wojciech Śleszyński, *Województwo poleskie* (Cracow, 2014).

<sup>56</sup> Its mass character was mentioned also by Per A. Rudling, *The rise and fall of Belarusian nationalism, 1906–1931* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2014), esp. p. 206.

<sup>57</sup> The reports of the Border Guard Corps and the Voivode were particularly helpful here (SAotBR 1/9/109–12), and reports of the Polesie Oblispolkom (ZSAiM).

the border law, while in the inner counties, closer to core regions of the home state, that percentage was significantly lower: no more than 8–10 per cent.

For up to 5 per cent of irregular border crossers, this was a one-destination movement, because their main goal was to change their country of residence. They were migrants. What is important is that they did not want to leave the region, preferring to settle near their own relatives.<sup>58</sup> There was no single prevalent direction of intraregional migration: inhabitants of both parts of Polesie actively crossed the border. Sometimes, the migrant flows from the two parts of the region overlapped over time. These flows overlapped, for example, in 1930–2, when the population of the Polish Polesie suffered from the global crisis and recession, while the Soviet one from the policy of collectivization. People all over the region faced the danger of starvation or execution and tried to find a way out.<sup>59</sup> Very often, migration to a neighbouring country was perceived as such. However, as a rule, the peaks alternated: an increase of migration from the Soviet part of the region reduced migration from the Polish one and vice versa.

Initially, both states resettled refugees in places of their own choosing without any structure, in the hope that they would propagate negative rumours about the neighbouring country.<sup>60</sup> Over time, however, the Soviet Union abandoned this policy, attempting to isolate and relocate people from the Polish Polesie to the inner regions, while the Polish authorities continued it. The phenomenon of ‘border vagabonding’ can be considered a vivid declaration of local adaptive practice in relation to the manifestation of power by the modern state. Some of these seekers, in search of a better life, repeatedly changed their residency from the Soviet to the Polish part of Polesie and vice versa. The reasons for this were varied, but, in most cases, it can be explained by the gradual extinction of old local traditions and an increase in the number of ‘superfluous’ men who had lost their ties to their own community. Of course, this behaviour was not accepted by either state and resulted in legal consequences if detected. Moreover, this was not supported by the conservative opinion of the local society: these people very often were treated as infiltrators, criminals, and troublemakers.

Specifying the problem of the resettlement of the local population between Soviet and Polish Polesie from 1924 to 1935, it should be noted that the main source of migration in both parts of the region were different. Wealthy peasant families, middle-class people from local towns and people of Polish origin attempted to escape *en masse* from the Soviet part of Polesie to the Polish part.<sup>61</sup> Most of them did this to save their own lives from the Bolshevik repression, and the Soviet policy of mass terror directed at these groups. All this

<sup>58</sup> A series of interviews with the descendants of immigrants in 2016–18 in Brest and Homel districts.

<sup>59</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London, 2010), pp. 21–59.

<sup>60</sup> Reports of the Polesie Voivode 1921–35, SAotBR, 1/9/46–7; reports of Oblispolkoms 1924–8, ZSAiM, 463/12–4.

<sup>61</sup> This conclusion follows from the surveys of migrants conducted by the Border Protection Corps (KOP) in 1928–34. Up to 90 per cent of migrants were classified as belonging to the above-mentioned groups, SAotBR, 1/10/144–51.

meant was that times of increasing migration alternated with periods when the flow was depleted. Such fluctuations were closely related to the starting of repression against the new socio-ethnic groups.<sup>62</sup> For example, after the beginning of the policy of collectivization, many wealthy peasants, whose lives or freedom were under threat, tried to flee to Poland; therefore, in the reports of the Corps of the Border Guard during collectivization, numbers of more than several hundred migrants from the Soviet Union appeared per day. Two years after the extermination of this group, the flow of migrants decreased significantly.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, the immigrants from the Polish part of the region were mostly represented by young sons of landless peasants and low-paid workers.<sup>64</sup> Many of them left their homes driven by the hope that the Soviet part of Polesie would become a kind of promised land for them, and this belief was based on communist propaganda in the region about the uncountable successes of the Soviet Union in building a new society of workers and peasants. The less popular reason for the migration from the Polish Polesie was political. Local communist activists, when faced with the punitive apparatus of the Polish state, often chose to flee in the hope of receiving a reward, i.e. land and position, for their activity.<sup>65</sup> Another less popular reason, at least until the early 1930s, was based on an attempt to avoid military service in the Polish Army in fear of ethnic-based hazing.<sup>66</sup>

It is worth noting that, initially, both states had a very similar policy with regard to the question of accepting migrants: they tried to prevent the departure of their own population and accept migrants from the neighbouring state, sometimes even to promote resettlement.<sup>67</sup> This was probably due to the value of the working-age population and potential taxpayers in post-war societies. However, over time, namely in the 1930s, this policy changed, and inter-state relations played an important role: new arrivals from the neighbouring state began to be considered as potential infiltrators and spies.<sup>68</sup> Before issuing a permit to settle in the state, they were tested, and, very often under suspicion, returned to the state of origin, or, in the case of the Soviet Union, they simply disappeared.<sup>69</sup> There were also significant changes in state attitudes towards the 'escapees'. The Polish authorities began to perceive the departure of those dissatisfied with the Polish state and pro-Soviet as the best option. According to administrative sources, regional-level authorities often

<sup>62</sup> On Soviet terror, see Snyder, *Bloodlands*, esp. pp. 59–119.

<sup>63</sup> Monthly reports of the KOP in 1928–34, SAotBR, 1/9.

<sup>64</sup> A series of interviews with the descendants of immigrants in 2016–17 in the Brest and Homel districts.

<sup>65</sup> By my estimates, up to 60 per cent of the local party activists left the region in years 1924–35. In the reports of the governor of the region, even more than 90 per cent of them are mentioned as 'escapees' to Russia (SAotBR, 1/10/144–6).

<sup>66</sup> Numerical estimation of the phenomenon is extremely difficult. However, based on the official documentation of local self-government bodies, it can be argued that up to 20 per cent of the local non-Polish conscripts 'ran to Russia'.

<sup>67</sup> References to this are often in the reports of the Polesie Voivode in 1924–8.

<sup>68</sup> For example, SAotBR 1/8/639.

<sup>69</sup> Department of State Security, SAotBR, 1/10/137–9.

recommended the local authorities to turn a blind eye and not interfere in the preparation of anti-Polish and pro-communistic activists fleeing to the USSR.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, the Soviets continued the policy of preventing any emigration from the Soviet Union but in more rigid ways than ever. For the Kremlin, the preferred method was to deport entire 'suspicious' classes or families to the inner regions, or even physical elimination, instead of permitting escape.<sup>71</sup>

Oral and statistical sources indicate that, during this period, the border was finally recognized by the local inhabitants, and, moreover, in their mentality, it became a symbolic frontier between the two states. However, the acceptance of the inter-state border did not create a border-barrier effect: the local residents still did not divide Polesie society into two parts. Polesians adapted their behaviour in public life to the legal boundaries, but, within private life, cultivated old traditions. This dichotomy can be observed through non-migratory cross-border movements of the population between the two parts of the region. Despite the best efforts of local authorities in both states to eliminate this type of activity through exemplary punishments and awareness campaigns, the population did not change their own habits, but adapted them to a new state environment, i.e. began to make efforts to hide it from the authorities and law enforcement agencies, as it was now clear to them that such behaviour was unacceptable to the state.<sup>72</sup> For example, marriages of people from different parts of Polesie became rarer than in previous times, as the increased bureaucratic apparatus began to track the appearance of spouses from abroad. Nevertheless, there were still many gaps. This even created a new practice: in inter-regional marriage, the grooms were usually of Polish Polesie origin, and the brides were of Soviet. This can be explained by the backwardness of the local administration in the Polish Polesie in comparison with the Soviet one and the possibility of avoiding state tracking in this part of the region.

The structure of reasons for economic movements during this period slowly began to change. The strengthening state presence made it impossible to use the land that had become foreign, and the locals finally resigned from it, fearing state sanctions. With each passing season, stray workers were less and less likely to find seasonal jobs in the neighbouring state. In the early 1930s, when collectivization in Soviet Polesie led to the liquidation of private farming, it completely destroyed the base of jobs for hire, and, consequently, that kind of border movement was halted. At the same time, professional and semi-professional smuggling began to appear and develop in the region, the main base for which were wandering workers and inhabitants of border communities.

In summary, from the perspective of changes in the local mentality, the years 1924–35 in Polesie can be characterized through the progressive

<sup>70</sup> For example, correspondence of the Polesie Voivode with county soltuses (village chiefs) of Kosów Poleski, SAotBR 1/9/87.

<sup>71</sup> Maksim Petrov, 'Bol'shoj terror v BSSR', *Dedy: dajdzhest publikacij o belorusskoj istorii*, 11 (2013), pp. 221–31.

<sup>72</sup> On Soviet policy, see Hoffmann, *Cultivating the masses*, esp. pp. 181–238.

evolution of the perception of the border, state, and nation as a part of local reality. In both parts of Polesie, understanding of these concepts increased; however, the process had a different direction in each. What they had in common was that the local population began to understand the issue of their own state belonging in terms of personal well-being and sense of security. The differences between the two parts of the region were based on different ways of understanding the role of the phenomenon of indifference by the governments in Warsaw and Moscow.

The authorities of Soviet Polesie interpreted the national indifference of the local population as a threat to the first communistic state and especially its policy of integrating non-Russian nationalities into the national Soviet Republics.<sup>73</sup> Initially, they tried to eliminate this attitude of local residents through the Belarusization of the region and the promotion of a sense of belonging to the Belarusian nation and the BSSR, and then by promoting belonging to Soviet society.<sup>74</sup> This meant not only fighting with ambivalent attitudes towards the state and its symbols, such as the border, but also the policy of total indoctrination of the population through the school system and the media.<sup>75</sup> In Polish Polesie, the authorities held the opposite attitude.<sup>76</sup> For the officials in Warsaw, the lack of any national identity among the local population was perceived not only as a great chance for a long-term policy of Polonization of the region, but also as a symbol of its pro-Polish sentiments.<sup>77</sup> In other words, the national and state indifference of the Polesians was considered a symbol of its ties with the rest of the state. Furthermore, all other kinds of self-identity in the region (i.e. Belarusian or Ukrainian) were very often perceived as a manifestation of pro-communist and anti-Polish views.<sup>78</sup> Thus, the Polish bureaucratic apparatus tried to maintain and even to strengthen the sense of national ambivalence among the local non-Polish population in the hope of using it in the long term. As a result, during upcoming censuses, the majority of inhabitants of the Polish Polesie declared themselves as belonging to the group of 'people from here'; meanwhile, their relatives from Soviet Polesie did so as 'Belarusians'.<sup>79</sup> However, the population of Polesie in both states continued to think of themselves as

<sup>73</sup> See Jeremy Smith's works *The Bolsheviks and the national question, 1917-1923* (Berlin, 1999), and *Red nations* (Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>74</sup> Per A. Rudling, 'The beginnings of modern Belarus: identity, nation, and politics in a European borderland', *Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies*, 7 (2015), pp. 115-27.

<sup>75</sup> Francine Hirsch, *Empire of nations: ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), pp. 145-87.

<sup>76</sup> Piotr Cichoracki, 'Polonisation projects for Polesia and their delivery in 1921-1939', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 109 (2014), pp. 61-79.

<sup>77</sup> See Wojciech Śleszyński and Anna Jodzio, eds., *Polesie w polityce rządów II Rzeczypospolitej* (Białystok and Cracow, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> Pavel Ablamski, 'The nationality issue on the peripheries of Central and Eastern Europe: the case of Polesie in the interwar period', *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 52 (2017), pp. 55-76.

<sup>79</sup> See Piotr Eberhardt and Jan Owsinski, trans., *Ethnic groups and population changes in twentieth century Eastern Europe: history, data and analysis* (Abingdon, 2002).

one community and, as a rule, certainly did not associate themselves with any political entities, especially those separate from their home communities.

## V

The last selected period covered the years 1935–9; this was a time of general stabilization of the situation throughout the region.<sup>80</sup> This stabilization consisted of two important components: socio-economic and political.<sup>81</sup> As a part of the changes in the socio-economic aspect of life, it can be noted that, in both Polesies, the threat of famine among the rural population had become less likely. Moreover, in the Soviet part of the region, mass repressions against the wider community (i.e. Kulaks, Poles, etc.) ceased. Meanwhile, in the Polish part, the economic crisis had finally weakened its grip. Border protection had become more comprehensive; local and regional governments in both parts of the region fully established state power over the territory and subdued local communities, consequently demolishing the remnants of local autonomy.

As a result of all the above, according to archival sources,<sup>82</sup> intraregional migration movement had become less intense. There were no more mass cross-border movements of entire groups of the population who were attempting to leave their own state. Essentially, migration had become more occasional and individual. This is observable in the reports of Soviet and Polish border guards and Polish security services: the total number of people seeking refugee status and detained border violators had significantly fallen to a few individuals per week. Moreover, cases of crossing the border in large groups consisting of entire families or people from the same villages had become rare.

Additionally, the state presence played an important role here, especially in the Soviet part of the region because of the totalitarian nature of the statehood of the Soviet Union.<sup>83</sup> For example, on 5 June 1939, the death penalty for fleeing abroad was adopted in the USSR. At the same time, the Soviet Union Communist Party declared a policy of zero tolerance for political escapees from Poland, condemning them as cowards and damagers of party authority. In addition, there had been a generational change. A significant number of local residents were born and grew up in a Polesie society divided between two different states. Accordingly, the existing state of things seemed to them the only natural one. All the above had led to changes in the local mentality. The awareness of the local society of the division of the region into two parts and the existence of a modern external border had become a fact.

<sup>80</sup> Mihail V. Strelec, 'Deyatel'nost' obshchestvennykh organizacij v 1926–1939 gg. na territorii Poleskogo voevodstva vo Vtoroj Rechi Pospolitoj', *Vesnik Magilyouskaga dzyarzhavnaga universiteta imya A. A. Kulyashova. Seiya A. Gumanitarnyya navuki (gistoryya, filasofiya, filalogiya)*, 53 (2019), pp. 14–23.

<sup>81</sup> Viktor P. Garmatny, 'Sacyal'na-ekanamichnae razvicyo Paleskaga vayavodstva ŷ 1921–1939 gg.: gistoryyagrafiya prablemy', in *Belarus' u kanteksce Eurapejskaj gistorii: asoba, gramadstva, dzyarzhava* (Grodno, 2019), pp. 213–17.

<sup>82</sup> On border protection, 1935–9, see SAotBR 1/10/146–7.

<sup>83</sup> Materski, 'The Second Polish Republic', pp. 332–9.



Compared to previous periods, the main goal of immigrants from Polish Polesie changed significantly, as most of them crossed the border in the hope of becoming residents of large industrial cities in the Soviet Union.<sup>84</sup> They were not interested in staying in rural Soviet Polesie; they wanted to change their social status, not their place of residence. Therefore, it was more of a social migration than an intraregional migration. Meanwhile, the motivation and purpose of migration from the Soviet Polesie remained the same. The main reason for residents leaving their homes was still fear for their lives and fear of repression. It was not a result of a choice, but a decision made in particular circumstances. Consequently, immigrants from the Soviet part of Polesie preferred not to leave their home region and did not want to change their occupation; in most cases they settled near their relatives in the Polesie Voivodeship.<sup>85</sup>

Overall, most other forms of cross-border activities also declined during this period. Cross-border movements for political reasons became rare, since the Communist Party stopped campaigning for the idea of immigration to the Soviet Union among pro-Soviet activists of the Polish Polesie. Even cross-border movements due to family necessities became less popular and ceased to be an integral part of frontier life for the inhabitants. According to oral sources, its frequency slowly decreased.<sup>86</sup> Often, the main reason for this was the stated policy of the Soviet Union, which was purposefully aimed at identifying all locals who maintained relations with their relatives on the Polish side of the border as 'enemies of the state'. The main barrier here, according to oral sources, was not the propaganda regarding the inadmissibility of such behaviour, but the fear of punishment by death or deportation. An individual who was born and lived 500 metres from the border for more than ten years noted:

There were situations when Soviet relatives working at the same time in the same field did not greet us and did not even look in our direction. They completely ignored us. Later, we learned that the communist authorities had tightened control over the Soviets and settled thousands of NKVD informers there.<sup>87</sup>

As a result, the local population began to meet relatives from abroad less often and only for the most important occasions, such as funerals, and, rarely, weddings. Most of the intraregional informal connections were almost entirely eliminated, especially in the Soviet part of the region, and, due to the lack of adequate information, the image of the neighbouring region became even less realistic than before.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>84</sup> This statement made on the base of transcriptions of conversations with violators of the state border conducted by the KOP and a series of interviews with the inhabitants of Pruzhany, Pinsk, and Berioza districts in 2018–19.

<sup>85</sup> SAotBR, 1/10/148–9.

<sup>86</sup> A series of interviews with the descendants of immigrants in 2016–18 in Brest and Homel districts.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with ninety-year-old woman, Lienin, 1 July 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Smalianchuk, 'Za pershyimi savetami', pp. 1–26.

All of the above meant that, among the inhabitants of the region, a border-barrier mentality became more apparent. This is evidenced by the emergence of a tendency among local residents to use the border for self-identification. In the recordings of the authorities' conversations with the local population, word-markers such as 'we/our' and 'they/their', increasingly began to appear.<sup>89</sup> Previously, the word 'they' was used only for strangers who were not from the region, who were from outside Polesie. However, in 1935–9, the word 'they' began to be used to refer to Polesians from a neighbouring country; the border had become an integral part of sub-local identity. Therefore, the inhabitants of both Polish and Soviet Polesie began to perceive their neighbours as being part of a different society. This was especially the case among the younger generation of the locals, from the non-border counties.

The decline in private intraregional ties was accompanied by the rapid increase in semi-professional and even professional smuggling in the region. For the first time, the smuggling of goods had become so profitable that, for thousands of people, cross-border movement became a real opportunity to achieve personal enrichment. According to oral sources, entire villages in Polish Polesie specialized in the smuggling and/or production of goods for smuggling. Moreover, there was even a division of labour: some villagers produced or bought in towns the goods needed in Soviet Belarus, others stored and transported them to the border, and some smuggled them across the border. As the son of a village chief notes, 'The whole village lived on contraband. The officials ignored it until we followed the state law and accepted Polish rule over us. It was not bad.'<sup>90</sup> The same applied in Soviet Polesie with one minor difference: the authorities of the Soviet Union considered smuggling as being a state crime and, therefore, punished smugglers with death or deportation.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the scale of activity in the Soviet Polesie was much smaller and much more professional. The main reason for this increase in smuggling compared to previous years was the fact that there was a shortage of a number of goods in both countries. The range of contraband proved this: food, a wide range of consumer goods, and homemade alcohol were smuggled from Poland to the Soviet Union, while jewellery, golden ruble coins, and some monopoly goods (such as matches and kerosine) were smuggled from the Soviet Union to Poland.<sup>92</sup> However, illegal activities certainly did not help maintain the intraregional ties and were aimed only at personal gain. As a result, despite frequent travel between the states, smugglers had only a vague knowledge of the situation in the nearby state.<sup>93</sup> 'My brothers had been to the USSR several

<sup>89</sup> Such changes were also noted by the Polish interwar ethnologists, for example, Joseph Obrebski. See Józef Obrebski, *Dzisiejsi ludzie Polesia i inne eseje*, ed. Anna Engelking (Warsaw, 2005), esp. pp. 20–45, 91–102.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with eighty-seven-year-old man, Dawidgródek, 16 June 2016.

<sup>91</sup> ZSAiM, annual reports of the local militia, 1936–9, 178/24–8, 31–2.

<sup>92</sup> On measures to eliminate smuggling, 1937–9, ZSAiM, 178/4–22.

<sup>93</sup> Aliaksandr Smalianchuk, 'Paleskaja vjoska w stasunku da pana', in *Belaruskaia historyia: Znaistsi chalaveka* (Minsk, 2013), pp. 138–54.

times a week, but the Soviet invasion and the Soviet reality surprised my pro-Soviet family.<sup>94</sup>

In 1935–9, the border finally became not only formally accepted by the population, who fully complied with the law, but also created a border-barrier effect in their mentality.<sup>95</sup> The local population began to perceive the neighbouring Polesie as part of a foreign state. The issue of state identification came to the forefront in relation to neighbouring communities, and most of the less important ties with relatives abroad were lost.

## VI

The story described in this article as a whole is one of slow but fairly inevitable enforcement of state authority on either side of a new frontier, with local residents slowly but inexorably conforming to those top-down pressures. This is undoubtedly a predictable story but nonetheless interesting for the texture and detail of how this unfolds on the ground. It once more illustrates how unobtrusive, ambiguous, and volatile the process of the establishment of a state border is in an indifferent society.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, it reveals that state indifference is not based on the same attitude towards a modern institution as a result of only a vague knowledge of modern society, but is, very often, a result of a conscious choice in the conditions of the need to live and co-exist with ‘alien’ institutions of power.<sup>97</sup>

As has been shown, initially, the population of Polesie had only a vague knowledge of the modern concept of nation, state, and border and, consequently, ignored them in equal measure throughout the region. When necessary, most of the Polesians changed their nationality and violated the state border without any awareness of the illegality of doing so. Thus, the indifference of the local population towards the state meant passive submission to any power institutions and, therefore, was the main reason for the initially rapid establishment of illusory state power in the Polish–Soviet frontier. Over time, however, the above-mentioned concepts became known to the population, and local residents realized the possibility of using them. Thus, behavioural patterns in various parts of the region changed in different ways due to the need to comply with state requirements.

Due to the establishment of state control over the territory (especially the border) and the gradual breaking of the ties between the two parts of the

<sup>94</sup> Interview with ninety-one-year-old woman, Sinkiewiczze, 15 June 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Stanisław Boridczenko, ‘Strangers: first encounter with the Soviets through the eyes of the population of the Polesie Voivodeship’, *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, forthcoming (2022).

<sup>96</sup> In national and state awareness societies, this process is completely different. For example, Anssi Paasi, *Territories, boundaries and consciousness: the changing geographies of the Finnish-Russian boundary* (New York, NY, 1996); Sahlins, *Boundaries*.

<sup>97</sup> On the topic of rural conflict with the modern society, see Forrest D. Colburn, *Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven, CT, 1989); Charles Tilly, *The contentious French* (Cambridge, 1986); James C. Scott, *Decoding subaltern politics: ideology, disguise, and resistance in agrarian politics* (London and New York, NY, 2012).

region, a separate mentality within Polish Polesie<sup>98</sup> and Soviet Polesie began to appear.<sup>99</sup> This was the first – but very important – step towards establishing a modern type of relationship between the state and the individual in the region.<sup>100</sup> However, the state was still perceived as an artificial instrument of alien oppression. The alienness of the state to the local population is confirmed by the fact that local residents demonstrated an amazing readiness to change their state affiliation and openly support smugglers and illegal border crossers, without showing any feelings of guilt typical of representatives of a modern state identity.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, the article has shown that even within the framework of a state-indifferent society, the state border may be perceived differently at different periods of time. Moreover, even in a short period of time, the establishment of borders can lead to the appearance of completely new patterns of external behaviour, which, based on a comparative approach, may differ from state to state, while the true ways of perceiving a state identity remain the same.

In summary, as proposed in the article, the method of study of the human mentality from the perspective of the evolution of attitudes of the ordinary man towards such state symbols as the border and citizenship can offer a good alternative for a deeper understanding of the transformation of the perception of the state by non-modern communities. It helps to explain the presence of state ambivalence, since the question of state indifference, especially within the history of the twentieth century, must be understood as a complex one, not just in terms of the lack of a strong and consistent national and/or state identity, but also closely related to many aspects of ordinary life.

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<sup>98</sup> On the topic of the Second Polish Republic's attitude to the eastern territories, see Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, *Kresowy kalejdoskop: Wędrówki przez Ziemię Wschodnie Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej, 1918–1939* (Cracow, 2018); idem, *Województwo wołyńskie, 1921–1939: Elementy przemian społecznych, politycznych, cywilizacyjnych* (Wrocław 1988).

<sup>99</sup> This was probably the first step towards the development of nationalism. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1991), pp. 23–59.

<sup>100</sup> On the topic of modern understanding of sovereignty and borders, see Mathias Albert, David Jacobson, and Yosef Lapid, eds., *Identities, borders, orders: rethinking international relations theory* (Minneapolis, MI, 2001)

<sup>101</sup> On the forms of modern state identity, see Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders: frontiers of identity, nation and state* (Oxford, 1999), esp. pp. 43–63.

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