Polesia: Modernity in the Marshlands
Interventions and Transformations at the European Periphery from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-first Century

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1 Modernity in the Marshlands: The Context of This Issue

The history of Eastern Europe in the twentieth century is often conceptualized in spatial images in which an inner connection is established between spatial conditions on the one hand and political-historical processes on the other. This applies both to the history of borders and phantom borders[1] as well as to the history of violence as a leading characteristic of the so-called "bloodlands" or *Gewalträume* (spaces of violence).[2] The essentialist and determinist space-time-power constructs that derive from various schools of geopolitical thought, which have recently become popular again in light of Russia's policy of expansion towards Georgia and Ukraine, operate primarily with the spatial dimension of history. It can therefore be stated that the spatial turn has created certain trend spaces that come to the fore again and again, for example multi-ethnic landscapes that are characterized by the constant shifting of borders.

In addition, we can now look back on a wealth of research literature on environmental history in Eastern Europe, i.e. on the relationship between the natural environment, the concept of the natural world, power and the installation of power; this research often also makes connections to the history of imperial integration at the peripheries of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union or Russia. Moreover, it addresses questions relating to the special form and specific pathways that European modernity took in the eastern parts of the continent.[3]

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1 BÉATRICE VON HIRSCHHAUSEN, HANNES GRANDITS, CLAUDIA KRAFT, DIETMAR MÜLLER, THOMAS SERRIER: Phantomgrenzen: Räume und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken, Göttingen 2015.

2 JÖRG BABEROWSKI, ANSELM DÖRING-MANTEUFFEL (eds.): Ordnung durch Terror: Gewaltexzesse und Vernichtung im nationalsozialistischen und stalinistischen Imperium (Dietrich Beyrau zum 65. Geburtstag), Bonn 2006; DIETRICH BEYRAU: Das Schlachtfeld der Diktatoren: Osteuropa im Schatten von Hitler und Stalin, Göttingen 2000; FELIX SCHNELL: Räume des Schreckens: Gewalt und Gruppenmilitanz in der Ukraine 1905-1933, Hamburg 2012; TIMOTHY SNYDER: Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin, New York 2010.

3 KLAUS Gestwa: Ökologischer Notstand und sozialer Protest: Ein umwelthistorischer Blick auf die Reformunfähigkeit und den Zerfall der Sowjetunion, in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 43 (2003), pp. 349-383; JULIA OBERTREIS: Von der Naturbeherrschung zum Ökozid? Aktuelle Fragen einer Umweltzeitgeschichte Ost- und Ostmitteleuropas, in: Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History 9 (2012), 1, URL:

What these inroads into new territory and the environment have in common from a historical perspective is that they point to modernity as the epoch that produced new forms of spatial order. Based on global findings, these can be described as processes of territorialization, i.e. as the "Vorrücken des Staates in die Fläche"[4] (the advance of the state into new geographical territory), flanked by technology and the military, with the goal of intensified control and economic utilization of previously subsidiarily administered regions by the modern state.

In relation to Eastern Europe and its empires, however, these spatial and environmental advances can also be understood as an "internal colonization," in the course of which previously unaccounted for areas of land became an important focus of the actions of the central government through advancing methods of communication, new scientific disciplines like cartography, geography and engineering science as well as state education efforts. These processes concern, on the one hand, historical peripheries that had long belonged to imperial states and were, as late as the nineteenth century, still being shaped by traditional regional legal and economic systems that differed from those of the imperial center. On the other hand, they also took place along modern colonization frontiers, as well as in the inner peripheries of the heartland, where the populations were newly conceived to be under-developed but also able to be molded.[5]

The environmental-historical approach sharpens our view of modernity at the periphery, both in terms of the ecological consequences of modern interventions, but also concerning the argumentation patterns of historical actors as they modeled their relationship to the structures they found in the natural world. These structures were often perceived as sources of hidden economic potential that must be unleashed through technical-administrative means in order to directly or indirectly transfer expected future earnings to the tax authorities. On the other hand, natural environments were viewed in terms of obstruction: obstacles first had to be removed and the natural conditions had to be adapted to newly defined goals in order to make them useful for people. Areas were often conceptualized as being untouched and empty space, even though humans had lived there for centuries and altered the landscape through

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http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Obertreis-1-2012 (2018-12-11); ULRICH HERBERT: Europe in High Modernity: Reflections on a Theory of the 20th Century, in: Journal of Modern European History 5 (2007), pp. 5-21.

4 JÖRG GANZENMÜLLER, TATJANA TÖNSMEYER: Einleitung: Vom Vorrücken des Staates in die Fläche: Ein europäisches Phänomen des langen 19. Jahrhunderts, in: IDEM (eds.): Vom Vorrücken des Staates in die Fläche: Ein europäisches Phänomen des langen 19. Jahrhunderts, Köln et al. 2016, pp. 7-31.

5 ALEXANDER ETKIND: Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience, Cambridge 2011; ANNA Veronika WENDLAND: Imperiale, koloniale und postkoloniale Blicke auf die Peripherien des Habsburgerreiches, in: CLAUDIA KRAFT, ALF LÜDTKE (eds.): Kolonialgeschichten: Regionale Perspektiven auf ein globales Phänomen, Hamburg 2010, pp. 215-235.

agriculture, cattle pasture, fishing, hunting and clearing the land.[6] But the representation of a landscape as original, desolate and empty made it easier to endow it with meaning and function in the course of modernization efforts. The meaning could, for example, consist in the internal colonization, stabilization and border security of a state (in the twentieth century, increasingly a nationalizing state[7]), while the usefulness came from increasing agricultural yields and the creation of supra-regional markets and trade routes. At the interface of human interventions and found environments, new forms of knowledge emerged as well as artefacts, but also environmental phenomena, which Sarah Pritchard has described as "enviro-technical systems," particularly with regard to the undesirable consequences.[8]

2 Polesia as a Landscape of Intervention

This motif of growing communicative, economic, infrastructural and generally functionalizing penetration of the natural world constitutes a historical continuity, which is shown in this issue through the example of the peripheral wetland landscape of Polesia[9] from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. This large region, encompassing around 70,000 square kilometers[10], today extends across the Belarusian/Ukrainian border, with roughly equal areas in each country and with smaller areas in Poland and Russia.

Polesia was the central focus of the project (Polesia as a Landscape of Intervention: Space, Rule, Technology and Ecology at the European Periphery, 1915-2015), which was funded by the Leibniz Association.[11] In its discussions, the project group worked with the heuristic concept of the "landscape of intervention" proposed by Anna Veronika Wendland in order to be

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6 See also ULRIKE JUREIT: Das Ordnen von Räumen: Territorium und Lebensraum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, Hamburg 2012; EADEM (ed.): Umkämpfte Räume: Raumbilder, Ordnungswille und Gewaltmobilisierung, Göttingen 2016.

7 ROGERS BRUBAKER: National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe, in: Daedalus 124 (1995), 2, pp. 107-132.

8 SARAH PRITCHARD: An Envirotechnical Disaster: Nature, Technology, and Politics at Fukushima, in: Environmental History 17 (2012), 2, pp. 219-243.

9 Ukr. "Polissia," Belarus. "Palesse," Pol. "Polesie," Rus. "Polese."

10 STEFAN BISKUPSKI: Ceny ziemi w województwie poleskiem w latach 1924-1929 / Prix de terres au département de Polesie en 1924-1929, Warszawa 1931, p. 1.

11 The project was led by Anna Veronika Wendland (Marburg), Claudia Kraft (Siegen) and Thomas Bohn (Gießen). The three sub-projects "Techniques of Domination in the Swamplands and their Scope, 1914-1941," "Melioration and Collectivization in Belarusian Polesia, 1965-2015," and "Ukrainian Polesia as a Nuclear Landscape: The Transformation of Local Identities, 1965-2015" were carried out, respectively, at the University of Siegen, Justus Liebig University in Gießen and at the Herder Institute for Research on East Central Europe—Institute of the Leibniz Association in Marburg. Two of the studies have already been published: ARTEM KOUIDA: Melioration im belarusischen Polesien: Die Modernisierung der sowjetischen Peripherie (1965-1991), Wiesbaden 2019; DIANA SIEBERT: Herrschaftstechniken im Sumpf: Landschaftsinterventionen und Social Engineering in Polesien von 1914 bis 1941, Wiesbaden 2019.

able to work out in what ways modern interventions in landscapes can be distinguished from all those historic interventions that can be identified in the landscapes around us. The empirical data collected in the subprojects from various sub-regions of Polesia should serve to review and sharpen the working concept. The term "landscape" already implies a space that has been shaped by people and constructed through human cognitive accomplishments.[12] There are barely any wildernesses left to speak of in Europe; almost every landscape has, in some way or another, been influenced or created by human activity. And yet, not every landscape is a modern landscape of intervention in the sense implied by the chosen concept.

According to this approach, an intervention landscape is characterized by a number of features that relate to the process on the one hand and to the quality of the intervention on the other. Characteristics of the process include the following:

- **Territorialization:** on the part of hegemonic actors or power bearers, administrative structures expand into peripheral zones that are perceived as uncontrolled and disorderly (e.g. in the form of border security).
- **Planning:** by this we mean systematic and structured acts of intervention, for which specific technological and communicative mechanisms are a prerequisite (e.g. statistics, cartography, communication technologies).
- **Optimization:** those who intervene in the landscape conceptualize themselves as optimizers, who organize the use of the landscape rationally (e.g. through land melioration, establishing supply networks, transport infrastructures).
- **Impedance:** Space and humans using space also act as resistive, inhibitory moments, which in turn triggers counter-pressure and produces, on both sides, spatial concepts of the resistive landscape (e.g. the significance of local natural conditions for partisan warfare; resistance by village communities to modernizing interventions in customary rights to forests and waterways, such as the dissolution of easements).
- **Appropriation:** Local actors react to intervention, attempt to profit from it, adopt its strategies (e.g. multilingualism, career changes as a result of shifting from the village to the nuclear city).

In turn, the following characteristics apply to these processes:

- **Asymmetry:** Intervention is initially (but not necessarily for the entire course) supported from outside. The interveners are equipped with greater means of power and resources than indigenous actors. Exercise of power is characterized by little local participation and, in some cases, a high degree of violence.

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[12] HANSJÖRG KÜSTER: Die Entdeckung der Landschaft: Einführung in eine neue Wissenschaft, München 2012; IDEM: Geschichte der Landschaft in Mitteleuropa: Von der Eiszeit bis zur Gegenwart, München 2010. Exemplary study for Germany that looks at Polesia in the context of German resource and forestry policy in occupied Eastern Europe: DAVID BLACKBOURN: Die Eroberung der Natur: Eine Geschichte der deutschen Landschaft, München 2008.

- **Impact:** Intervention leaves lasting traces, which are perceived by all actors as a long-lasting upheaval and caesura.
- **Newness:** Interventions as innovation (genocidal intervention, partisan warfare, soil/land optimization, introduction of nuclear technology, coping with technological consequences).
- **Transcendence:** Actors orientate their actions towards objectives that extend far beyond the horizon of landscape; intervenors see themselves as executors of higher orders.

This selection was based on the assumption that the processes listed here not only contributed to the considerable transformation of the landscape and living environments, but also had an impact on local identities and the actors' concepts of self.

However, we also suspect that all these processes present certain ambivalences: they can be associated with experiences of suffering as well as success and adaptation of local actors. The concept should take into account, on the one hand, the complexity of human-space-nature-technology relationships and, on the other hand, an important debate in environmental and landscape history. The focus here is on the self-reflexive question of the extent to which the researchers—mostly urban elite far from the landscapes under scrutiny—in describing landscape-altering interventions, tend to promote narratives of decline, destruction and loss, where it would be preferable to discuss complex processes that encompass a high degree of ambivalence. Thus, the destruction of traditional contexts and interrelationships sometimes also enables the chance of social mobilization, increasing freedom of movement, and enhanced opportunities for the self-realization of individuals. A thorough and consistent micro-perspective of landscape changes can lead to the finding that people develop solution-oriented strategies and the capacity to assimilate, even in precarious situations. Natural environments can change in unforeseen ways and human-initiated processes of change within natural environments can have unintended and ambivalent outcomes.

Landscape history, as a subdiscipline of spatial and environmental sciences working with cultural and natural sciences[13], therefore points out that landscape never exists statically, objectively and factually, but is always a complex structure of constantly changing natural and physiological conditions, human (and animal) interventions as well as culturally produced attributions and systemizations.

In keeping with this approach, the articles in this issue also work against the perception that Polesia is a largely remote, static and untouched marginal and natural landscape, even if this perception itself must of course be an object of historical analysis. Beyond the zoning of landscapes in culturally and politically themed maps between swampy Arcadia, national heritage site, bloodlands and nuclear wastelands, one must therefore ask how exactly pro-

[13] KÜSTER (as in footnote 12).

cesses of interaction took place between the natural environment and man-made or imagined landscapes, as well as between imperial or national planning, modernization and scientification, and finally between research and exhibition of the social aspects of the region in this European periphery. We must also question whether this region was indeed so peripheral at all.

The findings presented in this issue suggest that victim narratives and catastrophic interpretations of the history of Polesia that are frequently put forward do not do justice to the more complex interactions and often blurred demarcations between the rulers and the ruled or between profiteers and losers. However, acknowledging this also means accepting the limits of the essays collected here. They deal with the particular forms of landscape interventions and their consequences for the people involved. Other forms of interventions, which had a massive impact but were not centered around the landscape, like the mass murders committed by the Germans and Soviets in the twentieth century, are not dealt with in this collection of essays. Nevertheless, these interventions must be taken into account when discussing the concept of landscape interventions because they remind us that certain groups of people in the history of Polesia during the twentieth century had no chance at all to participate in any transactions, transformations, interactions or adaptations as their persecutors had declared them to be racial, class or national enemies and physically wiped them out.

The hypothesis that "Polesia is a landscape of intervention" of course also contains the possibility of its own falsification. Indeed, a review of the findings of this collection of essays could lead to the following conclusions: Polesia did not always carry all of the characteristics presented here—when we look at certain parts of its modern history, it is not, according to the definition introduced here, a landscape of intervention. The imperial Russian and Polish melioration interventions before the Second World War, for example, lacked "impact" or lasting effect and they also left hardly any traces in the collective memory. If one were to evaluate the intensity and scope of landscape interventions as a characteristic for the dawn of *a* (according to Shmuel Eisenstadt, not necessarily *the*) modern age[14] then we can only really define this as starting with the Sovietization of Polesia after the Second World War. Here, the Polesian experience of modernity was similar to that of colonized non-European societies. "Impact," "transcendence," "newness" and "asymmetry" were undeniably qualities of Soviet government planning from the 1960s on, which produced "Large Technological Systems" that were new, innovative and operated on a considerably large scale.[15] But there is also evidence to suggest the opposite: While the new technologies and artifacts were able to mobilize groups of people over long distances and to revolutio-

[14] SHMUEL N. EISENSTADT: Multiple Modernities, in: Daedalus 129 (2000), 1, pp. 1-29, esp. pp. 13-16.

[15] THOMAS P. HUGHES: The Evolution of Large Technical Systems, in: WIEBE E. BIJKER, IDEM et al. (eds.): The Social Construction of Technological Systems, Cambridge 1987, pp. 51-82.

nize the traditional living environments of other groups, some people living in the immediate vicinity of the major construction sites and melioration projects remained amazingly unaffected by them and cannot be said to have either profited from them or suffered because of them. In this way, the landscape of intervention was not a homogenous phenomenon. There is clear evidence that it had cracks, bubbles and voids. This is also the finding of other investigations into ultra-modern infrastructures, particular those built in colonial contexts.[16]

3 Actors and Forms of Development

Who were the "interventionist" actors? These include institutions that sometimes competed with each other and at other times cooperated (for example, the forestry and transport sectors and the military), as well as key stakeholder groups (civil servants, landowners, farmers, migrant workers, experts). All these people and organizations had in common a new way of looking at the existing or customary environment that broke with traditional concepts of order and long-established ideas of a person's role within that environment[17]: an objective way of thinking, whereby the price of natural products was calculated and weighed up against other costs (and often did not include follow-up costs); a new mode of thinking that focused on changing, standardizing and optimizing benefits for the state, groups and private individuals. This change also produced a new understanding of the common good, whereby local actors were only allowed to participate once they had made their own contributions or paid user fees[18], or where only privileged sections of the population could participate by having access to limited and controlled spaces and resources, for example as residents of the Soviet nuclear engineering cities in Polesia, which were established in the 1970s.[19] This understanding of a segregated or preconditional common good replaced pre-modern forms defined, for example, by common rights of use to natural sources (easements).[20]

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16 DIRK VAN LAAK: Alles im Fluss: Die Lebensadern unserer Gesellschaft—Geschichte und Zukunft der Infrastruktur, Frankfurt a. M. 2018; JANNIK SCHRITT: Crude Controversies: Disputes along Niger's Petro-Infrastructure, in: History & Anthropology 29 (2018), 5, pp. 645-669; PENELOPE HARVEY, CASPER BRUUN JENSEN et al. (eds.): Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion, Routledge 2016; ANDREW BARRY: Material Politics: Disputes Along the Pipeline, Chichester 2013; DIANA SIEBERT: Landscape Interventions? The Draining of Wetlands and Other Modernization Initiatives in West Polesia from 1921 to 1939, in this issue; SVETLANA BOLTOVSKA: Local Identities in Ukrainian Polesia and their Transformation under the (Post-)Soviet Nuclear Economy, in this issue.

17 EISENSTADT (as in footnote 14), pp. 4-5.

18 KATJA BRUISCH: The State in the Swamps: Wetland Drainage as a Means of Territorialization in the Late Russian Empire, in this issue.

19 BOLTOVSKA (as in footnote 16); NATALIA OTRISHCHENKO, IRYNA SKLOKINA et al.: Slavutych: Urban Practices, Memories, and Imagination, in this issue.

20 SIEBERT, Landscape Interventions? (as in footnote 16).

However, this motif also combines a number of very different historical manifestations of modern utilization, which nevertheless build on one another. The line of continuity begins with the Russian imperial "Western Expedition" in the second half of the nineteenth century, which carried the claim of being explorative and colonial in its title and combined the collection of scientific knowledge about regions that had barely been explored with the aim of making unproductive "wilderness" cultivatable.[21] The initiatives carried out by the Second Polish Republic in western Polesia during the interwar years had similar objectives. Here, the colonizing aspiration was at the same time a controlling and civilizing one vis-a-vis non-Polish nationalities.[22] At the (provisional) endpoint of these developments was the Soviet agro-industrialization of the Brezhnev era, which operated according to very different political and technical mechanisms and focuses.[23] From 1970 onwards, an entirely new initiative was added to the existing projects which primarily focused on swampland and forests, agriculture and forestry, and plant and animal production: the attempt to develop and open up the Ukrainian part of the wetland and forest region with the help of modern technology and to introduce a new way of penetrating and interconnecting the area by turning it into an energy landscape through the construction of nuclear power plants and electricity supply infrastructures, i.e. a landscape that produces more energy than it consumes.[24]

This most recent form of transformation within the Polesian landscape was based, on the one hand, on its seemingly inexhaustible wealth of water, which is still the region's most remarkable and unique feature (despite melioration works drying out much of the land) and which made Polesia seem suitable for the construction of large-scale power plants. On the other hand, this newest development was driven by a growing hunger for energy in the peripheral regions of the western Soviet Union, which had been intensifying since the 1960s as a result, not only of urbanization, but also the electrification, mechanization and chemicalization of agriculture. This growing need for energy also became one of the defining features of the great agricultural transformation in the Polesian swamplands.

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21 BRUISCH (as in footnote 18).

22 SIEBERT, Landscape Interventions? (as in footnote 16).

23 ARTEM KOUIDA: Land Melioration in Belarusian Polesia as a Modernization Factor in the Soviet Periphery, in this issue.

24 More precisely, the landscape transforms and transports more energy than it uses (since energy, according to its scientific definition, cannot be "produced" and "consumed," but only transformed), ANNA VERONIKA WENDLAND: Inventing the Atomograd: Nuclear Urbanism as a Way of Life in Eastern Europe, 1970-2011, in: THOMAS BOHN, THOMAS FELDHOFF et al. (eds.): The Impact of Disaster: Social and Cultural Approaches to Fukushima and Chernobyl, Berlin 2014, pp. 261-287; EADEM: Nuclearizing Ukraine, Ukrainizing the Atom: Soviet Nuclear Technopolitics, Crisis, and Resilience at the imperial periphery, in: Cahiers du Monde Russe 60 (2019), 2-3 (forthcoming). LUDGER GAILING, MARKUS LEIBENATH: Neue Energielandschaften—Neue Perspektiven der Landschaftsforschung, Wiesbaden 2013.

But it was not coal, the traditional energy source of Soviet Ukraine, that became the basis of Polesia's energy landscape, but uranium. Like coal, uranium was also alien to the landscape here, but its immense energy density compared to fossil fuels (and especially compared to peat, the traditional fuel of Polesia) made the ongoing fuel-transport problems in the Soviet Union obsolete. In view of the progressive depletion of Ukrainian coal deposits, together with Soviet policy, which dictated a priority sale of domestic fossil fuels on the currency-producing international market, nuclear energy technology appeared to be the way of the future. This decision was to have historical consequences on a global scale when the flagship of this development project, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, suffered the most serious accident in the history of nuclear technology in April 1986. Polesia, which had previously been little known around the world, now attracted international attention as a landscape of contamination and damage control.[25]

It is not by chance that both the melioration projects in Belarusian Polesia and the nuclear power plants in the Ukrainian part of the region produced similar socio-technical formations, namely the All-Union Komsomol Major Construction Site (*vsesoiuznaia komsomol'skaia stroika*), which drew young, highly mobile and well-educated workers from all parts of the Soviet Union into an economy previously based on local, unskilled labor. At the same time, we can observe a centrally planned, selective mode of urbanization, cast into the forms of transnational modern urban development, be it in the form of a farming or nuclear settlement. The Soviet post-war period was characterized by a completely new standard of land usage, social mobilization and capital expenditure on initiatives to control and use the natural environment. This vision was also intended to produce the "New (Soviet) Man."

One of the ambivalences of these major projects was that they were largely welcomed by the local communities, who perceived them as a way out of the miserable conditions they had to endure in their everyday lives. This aspect of local affirmation is a factor that links the Soviet interventions with earlier interventions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[26]

Another important aspect of "modernity in the swamplands" was its transnationality, which we—following our catalog of characteristics—can understand as a consequence of territorialization and the transcendence of government action. Not only were the melioration projects in the region based on knowledge transfer across national borders, for example from Western to Eastern Europe or from Poland in the interwar period to the Soviet Union, but concepts and technology were also transferred. These include, for example, the late Soviet attempt to compensate for the melioration-related loss of natu-

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25 WENDLAND, Nuclearizing (as in footnote 24); KOUIDA, Land Melioration in Belarusian Polesia (as in footnote 23); MELANIE ARNDT (ed.): Memories, Commemorations, and Representations of Chernobyl: Anthropology of East Europe Review 30 (2012), 1, special issue.

26 KOUIDA, Land Melioration in Belarusian Polesia (as in footnote 23); BOLTOVSKA (as in footnote 16); OTRISHCHENKO/SKLOKINA (as in footnote 19).

ral resources regarded to be economic assets, such as cranberries, by sourcing American plants and importing the technology necessary for their cultivation.[27]

A further example is the adoption of the North American idea of a touristic national park in post-Soviet regions, where the continental European idea of a protected environment for scientific purposes and not for tourism had formerly prevailed. Cross-border communication processes also gave rise to the virtual counter-movement, which rose up to combat the utilization of landscapes for production processes, as well as the idea of nature conservation, the establishment of special territories and the scientifically supported achievement of nature conservation goals. However, even these efforts were subject to intrinsic economization pressures, as the study of the region's national parks reveals.[28] Finally, the ethnological modeling of Polesia, which took place in the late Soviet period and was driven by efforts to preserve national heritage, again were part of a wider pan-European trend.

4 Forms of Perception: Polesia as a Periphery and a Region Outside of the Norms

In documented descriptions, Polesia was initially portrayed as a region on the margins of the great upheavals and revolutions of history. It was generally perceived by the politicians and experts from the big cities as the perfect embodiment of a periphery: sparsely populated, characterized by local identities, barely touched by modernity in the form of the above-mentioned forms of national and imperial integration or by industrial and infrastructural development. With its vast expanses of natural wilderness, the region appeared to have shut itself off from, and even to have opposed, outside forces such as conquest or state-driven interventions.

The imagology of Polesia as a periphery meant that sub-regions gained their own specific identities in which modernity, as a rule, had no place, or if it did, it was perceived as a hostile intervention from outside. Various images emerged, including that of the peaceful farming family living within its own subsistence economy or that of a partisan country, which offered its native inhabitants a natural refuge in swamplands and forests. Another image was that of an ancient homeland of authentic (East) Slavic and Jewish traditions that were supposedly untouched by innovation and were only now starting to be affected and threatened by modernization efforts and social engineering.[29] In more recent times, a picture also emerged of an archaic paradise, rich in natural resources, which was being threatened by the destruction of the natu-

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27 KOUIDA, Land Melioration in Belarusian Polesia (as in footnote 23).

28 THOMAS M. BOHN, ALIAKSANDR DALHOUSKI: Nature Conservation in the Belarusian Marshland: The Pripiat National Park as Timber Source and Hunting Paradise, in this issue.

29 KATE BROWN: A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland, Cambridge 2004.

ral environment and the consequences of technology. Hence, parts of Belarusian and Ukrainian Polesia are known today in the global public consciousness, less as "Polesia" than as the "Chernobyl zone."

An ironic twist in local history is that the upheaval resulting from a technogenic catastrophe, namely the Chernobyl reactor accident, has at the same time led to the creation of a protective zone where plants and animals can live undisturbed by humans. Especially Polesia, as a region within a late-modern global risk society—a concept that was devised in Western cities at the end of the twentieth century—can teach us a lot about the ambivalences of landscape history in modern times. While this region is described from the point of view of the affected evacuees, relatives of the dead or injured, or from the perspective of transnational eco-activists, as a death or "alienation" zone or as a warning sign of engineering hubris, ecologists have proposed that the evacuation of humans has opened up new and different opportunities for the local fauna and the natural environment to develop. From a strictly landscape and wildlife-centered historical perspective, for example, terms such as "catastrophe," "radiation," "ghost town" and "loss of homeland" have no relevance. If bears, wild boars, wolves, and moose were able to write their own history of post-Chernobyl Polesia, they would speak in terms of a Reconquista.[30] Yet another story would be written by the bison, who, in Belarusian Polesia, have had to submit to being exploited above all as a symbolic animal and an adorning feature of a post-modern, paternalistically run nature park project, which was set up as an economizing tourism and hunting initiative but has ultimately not proven to be very profitable.[31]

Often, the self-image of the region's inhabitants and the various narratives of loss, such as those mentioned above, did not in fact originate in Polesia. Thus, it is still controversial to assume that a "Polesian" cultural and regional identity even exists; it could indeed be argued that the whole concept of Polesia is, rather, the product of foreign stereotypes or administrative standardization measures imposed from outside.[32] The experiences of loss caused by land melioration and the nuclear accident have led to a series of centrally administered interventions at the "periphery," including, for example, ethnological research in Ukrainian Polesia, or the establishment of a national park on the Belarusian side, which may well have contributed to the image of this landscape as a single spatial entity and as a lost paradise to be restored by renaturation efforts and reconstructed in museums. Ecological protest, on the other hand, was not generated in the region itself, but was led by urban intellectuals who brought with them specific notions of the landscape and its needs that differed from the perceptions of local inhabitants. Their motives

30 T. G. DERYABINA, S. V. KUCHMEL, L. L. NAGORSKAYA, T. G. HINTON, J. C. BEASLEY, A. LEREBOURS, J. T. SMITH: Long-term Census Data Reveal Abundant Wildlife Populations at Chernobyl, in: Current Biology 25 (2015), 19, https://doi.org/%2010.1016/j.cub.2015.08.017, pp. R824-R826.

31 BOHN/DALHOUSKI (as in footnote 28).

32 SIEBERT, Landscape Interventions? (as in footnote 16).

ranged from a romantic idea of homeland protection to whistle-blowing due to the discovery of dramatic data on the collateral damage of melioration.

5 Polesia's Borders

Polesia has no distinctive external borders because, with one exception in the Second Republic of Poland, the region never formed a basis for administrative divisions. On many maps, its territory is shaded but not sharply delineated. To the west, the Bug River is regarded as the outermost border, but in the northeast no major watercourse marks the boundary of Polesia. It extends far beyond the Dnjepr River into the Desna region. The transitions to the neighboring regions are blurred, both physiographically and culturally. Symptomatic of this is the way in which the various relevant national map series continuously intersect or cut out this landscape, which forms Europe's largest wetland area. This observation led the project group to commission its own thematic map in order to illustrate the broader context. In this respect, the project work can also be seen as an intervention sui generis: Re-centering Polesia.

The perception of Polesia as a largely undeveloped and closed-off periphery is also the product of a cartographic tradition. Interestingly, this view was not established in the historiographical tradition of Polesia from the very beginning. As late as the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Polesia was not described in terms of being backward. From the mid-nineteenth century on, however, it became the "land of the swamps."[33] The shift in perception came about when the first expedition to drain the wetlands was launched in the 1870s[34] and work was started on two railway lines in the 1880s. It was then that people started to regard the swamp as an obstacle that had to be overcome using technology and it came to play a dominating role in how the landscape was perceived.

Now Polesia's reputation as "this desolate, poor, and sparsely inhabited land, unhealthy for both humans and animals" spread beyond the Russian Empire; "swamps pose major obstacles for the installation of dry communi cation systems."[35] Russian and Polish writers[36], ethnographers and regional

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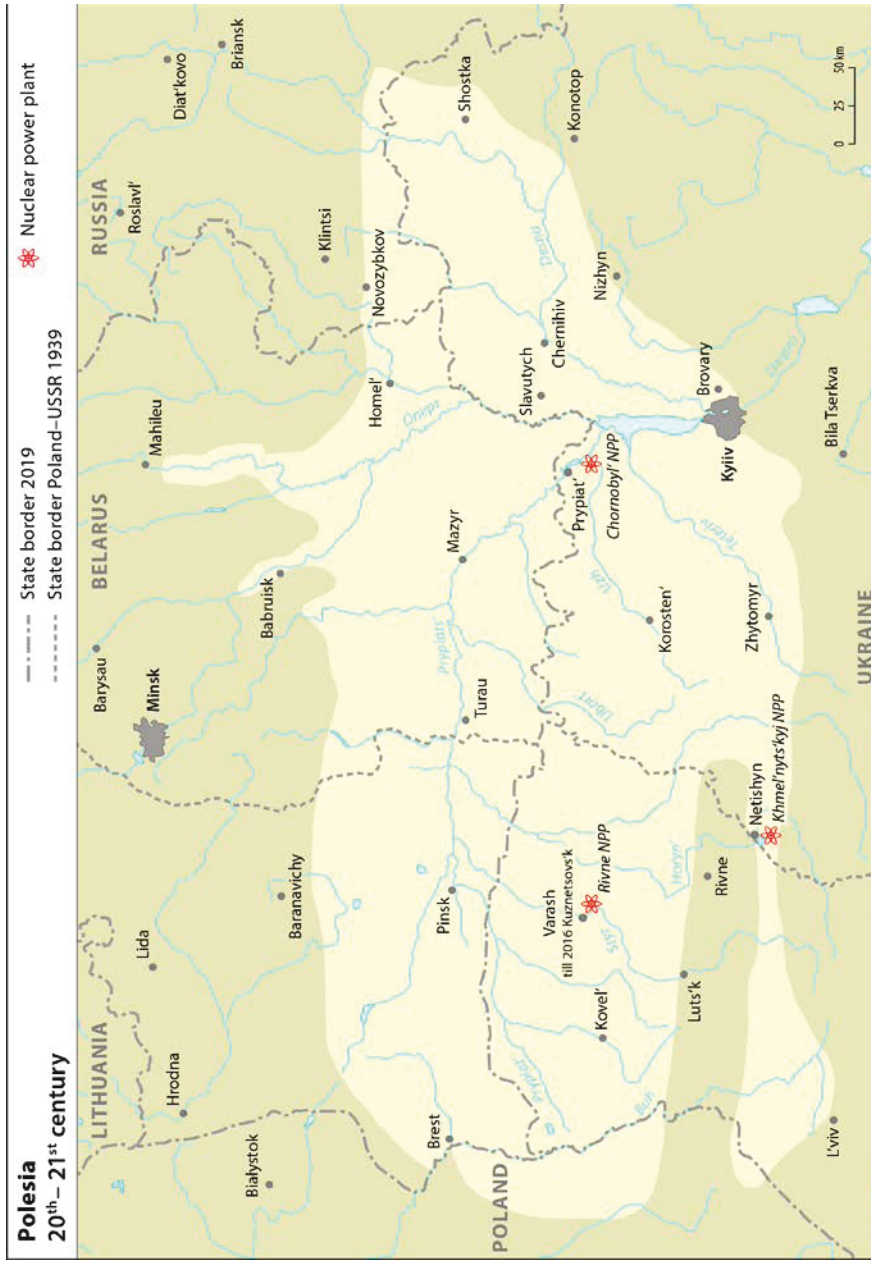
33 IRYNA CHARNIAKEVYCH: U poshukakh Palessia [Searching for Polesia], in: ARCHE (2011), 3, pp. 7-12.

34 BRUISCH (as in footnote 18).

35 JOSEF POPOWSKI: Entsumpfungs-Arbeiten in dem Polesie: Vortrag vom Ober-Lieutenant Josef Popowski, Wien 1884, pp. 5-6. During the era of National Socialism, the geographism relating to Polesia was then extended in line with racist theories and practices.

36 ANNA ENGELKING: "Poleszuk" nieoswojony. Wokół funkcji chłopskości w konstruowaniu polskości [The Untamed "Poleshuk": The Role of the Peasant in the Construction of Polishness], in: Teksty drugie (2017), 6, pp. 68-94.



Map: Marc Friede, Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe – Institute of the Leibniz Association, Map Collection

experts[37] in the nineteenth century described Polesia as a wild and inaccessible landscape and portrayed its East Slavic Christian Orthodox population as a primitive people. In the German-speaking world, Polesia gained modest fame and was known as the *Pripjet-Sümpfe* (Pripiat Swamps). It was considered—along with neighboring regions—as the "original homeland of the Slavs" (according to the Slavic expert Max Vasmer).[38] In times of war, Polesia was avoided because of its difficult terrain. This was the case, both during the Napoleonic campaigns in Eastern Europe and during the two world wars in the twentieth century.[39]

During the First World War, the Central Powers occupied the western half of Polesia up to and including Pinsk; the region was perceived primarily as a supplier of raw materials.[40] The occupying forces were not familiar with the term, so the name *Rokitno-Sümpfe* (Rokitno Swamps), which had been established in the nineteenth century[41], was used on an ad hoc basis in German-speaking areas.[42] Also, throughout the various territorialization efforts that followed, at the hands of the German occupiers, the Ukrainian People's Republic, and paramilitary associations, Polesia never played a role as a unified territory or a spatial point of reference. In principle, until 1920, the same applied to this region as to other western peripheries of the collapsed Russian Empire; here, too, the period was characterized by a collapse of the state, extreme outbreaks of violence, local uprisings and self-empowerment, as well as frequent changes of sovereignty.[43]

When the question of the demarcation between the Republic of Poland and the Soviet republics was discussed as part of the peace negotiations concluded in March 1921, the region of Polesia—later to become a border region—was

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37 PETR PETROVICH SEMENEV[-TIAN-ŠANSKII]: Litovskoe i Belorusskoe Poles'e: Minsk. Č. 1: Litovskoe Polese; č. 2: Belorusskoe Polese [Lithuanian and Belorusian Polesia: Minsk. Part 1: Lithuanian Polesia, part 2: Belorusian Polesia], Sankt-Peterburg—Moskva 1882 (Zhivopisnaia Rossiia, 3).

38 MAX VASMER: Die Urheimat der Slawen, in: WILHELM VOLZ (ed.): Der Ostdeutsche Volksboden: Aufsätze zu den Fragen des Ostens. Erweiterte Ausgabe, Breslau 1926, pp. 118-143.

39 Streffleur's Militärblatt from 1915-09-25, pp. 2-5, here p. 5; on the Soviet army in 1939, see: Osen 1939 goda: Korennoi perelom v sudbe belorusskogo naroda [Autumn 1939: A Radical Change in the Fate of the Belarusian People], Brest 2009, p. 62 (map). For a map on the situation in 1941, see: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Пинские_болота#/media/File:Invasion1941.jpg (2018-12-04).

40 Pinsker Zeitung from 1915-12-20, p. 1; from 1917-05-30, p. 1; and from 1917-07-28, p. 3; on the purchase prices, see ibidem from 1916-03-30, p. 1.

41 Pierer's Universal-Lexikon, Altenburg 1862, p. 236.

42 In Velhagen and Klasing's Großer Volks-Atlas 1936, p. 53, the region is given the name "Podlesien."

43 Entsyklapedyia Historyi Belarusi, vol. 2, Minsk 1994, p. 122, for comparison with the neighboring Ukraine see SCHNELL (as in footnote 2); A. LATYSHONAK: Zhaunery BNR [BNR Soldiers], 3rd ed., Smalensk 2014, p. 156; IRINA T. TAKOEVA: Gomelskaia guberniia: Kak vse nachinalos. Neizvestnye stranitsy [Homel Province: How It All Began. Unknown Pages], Gomel 2014, pp. 149-202.

not particularly sought after; the Soviets had initially even considered leaving Minsk, later the capital of the BSSR, to the Polish Republic.[44] However, in the end, the Polish-Soviet border was drawn further west. The majority of Polish decision-makers[45] conceded that too large a non-Polish and non-Catholic territory would have weakened the young nation. Belarus and Polesia were now divided into a western part belonging to Poland and to an eastern, Soviet part of roughly equal size. But now, for the first time, an administrative area bearing the name of this landscape was created, namely *województwo poleskie* (Polesian voivodeship).[46] There was a special reason for this: Warsaw did not want the names of the voivodeships in the eastern territories to have any Ukrainian, Belarusian or Lithuanian connotations. From 1936 on, the term "Polska B" was used for the entire region of the eastern territories, to which Polesia belonged, and denoted the less developed half of Poland.[47]

In the Polesian voivodeship, non-Polish minorities made up over 85 per cent of the population, i.e. a vast majority; nevertheless, these non-Poles were almost totally unaffected by Ukrainian or Belarusian national mobilization. In terms of its area, Polesia was the largest voivodeship in Poland, but at the same time it had the lowest population density and one of the highest birth rates. Pre-modern social relations had held there for a long time: Polesian society was made up of a small Polish-Catholic land-owning elite supplemented by Russian state officials, who were now replaced by Polish state officials.

The cities were dominated by the Jewish population, who lived from retail trade and small handcraft businesses. The majority of the population consisted mostly (but not exclusively) of East-Slavic peasant families. These groups were still living in separate worlds after the First World War. The

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44 BENJAMIN CONRAD: Umkämpfte Grenzen, umkämpfte Bevölkerung: Die Entstehung der Staatsgrenzen der Zweiten Polnischen Republik 1918-1923, Stuttgart 2014, p. 242. Cf. A. HRYCKEVICH: Slutskae paustanne 1920 h.: Zbroiny chyn u baratsbe za nezalezhnasts Belarusi [The Slutsk Uprising in 1920: Armed Activity during Fights for the Independence of Belarus], in: Spadchyna (1993), 2, p. 3; NINA STUZHYNSKAIA: Belarus miatsezhnaia: Z historyi uzbroienaha antysavetskaha supratsivu u 20-ja hh. XX stahoddzia [Rebellious Belarus: On the History of Armed Anti-Soviet Opposition in the 1920s], Minsk 2012, p. 46.

45 Except for Leon Wasilewski, who continued to advocate a federal solution; cf. CONRAD (as in note 44), p. 242.

46 VOLHA M. BAROUSKAIA: Belaruskaie pytannie na Savetska-polskikh perehavorakh 1918-1921 gg. [The Belarusian Question in Soviet-Polish Negotiations, 1918-1921], Minsk 2017. The actual negotiated border line, which was recognized internationally in 1923, neither corresponded to the principle of the nation state granted by Lenin for tactical reasons, then propagated by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and finally depicted territorialized in the Curzon Line as a line on the map, nor did it run along the borders of 1772. It did not correspond, either, to the ideas of a Polish-centered federation of peoples by Leon Wasilewski, and initially also the head of state Józef Piłsudski, or to the ideas of the incorporationist Roman Dmowski, whose "Dmowski Line" of 1919 also ran much further to the east.

47 LUDWIK GRODZICKI: Polska A i Polska B [Poland A and Poland B], in: Rocznik Ziem Wschodnich 3 (1937), pp. 20-22.

peasants had very little chance of upward social mobility and therefore chose spatial mobility through out-migration.

Conversely, in Eastern Polesia, which had been Soviet since 1921, territorial-ethnic administrative divisions established in late 1926 saw the larger northern part of the region come under the Belarusian SSR, while the southern part now belonged to the Ukrainian SSR. The concept of Polesia remained without precisely defined boundaries. Polesia only became a single administrative entity in 1938 (until 1954), namely an administrative district of the BSSR and, after 1957, it was classified as a rayon (district) of the Ukrainian SSR in the Kiev region. After the Soviet army had occupied West Poland in September 1939, there was a dispute between the party leaders of the Ukrainian and Belarusian SSR, Krushchev and Panamarėnka, about where West Polesia belonged to. This points to the fact that Polesia was no longer a shunned region as there were now struggles around who controlled it and how it should be divided up.[48]

With the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany, Polesia was once again assigned to Ukrainian administrative districts, namely the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine*. The *Wehrmacht* ruled over Polesian territory, at least as far as the larger towns and traffic routes were concerned. During the first months of occupation, the German armed forces and special forces murdered the Jewish population of the cities and shtetls. After a brief delay, they continued in Pinsk where, over the course of a few nights, they killed around ten thousand Jews.[49] Many rural and swampy regions of Polesia were administered, as in the First World War, by an astonishingly small number of German military personnel, and this despite the fact that the number of anti-German partisan groups was steadily on the rise.[50]

After the Second World War, Polesia was again divided between the Belarusian and the Ukrainian SSR. However, another more significant phantom "border," hardly noticeable from an administrative point of view, divided Polesia, not into a northern and southern, but into an eastern and western part. The western areas, which had belonged to Poland until 1939, now caught up with changes that had taken place in the regions of East Polesia prior to the war: agriculture was forcibly collectivized in the form of *kolkhozes*[51], even

48 SIEBERT, Herrschaftstechniken im Sumpf (as in footnote 11), pp. 419-423.

49 WERNER MÜLLER: Aus dem Feuer gerissen, Köln 2002, attached document XI on different numerical data; VERNER MYULER: Vyrvany z agniu, Minsk 2002, pp. 155-156.

50 Studies in German: BABETTE QUINKERT: Propaganda und Terror in Weißrussland 1941-1944: Die deutsche „geistige" Kriegführung gegen Zivilbevölkerung und Partisanen, Paderborn 2010; CHRISTIAN GERLACH: Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944, Hamburg 1999; BOGDAN MUSIAŁ: Sowjetische Partisanen 1941-1944: Mythos und Wirklichkeit, Paderborn 2009; BERNHARD CHIARI: Alltag hinter der Front: Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrußland 1941-1944; WITALIJ WILENCHIK: Die Partisanenbewegung in Weißrußland 1941-1944, Berlin 1981.

51 MAŁGORZATA RUCHNIEWICZ: Das Ende der Bauernwelt: Die Sowjetisierung des westweißrussischen Dorfes 1944-1953, Göttingen 2015.

though this form of organization, which was usually centered around the cultivation of grains and potatoes, had no economic basis in this inhospitable landscape—at this time, still the largest intact swampland area in Europe. In their productivist thinking, the Soviet authorities measured the value of the region, and thus the usefulness of existing and potential landscape interventions, according to the amounts of raw materials that could be extracted from the land and the production figures that could be achieved. However, these still did not amount to much: not even in forestry productivity was high. Therefore, as in other parts of the Soviet Union, melioration seemed to be the means of choice to achieve an increase in yields per hectare. The "expenditures" of the Tsarist Empire and the Polish Republic had already begun this, but now, in the 1960s, it seemed that the time had come to drain large areas of swampland.[52]

Over the course of the period dealt with in this issue, the landscape and population have thus undergone major changes, not only as a result of violent and genocidal interventions, but also due to mechanization, new forms of organization in agricultural production and social conditions, together with the resulting demographic changes such as birth surpluses, migratory movements and urbanization. However, non-interventions also deserve mention here. Compared to the melioration works, for example, the construction of transport infrastructures in the 1960s and 1970s was significantly delayed. Sacrifices were also made in the areas of housing and school construction in the 1920s and 1930s in favor of other industrial, political and geographical priorities. Such decisions caused the gap between Polesia and neighboring or more distant regions to widen increasingly over time.

5 Historiography and Hetero-narrativity

As outlined in the previous section, apart from in the period from 1921 to 1939, Polesia was not a single political or administrative entity, but rather a geographical, ethnographic and cultural category perceived as a historical or natural landscape.

This alone has influenced research perspectives considerably. There have been many more linguistic, ethnographic and geographical studies done than political studies, and the linguistic and ethnographic history of Polesia has been more strongly highlighted than the region's political history. In an almost logical way, however, this only encouraged a latent culturalism, biologism and geographism, at least in the Soviet Union. The dominant narrative about Polesia remained that of a backward natural and cultural space. This does not mean, however, that this historiography is irrelevant to the analysis of "Polesia as a landscape of intervention."

At times, there has also been increased interest in Polesia from a political angle. This was particularly noticeable during the interwar period, when au-

[52] KOUIDA, Melioration im Belarussischen Polesien (as in footnote 11).

thors often did not distinguish between historiography and contemporary writing. In the 1930s, Józef Obrębski successfully wrote about Polesia. In his "ethno-sociological" texts, most of which were published posthumously, he distinguished between the different historical epochs in a different way than the term he chose suggests.[53]

A historiography explicitly focusing on Polesia has only begun to be intensively pursued in the last twenty years.[54] The universities in Brest and Homel have begun to provide more texts on local and regional political, economic and cultural (also religious) history. In 2016, the Academy of Sciences in Belarus published an extensive interdisciplinary volume.[55] In addition, several individual studies have been carried out on cities and rural districts. In Belarus, there were gaps between the official and unofficial writing of Belarusian history, however both perspectives tended towards nationalizing the local identities. Since the turn of the millennium, the number of critical and analytical publications has been steadily increasing.[56] This finding also applies to Ukrainian Polesia.[57]

Since 1991, Polesia has been written about in a way that has increasingly focused on national borders and narratives. Belarusian and Ukrainian Polesia are seldom reflected on together, let alone as a single entity. Therefore, a dividing line of perception runs between the two parts of Polesia, which is not really justifiable considering the historical border lines. The present-day Ukrainian-Belarusian border never played an identity-forming role, either in the Soviet Union or during the interwar period, or before that in the Tsarist Empire. From time to time, the region even formed a single administrative entity encompassing and joining regions that are today divided between Ukraine and Belarus. But today's national borders are of course also reflected in the research infrastructure and ultimately also in this journal, in which most essays clearly refer to either Belarusian or Ukrainian Polesia. This is also related to the issues brought about by the establishment of the Soviet nuclear

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53 JÓZEF OBRĘBSKI: Polesie [Polesia], ed. by ANNA ENGELKING, Warszawa 2007.

54 An earlier anthology was Zaharoddze. Vol. 3: Materyialy Navukova-krayaznauchai kanferentsyi "Palesse u XX stahoddzi" 1-4 chervenya 2000g. [Proceedings of the Scientific-Ethnogeographic Conference "Polesia in the 20th century", June 1-4, 2000], Minsk 2001.

55 Prypjatskae Palesse [Pripyat Polesia], Minsk 2016.

56 Cf. the instructive essays by CHARNIAKEVYCH, U poshukakh Palessia (as in footnote 33); as well as EADEM (ed.): Belarus' u tsiani Palessia [Belarus in the Shadow of Polesia], in: ARCHE (2013), 4, pp. 1-639.

57 STEPAN PAVLIUK: Nach dem Reaktorgau: Wissenschaftler dokumentieren die kulturellen Traditionen der Polissja, in: EVA GERHARDS, SVETLANA BOLTOVSKAJA (eds.): Tschernobyl: Expeditionen in ein verlorenes Land, Freiburg 2011, pp. 27-37; LUDMILA BULHAKOVA: Expeditionen in das verlorene Land, ibidem, pp. 146-147; ROMAN CHMELIK: Die Polissja und ihre Bewohner, ibidem, pp. 39-51; Narodoznavchi zoshyty / The Ethnology Notebooks (2006), 3-4; Polissia Ukraiiny: Materialy istoryko-etnohrafichnoho doslidzhennia [Ukrainian Polesia: Materials of Historical-ethnographic Research] 3 (2003): U mezhyrichchi Uzha I Tetereva [Interfluve of Uzh and Teterev]; TARAS VYKHOVANETS: Chastynka istorii [A Piece of History], Netishyn 2016.

industry in Polesia. While its sites were located in Ukrainian Polesia, the Chernobyl reactor disaster unified Polesia across borders in a new type of nuclear landscape, this time defined by contamination zones generated by the weather and wind conditions at the time of the accident.

In Poland, where there had already been greater freedom of research in the 1980s, both the interest in knowledge and the research infrastructure were increasingly oriented towards the "West," towards "Europe." Apart from the *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne*, which has been produced in Białystok since 1994, there was little research done on Polesia, however, since Poland joined the EU in 2004, there has been a real Polesia boom.[58]

There is still no systematic treatment of Yiddish and Hebrew sources, which is so important for writing about the history of the cities and shtetls of Polesia. [59] Several shtetls and cities from Chernobyl[60] in the east to the western city of Brest[61] were individually described and analyzed according to various aspects.[62] The *Tsajtshrift*, which has been published since 2011, has a strong political impact and has published material about the history of Polesia in the period we are looking at in this issue.[63] Of course, there are also general historical works containing information about Jewish Polesia.[64]

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58 Cf. esp. WOJCIECH ŚLESZYŃSKI (ed.): Województwo poleskie [Voivodeship Polesia], Kraków 2014; PIOTR CICHORACKI: Województwo poleskie 1921-1939: Z dziejów politycznych Polesia [Voivodeship Polesia, 1921-1939: On the Political History of Polesia], Łomianki 2014. These works relate for the most part to the time when West Polesia belonged to Poland.

59 YEHUDA BAUER: Der Tod des Schtetls, Berlin 2013, covers, at least, the Polish *kresy*.

60 EVA GERHARDS (ed.): Tschernobyl: Expeditionen in ein verlorenes Land, Petersberg 2011.

61 EVGENIJ S. ROZENBLAT: "Zhizn i sudba" Brestskoi evreiskoi obshchiny XIV-XX vv. ["Life and Fate" of the Jewish Community in Brest, 14th to 20th Century], Brest 1993.

62 E.g.: A. N. SVIRID: Evrejskaia sotsialistichskaia rabochaia partiia "Poalei Tsion" v Polesskom voevodstve [The Jewish Socialist Workers' Party "Poale Zion" in Polesian Voivodeship], in: Chalavek. Etnas. Terytoryya: Prablema razvitstsia zakhodniaha rehiena Belarusi: Materyialy mizhnar. navukova-prakt. kanf. Brest, 23-24 krasavik 1998 r., Brest 1998, vol. 2, pp. 168-173.

63 ANDREI LEBEDEV, VIKTOR PICHUKOV: Politika sovetskoj vlasti i otnoshenii iudejskoi religii na Gomelshchine v 1920-1930-x hh. [The Attitude of the Soviet Authorities to Jewish Religion in the Gomel Region in the 1920-1930s], in: Tsaitshrift: Zhurnal po izucheniiu evrejskoj istorii, demografii i ekonomiki, literatury, iazyka i etnografii 7 (2012), pp. 28-35; IRINA VAVRENIUK: Torgovaia shkola Artura Ashera v Pinske [Artur Asher's Commercial School in Pinsk], ibidem 8 (2013), pp. 90-101.

64 E.g. LEONID SMILOVICKIJ: Jewish Life in Belarus: The Final Decade of the Stalin Regime (1944-53), Budapest—New York 2014; EMMANUIL G. IOFFE: Stranitsy istorii evreev Belarusi: Kratkii nauchno-populiarnyi ocherk [Pages from the History of the Jews in Belarus: A Short Popular Science Essay], Minsk 1996; ALBERT KAGANOVITCH: The Long Life and Swift Death of Jewish Rechitsa: A Community in Belarus, 1625-2000, Madison/WI 2013; MORDECHAI NADAV: The Jews of Pinsk, 1506 to 1880, Stanford/CA 2008; LEONID SMILOVITSKII: Evrei v Turove: Istoriia mestechka mozyrskogo Polesia [Jews in Turau: The History of a Shtetl in Mazyr Polesia], Ierusalim 2008.

Although there are epoch-spanning micro-historical longitudinal studies about places in Polesia that are rich in detail, these are often descriptive and chronical-like rather than analytical.[65] As far as villages are concerned, geographic and ethnographic orientations tend to dominate. These longitudinal studies are very informative and rise above the purely spatial view of Polesia.

6 Sources on the history of Polesia

The sources also reflect the real borders. In addition to epochal and geographical heterogeneity, hetero-narrativity also already existed at the time the sources were produced: Polish(-Lithuanian), Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian and Yiddish/Hebrew sources stood and stand side by side. The different conditions around the production of written sources also had an influence on the place where they were stored. Initially, in historiography, only the archives in Minsk, Kiev, Warsaw and Moscow were evaluated; it was only after the year 2000 that the archives of the state and ex-party administrations in Brest and Homel were also taken into account to a greater degree. The archival holdings on Polesia in New York's YIVO Institute for Jewish Research as well as those in Tel-Aviv and Germany have not, for the most part, been extensively indexed or described in archival directories.

Subaltern narratives as a supplement to official literature are rare simply because many of the potential contributors were illiterate. Even in those cases where peasants took offensive action, they rarely did so with a reading public in mind.[66] This also applied to Polesia.

Obrębski recognized this phenomenon early on and so limited his research not only to participatory observation, but also included essays by primary school children and corresponded with local Polesians on a one to one basis. In the Soviet Union, a volume published in 1958 included stories told by communists and pro-communists about activities in western Belarus in the period before 1938[67] and many similar texts about the actions of pro-Soviet

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65 Three very different examples: A. I. ATNAHULAU (ed.): Khronika Ubartskaha Palessia [The Chronical of Ubarts Polesia], Minsk 2001; a diploma thesis from the interwar period: PILIP ZASIM: Shani, vioska Pruzhanskaha paveta: Ekanamichnae i satsyialnae dasledavanne [Shani, a Village in Pruzhany District: Economic and Social Investigations], in: ARCHE (2013), 4, pp. 359-419; AZRIEL SHOHET: The Jews of Pinsk, 1881 to 1941, Palo Alto 2012; a more analytical text from the interwar period is R. ROLECKI: Czudzin, wieś powiatu łuninieckiego: Stosunki społezno-gospodarcze [Czudzin, a Village in Lunints District: Socio-economic Relationships], in: Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne (2006), 26, pp. 146-217.

66 Correspondingly in the BSSR: DIANA SIEBERT: Bäuerliche Alltagsstrategien in der belarussischen SSR (1921-1941), Stuttgart 1998, p. 183.

67 U suravyia hady padpollia: Uspaminy bylykh chlenau KPZB-aktyunykh udzelnikau revaliutsyinaha rukhu u Zakhodnjai Belarusi [During the Harsh Years of Underground: Memories of Former KPZB Party Members, Having Taken an Active Part in the Revolutionary Movement in Western Belarus], Minsk 1958.

partisans during the Second World War. But we search in vain for authentic sources from peasants.

For this reason, some Belarusian historians have set about recording oral history and, since 2011[68], have made some of these recordings available online.[69] In particular, this has addressed previously neglected historical sore points like, for example, the Soviet occupation of West Polesia in September 1939 and the consequences of the reactor accident in Chernobyl for the heavily affected Polesian region. The disaster had been previously dealt with around the world as an event of global significance, but in terms of the key protagonists, only the history of the heroic first responders had been written. In addition to the "voices" that were recorded and literarily reworked by Svetlana Aleksievich, and have since been circulated world-wide, the *Belaruski Archiu Vusnai Historyi* (Belarusian Oral History Archive) has recently been gathering first-hand oral accounts about Chernobyl. These have also played an important role in the interview campaign carried out in Ukrainian Polesia by Svetlana Boltovska.[70] The workshop report on the north-east Ukrainian Slavutych featured in this issue is further proof of the great importance of the writing of oral history and tradition.

7 The articles

Included in this issue are the results of a workshop held in Marburg in late 2017. These are supplemented by further articles. Katja Bruisch's contribution illustrates that a number of fore-runner schemes took place prior to the Soviet land melioration efforts in Polesia. Bruisch focuses the "Western Expedition" led by Iosif I. Žilinskij, who was commissioned to drain 2.5 million hectares of land and build an extensive canal system. Bruisch interprets this process within the context of imperial history, not only as an attempt to develop and open up new land, but also a claim to comply with European standards. With regard to the aspect of internal colonization, she points out as a peculiarity that Polesia was essentially concerned with the establishment of an administration and an infrastructure. The aim of resettling depopulated or sparsely populated regions—like the initiative embarked on in the steppe regions in the south east of the Empire—was, according to Bruisch not a realistic option. From a local perspective, the economic benefits of the Western Expedition were at best of benefit to the landowners. But by the end of the nineteenth century there was already a debate about the ecosystem. The melioration works on the Pripiat River were criticized for presenting Polesia as terra incognita from a geological point of view. Then, in the 1890s, when it was noticed that the water table around the lower Dnieper River had dropped,

68 http://www.nashapamiac.org/docs/BAVH%20-%20Uvodziny%20u%20kancepcyju%20archiva.%20A.%20Smalianczuk.pdf (2018-12-05).

69 http://www.nashapamiac.org/archive/home (2018-12-05).

70 BOLTOVSKA (as in footnote 16).

the risks of human intervention in the ecosystem became apparent for the first time.

Against this background, Diana Siebert deals with "The Draining of Wetlands and Other Modernization Initiatives in West Polesia from 1921 to 1939". As part of the eastern territories (*kresy*) of the Second Polish Republic, the voivodeship of Polesia belonged to the "poorhouse" of Europe in the interwar period. In the censuses of 1921 and 1931, the Belarusian part of the population was marginalized through the instrumentalization of their designation as "locals," but even the minority concerned did not articulate any interest in Polesia. Rather, it can be put down to the widespread lack of national awareness that the inhabitants of the *kresy* came to terms with the redefinition of their homeland from "Russian heartland" to "Polish borderland." From Warsaw's point of view, it was not irredentism (which was virulent in other peripheries such as the former Galicia) that posed a problem in Polesia, but rather the region's backwardness. Interventions therefore came in the form of agricultural reform, land melioration and settlement policy. Apart from the fact that most measures—other than land reallocation—were more or less stuck in the initial stages, a double contradiction emerged in practice. In contrast to the Tsarist period, the Polish concept of internal colonization involved, on the one hand, an active population policy. Ex-military settlement was reserved for Polish Catholics, and rural land was intended to be developed and opened up, first and foremost, with settlers from Galicia in mind. On the other hand, the local population's hunger for land was not satisfied and the peasant farmers, who were still rooted within a subsistence economy, were not in the position to accept the opportunities that modernity would have had to offer.

On the basis of these conditions, Artem Kouida is able to elucidate in his article entitled "Land Melioration in Belarusian Polesia as a Modernization Factor in the Soviet Periphery" that the apocalyptic proportions with which the consequences of Brezhnev's agricultural policy have been described, are not solely due to the pure arbitrariness of one Communist Party leader. Nevertheless, the melioration of Belarusian Polesia after 1965 was carried out in the style of a "major communist construction site" typical of the Stalin era. The primary interest of the state was to set in motion a push for modernization involving both the irrigation of arid areas in Central Asia and the draining of wetlands along the western periphery with the overall aim to guarantee agricultural surpluses and a plentiful food supply for a growing Soviet population, thus ensuring independence from the world market or the USA. Kouida argues that the population that had previously lost out during the collectivization of agriculture now profited from the development of a regional and rural infrastructure. Within the framework of melioration, not only were large numbers of jobs created for mostly foreign specialists, but the locals also benefited from an immense increase in their material standard of living. Many villages still characterized by wooden huts and muddy paths could now enjoy

the benefits of modern infrastructure for the first time in the form of apartment buildings and asphalted roads.

The other side of the coin, however, was the over-exploitation of natural resources. The lowering of the groundwater level, deforestation and the use of pesticides led to desertification and a decimation of the region's biodiversity. Consequently, in the context of Glasnost and Perestroika, writers and journalists began to describe a "meliorative Chernobyl."

In their article "Nature Conservation in the Belarusian Marshland: The Pripiat National Park as Timber Source and Hunting Paradise," Thomas M. Bohn and Aliaksandr Dalhouski align with Kouida's thesis. They argue that the locals en masse behaved indifferently towards the natural environment as a resource worth protecting, but acknowledge that, in recent times, a number of ecological initiatives have been launched by members of civil societies. Although a nature reserve was established in 1969 as compensation for the large-scale intervention in the Polesian landscape, and despite the fact that today's marketing strategists work with terms such as "the Belarusian Amazon" and "the green lung of Europe", there are a number of contradictions and inconsistencies. Firstly, instead of the Ol'many swamps, which had already attracted the attention of moorland experts during the interwar period, an area of forest directly adjacent to the Pripiat River, which had already been developed during the Western Expedition, was chosen for the reserve. This decision came about because priority was given to the military, who had interests in a training area on the sparsely populated border with Ukraine. A second contradiction was that, due to an exemption in the regulations, permission was granted to a forestry operation to continue logging in the area until 1975. While the Soviet concept of a nature reserve (*zapovednik*) required that the area be used for research as an open-air laboratory, the national park that was established in 1996 is aligned with the American model and thus also sees itself as a resource for tourism. In the post-Soviet context, the park has had to finance itself to a greater or lesser extent and, since the turn of the twenty-first century, it has primarily functioned as a hunting and business enterprise. Since 2009, the reintroduction of bison and red deer into the wild has even justified so-called safaris which, in view of the quasi-feudal power relations, continue to generate new patterns of self-colonization.

Svetlana Boltovska's interest focuses on "Local Identities in Ukrainian Polesia and their Transformation under the (Post-) Soviet Nuclear Economy." Because the fallout from Chernobyl fundamentally affected the whole eastern part of Belarusian Polesia, the international public often overlooks the fact that nuclear power plants were built at three sites in Ukrainian Polesia. In addition to the nuclear plants, model socialist cities were built with modern infrastructures. While young people, who saw schooling and military service as a way to escape the backwardness of village-life, moved away from the region en masse, technicians and construction workers needed for the new projects immigrated to the local cities, bringing together people from around the Soviet Union and giving rise to a new pioneering spirit.

This went hand in hand with a rapid change in identity, whereby the word *Poleshuk* (indigenous Polesian) was always understood as a foreign label, imposed from the outside. While locals living outside the nuclear cities traditionally focused on their family or their village, i.e. the closer circles of their traditional homeland, the migrant workers in the factory towns, who came from the vicinity of the nuclear power plants and from other Soviet republics, appropriated the "melting pot" narrative, which was also promoted by official propaganda. The polarization of "old" and "new" now aligned with other pairs of contrasting terms like "urban" and "rural," "modern" and "backward," "worker" and "peasant." The degree of Sovietization manifested itself in the use of Russian or Ukrainian as an everyday language. Accordingly, it was also the older generation who, after the Chernobyl disaster, resisted resettlement or endeavored illegally to return to the exclusion zone. In the context of the economic crisis in the first years of transformation, nuclear cities were also seen as a nuclear threat and a symbol of colonization under the aegis of Moscow.

Supplementing the essays collected in this issue is a workshop report from the eastern part of Polesia, a region which, although less affected by nuclear fallout, became part of the nuclear intervention and clean-up landscape after Chernobyl. Here, in North-Eastern Ukraine, some 50 kilometers northeast of Chernobyl and connected to the nuclear power plant via a railway line, the new town of Slavutych was built between 1986 and 1989 to replace the evacuated Pripiat. The new construction project played a significant role in the Soviet narrative around overcoming the nuclear catastrophe. At the same time, Slavutych was also the last planned city in the Soviet Union and thus represents the endpoint of a long, ambivalent history of urban planning under socialist conditions. The multidisciplinary student collective of authors led by sociologist Natalia Otrishchenko and historian Iryna Sklokina presents the results of a research summer school that focused on commemorative cultures, cognitive maps and urban practices of the inhabitants of Slavutych. The texts record how the residents of Chernobyl or their children adopted the newly built city and established urban traditions. While originally the narrative of the rebirth of a socialist city and the myth of friendship between peoples were cultivated within the multi-ethnic Soviet Union, today there is an increasing focus on founding an identity out of the spirit of modernity, in which the evocation of a youthful spirit of awakening is paired with the Soviet nostalgia of the founding generation.

In their entirety, the contributions illustrate that Polesia experienced a series of structural interventions of varying scope and intensity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in addition to the military interventions of the First and Second World Wars. However, it is not always possible to speak of an intervention landscape in the sense defined above. The driving force behind the campaigns, which were generally communicated as initiatives to modernize the country, was the state's interest in safeguarding, dominating and economically exploiting the peripheral region. But it was only during Soviet

and post-Soviet times that these interventions were accompanied by an increase in the material standard of living for those affected. The vast majority of people showed themselves as willing to pay the price of a radical change in their natural environment. Dust storms and atomic clouds, which spread out beyond the administrative borders, showed that new enviro-technical systems were emerging and revealed the limits of humans' ability to control their own acts of intervention.

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