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PEASANT COMMUNITIES IN INTERWAR POLAND'S EASTERN BORDERLANDS: POLISH HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE LOCAL STORY

Abstract

The nationality issues of interwar Poland's eastern borderlands (*Kresy*) have been a popular theme in post-war Polish historiography. A considerable part of this historiography has continued the debates of interwar experts and political activists, which revolved around the two interwar censuses and the question of ethnic identity. For this reason, scholars have given priority to statistical evidence in order to determine the national belonging and categorize the inhabitants of the eastern borderlands into particular ethnic and national groups. What is more, they have drawn their conclusions on the assumption that identity is objectively definable by blood ties. I argue that peasant identity in these borderlands was driven by 'localness', that is, a specific symbolic universe, set of values and conventions typical of peasant culture. Thus, identity cannot be comprehensively described through ethnic categories alone. In the article, I explore some practices of localness such as the malleable roles people ascribed to others in everyday life. For large groups of peasants, they were of vital importance in the reception of nation-building projects.

Keywords: peasants, Poland's eastern borderlands, nation, ethnicity, localness.

I
INTRODUCTION

In voices of peasants who reacted to the emergence of the Polish state in 1918 we find two contradictory attitudes: apparent zealous support of Polish independence and, conversely, indifference to change of state or noticeable lack of enthusiasm for the reign of 'lords'.[1]

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[1] The term 'lords' (in local dialects: *pany*) was commonly used in reference to people in higher social position, not landlords only but the Polish intelligentsia, clerks, and the state as imagined by peasants.

The first account could be illustrated for instance by a considerable number of memoirs written for contests by the young generation which wished a transformation of the fairly rigid societal model and aspired to better living conditions.[2] It often begins with a paean of praise towards the architects of the 'reborn' republic and pledges loyalty to new authorities. The second reaction, giving no attention or respect to the new political situation, is infrequently expressed in publications and not necessarily in the peasants' own utterances. Actors nearly silent in self-generated narratives can, however, be traced in ethnographic, sociological, and economic monographs on rural communities as well as in internal documentation of state institutions – usually in exchanges between governmental bodies such as the security and education ministries. Different attitudes – divided here schematically into two opposing points of view – were interconnected with more general divisions among inhabitants which defined the society of interwar Poland, namely its regional particularities, social hierarchy, and levels of urban development.

In interwar times, the identity of inhabitants of the eastern borderlands and acquisition of national consciousness in these multicultural areas were discussed frequently and ardently among the intelligentsia. Peasants were denounced as 'backward' and 'primitive', as resistant to change and lacking involvement in the Polish state and national projects. Such claims did not stop the intelligentsia from assigning these peasants arbitrarily to Polish nationality (concurrently, the Ukrainian intelligentsia wanted to see them as the 'true' Ukrainians with a distinct 'national character').

But these and the other ascribed statuses were of little significance for a large group of peasants since their identity was local in the first place. Such localness, I argue, expressed itself in practices of stating boundaries of social and cultural sort and related symbolical notions of a deeply religious character which secured the field of values appreciated by peasants. It served as a framework not only for interactions between individuals and integrity of their worldview but also – consequently – as the basis for receiving and adopting anything

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[2] The most well-known contest was organized by the sociologist Józef Chałasiński. Part of the memoirs' collection was published in Chałasiński's book *Młode pokolenie chłopów. Procesy i zagadnienia kształtowania się warstwy chłopskiej w Polsce*, 4 vols. (Warsaw, 1938).

new. National ideas, popularized then by various agencies, were transmitted and evaluated also through this framework. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of localness – pertaining more to shared knowledge, unobtrusive symbols, and social means of coping with everyday life than concerned with a material place itself – is practically absent from historical analyses of nation-building in the eastern borderlands. To elucidate reasons for this lack, I look at how post-war literature interplayed with the relevant interwar discussions. The concept of my paper is thus based on the simple juxtaposition of two elements. First, I examine the predominant mode of explanation of the 'ethnic and nationality issues' and 'identity question' that prevails in the Polish historiography (particularly in the post-1989 one) in reference to interwar ideas and interpretations. Second, I turn to a local narrative which can be traced in a variety of sources commonly used by historians as well as the ones excluded from the majority of studies.[3]

II
'NATIONAL MINORITIES' AND 'THE PEOPLE'
OF THE INTERWAR POLISH STATE

The eastern borderlands[4] – which in the interwar period spread along the frontiers of Poland with Lithuania and Latvia on the north, the Soviet Union[5] on the east and Romania on the south – had the reputation of an exotic and romantic territory on the one hand, 'uncivilized' and neglected on the other. Each region of this phenomenon[6] was

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[3] This paper is partly based on my unpublished Ph.D. thesis, see Olga Linkiewicz, 'Wiejskie społeczności lokalne na obszarze polsko-ukraińskiego pogranicza etnicznego w Galicji Wschodniej 1918–1939' (Warsaw, Instytut Historii PAN, 2009).

[4] Nowadays and also in interwar times Poles commonly have referred to the region as *Kresy* (literally means 'ends' or 'verges'). A sentimental notion behind this term embraces a special position of this space in Polish national identity and emphasizes efforts of many generations to maintain and defend its Polishness, see Kaja Kaźmierska, *Doświadczenia wojenne Polaków a kształtowanie tożsamości etnicznej. Analiza narracji kresowych* (Warsaw, 1999).

[5] Since 1922.

[6] The eastern borderlands embraced several regions. The main ones were historically known as Eastern Galicia, Volhynia, Polesia, and the region of Vilnius (in Polish *Wileńszczyzna*).

distinctive in terms of its cultural specificity outlined in the inter-play of various religions, languages, and nationalities. There was a number of similarities however, especially between rural areas which inhabitants intermingled and were unified by the same background and lifestyle as well as by experience of strong social divisions that played a decisive role in the identity discourse.[7]

It is not surprising that in discussions about these borderlands the 'ethnic and nationality issues' were inextricably linked to social structure, in particular the 'peasant question' which included the most important issues of the time – overpopulation and land fragmentation. The term 'national minorities', introduced to international debates in the nineteenth century,[8] in interwar Poland came into broader use in circles of educated people. In popular perception it was attached to the notion of a confrontational activist and potentially trouble-some neighbour. Yet peasants at large were seen as passive actors. They were treated by the Polish elites as the internal 'savage' but not fellow-citizens and members of the sovereign state. The official 'minority' status and claims for respective rights or duties were not thus associated with peasants and rather reserved for their spokes-people. An illustration to this way of thinking comes from one of dozens similar discussions that politicians and academics assembled. During the convention devoted to the Polesia region, held in Warsaw in September 1936, Juliusz Poniatowski, an economist and politician, was wondering how to win the 'friendship' and 'gratitude' of the peasantry: "Primitive societies, not mannered, have a profound sense of justice … The people [*lud*] feel justice."[9] Poniatowski appealed to the common notion of a peasant as a curious 'type', photographed and

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[7] See for instance Józef Obrębski, *Polesie*, ed. Anna Engelking (Studia etnoso-cjologiczne, 1, Warsaw, 2007), 34.

[8] See 'Introduction: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands', in Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington, 2013), 5.

[9] Stanisław Paprocki (ed.), *I Zjazd Naukowy poświęcony Ziemiom Wschodnim w Warszawie, 20 i 21 września 1936 r., Polesie. (Sprawozdania i dyskusje)* (Pamięt-nik Zjazdów Naukowych Poświęconych Ziemiom Wschodnim, 1, Warsaw, 1938). More about the notion of 'sense of justice' as an example of conventional wisdom see for instance Markus D. Dubber, 'Making Sense of the Sense of Justice', *Buffalo Law Review*, liii (2005), 2–29.

displayed as purchase in local town studios throughout the country,[10] in a manner of *Völkerschauen*.[11]

A special occasion for having discussions about the 'ethnic and national issues' arose in reference to the results of the two interwar censuses of 1921 and 1931, reflecting respectively religion and nationality, and religion and language (the 1931 census excluded the question about nationality and asked only about religion and mother tongue). Both interwar analyses and post-war historiography put these statistics as the central point of their investigations. They served as the basis for consecutive, allegedly new estimations of the national composition of Poland. This choice was not accidental. The first reason for it is obvious: the censuses were politically hot and caused a lot of disagreement. Second, despite doubts about the censuses' credibility, the census-based statistics have been perceived by historians as the real evidence, that is the most certain and objective source to reconstruct the then state and changes in ethnic and national identity. As any other source produced by official agencies, also these statistics have been palpably reinforced by the power of being a document and legitimized by institutions they represent. What lies at the root of overestimating their analytical value, is the belief that historians should prove their 'uncertain' procedures to be scientific. In a considerable part of Polish historiography this tendency manifests itself in mechanical compliance with procedures in order to enhance the results to be measureable and coherent. It facilitates presenting historical data as mere facts. In the case of the two censuses, we learn that some voters might have been under political pressure of commissioners who persuaded them to declare Polish nationality. We do not learn anything else about the encounter between such a commissioner and a peasant. It is important to note that nearly always this was an encounter between the government representative – a figure who belonged to the category of 'lords' (*pany*) – and the *muzhyk* (peasant) also called 'simple' (*prosty*) or just a 'man' (*tchalavek*), representing the category of the 'lesser people',

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[10] Józef Schwartz (ed.), *Zaleszczyki i okolica. Przewodnik krajoznawczy* (Tarnopol, 1931), 56, 62.

[11] Andre Gingrich, 'The German-Speaking Countries. Ruptures, Schools, and Nontraditions: Reassessing the History of Sociocultural Anthropology in Germany', in Fredrik Barth *et al.* (eds.), *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology* (Chicago, 2005), 85.

who occupied lower levels of the social hierarchy ladder.[12] In other words, this was the encounter between people who interpreted the surrounding world very differently.

The interwar school data offer us several examples of such confrontations. For instance, the cross-examination cases which were recorded during the plebiscite set up as a result of *Lex Grabski* of 1924 – a set of bills that, aside from other matters, was proposed to determine the language of instruction in public schools in ethnically-mixed territories.[13] Two main attitudes occurred then among inhabitants being questioned. The first one was seemingly passive albeit defensive, demonstrated by a repetition of the same formula: 'and still like it used to be'.[14] This answer aimed to avoid confrontation and implied keeping the existing state of affairs. It reminds us that according to peasants' cosmology, the sense of certain phrases – often unclear to a speaker – counted inasmuch as effectiveness obtained through the magic power of the stated words. The second attitude appears to be more confrontational, directed against authorities and the reign of 'lords': "We do not need Polish here."[15] As a matter of fact, this statement was supposed to have a similar if not identical goal: the words keeping former balance should have protected a community from undesirable influence and rapid changes.

Post-war analyses emerged thus out of a very particular reading of the interwar statistical data. As Mędrzecki argued, the same numbers prompted a different interpretation however very similarly constituted.[16] While many interwar researchers were making efforts to claim everyone that could not claim themselves to be Polish, the majority of post-war historians endeavoured to include all undefined local groups into definite, as the authors often put it, (national)

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[12] See for instance Chałasiński, *Młode pokolenie chłopów*, i, 68–73.

[13] The so-called language bill and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education decree following it meant, theoretically, a choice to be made between Polish and 'minority languages' – Ukrainian and Belarusian. In fact, the introduction of bilingual education served as a tool for Polonization. Furthermore, the plebiscite antagonized inhabitants of many communities by intensive agitation.

[14] Tsentral'nyĭ Derzhavnyĭ Istorychnyĭ Arkhiv Ukraïny, L'viv (henceforth: TSDIAL), Kuratorium Okręgu Szkolnego Lwowskiego, 179/2/1520.

[15] TSDIAL, 179/2/31.

[16] Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, 'Liczebność i rozmieszczenie grup narodowościowych w II Rzeczypospolitej w świetle wyników II spisu powszechnego (1931 r.)', *Dzieje Najnowsze*, xv, 1–2 (1983), 231–52.

'minorities'.[17] The census-based statistics used by them to segregate interwar society into national groups and moreover, proposed as the main, 'pilot' source representing the 'nationality issues of the Second Republic', misconstrue phenomena which they indicate, such as cultural diffusion and existence of groups typical of the borderland's culture – the 'culture in transition'.[18] The propensity to focus on statistical data without its social context – thus data reassuringly firm – led some historians to overlook the following: in the borderlands a declaration of nationality, 'mother tongue' or denomination, very often did not adequately reflect the essence and complexity of identity issues in their dynamics.

Similarly, the situation is two-sided when we examine terminology used to name groups of peasants and classify them into subcategories. These subcategories seek to render two phenomena: *latynnyki* (literally: 'belonging to Latin' which implies identity related to Roman Catholic Church and Polish culture) and 'Poles Greek-Catholics' (which we could understand as Poles of Greek-Catholic denomination). Both terms obviously had social grounding but, importantly, also served as political arguments in interwar times. The quantity of these subgroups was restlessly estimated by Polish and Ukrainian scholars also in recent literature which additionally resulted in the production of numerous new terms. The first phenomenon of so-called *latynnyki* the historian Grzegorz Hryciuk describes as 'Ukrainian Roman-Catholic population', 'Ukrainian *latynnyki*' as well as 'Ukrainian Roman-Catholics', to eventually qualify them as a group that more and more identified itself with Polishness. The second phenomenon the author defines as a group of a 'double identity' to stand for equally: 'Poles of Greek-Catholic denomination', 'Polish Greek-Catholic population', and 'Polish-speaking Ukrainians' (the latter in agreement with the Ukrainian historiography). At the same time, Hryciuk – as some other foremost experts on the Polish-Ukrainian relations – adopts the concept of 'cultures in transition' and considers equivocal attitudes as an outcome of the borderland diffusion of cultures. Nevertheless, this transition is introduced as a change of national 'self-identification':

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[17] Cp. *ibidem*; Jerzy Tomaszewski, 'W sprawie artykułu Włodzimierza Mędrzeckiego', *Dzieje Najnowsze*, xvi, 2 (1984), 191–2; and *idem*, *Rzeczpospolita wielu narodów* (Warsaw, 1985), 78–9.

[18] Mędrzecki, 'Liczebność i rozmieszczenie', 231–51.

the third, very significant factor, that had an impact on the shaping of nationality breakdown of Galicia were transformations of national self-identification of individuals and groups.[19]

Historian Czesław Partacz explains the applied term 'Ruthenians *latynnyki*' in a rather vague way, which tells us how a past local reality is adjusted to present-day categories:

> Among the eastern Galician peasants there were many Poles. They lived surrounded by a Ukrainian population for generations, mixing with it. With time, most of them lost almost all their national and cultural features. The Latin Rite was the only mark distinguishing them from Ruthenians-Uniate. The Ukrainian language was used in everyday life. Becoming Ruthenians of language and custom, these peasants had remained Latin Rite. … *Latynnyki*, despite using Ukrainian for everyday purposes, did not entirely feel themselves to be a part of the Ukrainian nation.

In his view 'Poles-Greek Catholics' were both "Polonized Ruthenians (Ukrainians)" and "Poles belonging to this [Greek-Catholic] Rite as a result of the scarcity of parishes, churches, and priests."[20] A note in the glossary by Włodzimierz Wilczyński says that *latynnyki* is a term describing "Ukrainian Poles who got Ukrainianized" (in other words became Ukrainian) but "remained Roman Catholics."[21] The *latynnyki* appear among other nine groups with Ukrainian ethnos Robert Potocki has enumerated. It stands out from the rest as the group 'resigned' from its former Ukrainian ethnicity and converted to Roman Catholicism.[22] Stanisław Ciesielski sees the group as 'Ukrainian Roman-Catholics'.[23] This terminological creativity confuses the issue further. Elżbieta Smułkowa, the editor of a short realistic novel set in the Podilya (Podolia) region, notes that the difference which should be marked between fictional *latynnyki* and *Rusyny* (or 'Ukrainians')

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[19] Grzegorz Hryciuk, *Przemiany narodowościowe i ludnościowe w Galicji Wschodniej i na Wołyniu w latach 1931–1948* (Toruń, 2005), 104–15.

[20] Czesław Partacz, 'Stosunki religijne w Galicji Wschodniej. Rusini łacinnicy i Polacy grekokatolicy', *Rocznik Przemyski*, xxviii (1991/1992), 123–46.

[21] Włodzimierz Wilczyński, *Leksykon kultury ukraińskiej* (Cracow, 2004), 133.

[22] Robert Potocki, *Polityka państwa polskiego wobec zagadnienia ukraińskiego w latach 1930–1939* (Lublin, 2003), 44–8.

[23] Stanisław Ciesielski, *Kresy Wschodnie II Rzeczypospolitej i problemy identyfikacji narodowej*, in *idem* (ed.), *Przemiany narodowościowe na Kresach Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej 1931–1948* (Toruń, 2003), 9–51.

remains in contradiction with the interpretation presented by the prominent historian Ryszard Torzecki:

> According to Torzecki … *latynnyki* are Ukrainian-Catholics. … Here [in the novel], at least some of the *latynnyki* are Poles.[24]

In all these examples scholars assumed that they must assign discussed groups to one or another nationality. Certain ambiguity in some hypotheses has two reasons: not surprisingly, authors were unsure about what social reality is to be found behind these terms. Secondly, some historians, including Torzecki[25] and those who followed him, got engaged in the process of negotiating the past with the Ukrainian historiography and therefore, at least slightly, adjusted their arguments in order to reach a consensus with the Ukrainian colleagues. Participants in interwar debates presented a fundamentally opposite stance in this respect. It seems however that their statements are a source of the repeated patterns that occurred in post-war literature. The Ministry of Internal Affairs representative reported in 1931 about *latynnyki* in the way the majority of the spokespersons at this time would:

> Nationalistic Ukrainian press has raised the *latynnki* affair in the dailies, claiming they are native Ukrainians and demanding sermons in Ukrainian. The work of Polish social institutions in the villages where *latynnki* live – who are, since time immemorial, Roman Catholics and forming a considerable percentage of the communities – greatly concerns Ukrainian nationalistic circles which fight 'Latin' as a contributor to 'the division of national unity'. Therefore, the above-mentioned press exhorted the Greek-Catholic clergy to take active action against Latin vicars.[26]

An indispensable part of this 'fight over souls' was to state clear divisions between people, according to their alleged descent and 'natural' bonds which united all potential members of the Polish or Ukrainian nation. Leon Wasilewski (1929) considered *latynnyki* in their majority as 'consciously regarding themselves as Polish' despite

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[24] Maria Schoferowa, *Grzędowie. Opowieść z Zimnego Podola; Exodus. Sztuka sceniczna*, ed. Elżbieta Smułkowa (Warsaw, 1998), 11.

[25] Ryszard Torzecki, *Kwestia ukraińska w Polsce w latach 1923–1929* (Cracow, 1989).

[26] Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych, *Sprawozdanie z życia mniejszości narodowych za III kwartał 1931 r.* (Warsaw, 1931), 109.

speaking Ukrainian in everyday life. He failed to clarify, though, what this Polish consciousness conveyed.[27] Experts like Wasilewski and the activists that argued so fiercely for their variant of nation were aware that the identity of people in the borderlands has an especially fluid and transitional character. They also knew that the 'borderland situation' influenced the relatively slow pace of national acquisition among peasants. The latter process took various directions which depended on individual and collective choices. The interwar ethnographic studies show that a certain percentage of the Roman-Catholic villages underwent processes of assimilation to the Ukrainian national culture. Their inhabitants joined Ukrainian cooperatives and were attending the 'Prosvita' reading rooms.[28] Such public activities among peasants sometimes indicated commitment to the nationality issues. In other cases no devotion to the cause or reflection on the national sense of belonging were involved: the simple necessity to be fashionable and accepted by fellow villagers made peasants take part in nationally-related practices, if only access to them was available.

The second term mentioned above – 'Poles Greek-Catholics' – covers not exactly a diverse group without any fixed identity, as it were in the former case, but rather various phenomena under one name. Usually, historians refer firstly to a particular example: a small group that published periodicals *Greko-Katolik* ('Greek-Catholic', in Cracow) and *Polak Greko-Katolik* ('Pole-Greek-Catholic', in Lvov), and, we might suspect, consciously chosen to declare as Poles of Greek Catholic denomination. Then there are other individuals of Greek-Catholic denomination who identified themselves with the Polish national culture and usually represented the intelligentsia or peasants aspiring to this group. They might then have taken the next step of assimilation: a conversion to Roman Catholicism. These cases did not change the overall picture which shows that in the east part of Galicia the assimilation movement towards Polishness was a trend of a minor importance. Even in voices of the proponents of the 'as much Polish nation as possible' attitude we detect a slight hesitation as to the particularities of being a Pole of Greek-Catholic denomination

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[27] Leon Wasilewski, *Sprawy narodowościowe w teorii i w życiu* (Warsaw and Cracow, 1929), 95.

[28] See, e.g., Józef Gajek, *Zarys etnograficzny zachodniej części Podola* (Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, Sectio F, II, 1, Lublin, 1947), 1–190.

or alternatively 'of the Polish mother-tongue'. Alfons Krysiński, a governmental expert on statistics who advocated the Polish national interest, wrote in 1938:

> Maybe, many from the census [of 1931] 'Poles Greek-Catholics' group have so far only a potential bond with the Polishness, with no signs of national activity. Nevertheless, are they Ukrainians … these Ruthenians that firmly disclaim any connection with Ukraine?[29]

Some authors apply the 'Poles-Greek Catholics' term to the common cases of children coming from Roman-Catholic families or so-called mixed marriages who attended Greek-Catholic churches and often were christened there. In these cases the two phenomena, *latynnyki* and 'Poles-Greek Catholics' conflate into one.[30]

Likewise, a phenomenon of the 'Orthodox Poles' flourished as a concept in the interwar times and appeared later in subsequent debates. In 1930, Olgierd Czarnowski, another supporter of the Polish national interest, in a typically paternalistic and superior manner argued that

> the bonds with the Orthodox religion are more and more loose, particularly in the villages where the people are Polish by origin and culture, and left Catholicism only out of fear of persecution or to get benefit.

According to Czarnowski, the same peasants who "frequently do not distinguish religion from nationality" are Polish "of flesh and blood."[31] Clearly, the intelligentsia believed that the masses of this composite society were easy to be shaped in a desirable direction. This story contains a second important component: the conviction that peasants did not distinguish between religion and nationality, which also appears as a claim that they identified these two (for example, in peasants' imagination a Roman Catholic would equal a Pole). Such a conviction has formed the basis for the stereotypical view of categories which belonged to the internal communication

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[29] Alfons Krysiński, *Ludność ukraińska (ruska) w Polsce w świetle spisu 1931 r.* (Warsaw, 1938).

[30] See, e.g., Hryciuk, *Przemiany narodowościowe*; Partacz, 'Stosunki religijne'; Łucja Kapralska, *Pluralizm kulturowy i etniczny a odrębność regionalna Kresów południowo-wschodnich w latach 1918–1939* (Cracow, 2000), 150. Kapralska points, however, that some inhabitants cannot be clearly divided into particular groups.

[31] Olgierd Czarnowski, *Polacy prawosławni na Rusi* (Brest, 1927).

of a village. In fact, these categories carried a broader meaning and expressed the symbolic universe shared by peasants. Researchers, however, interpret them along the censuses' lines. Thus for instance a 'Pole', *Russki*, and 'Orthodox' are understood as a declaration of national identity or religion. Interpretations go back to the views officially presented by the interwar intelligentsia and apply them in two ways: directly (*latynnyki* were Poles) or in a reversed pattern (*latynnyki* were Ukrainian Roman-Catholics). All discussed investigations, which might wish to stay politically neutral, overcome the national paradigm or rather remain within its frames, are preoccupied with assigning national categories and numbers to groups of peasants but rarely look for social reality beyond. There is the underlying cause for this mode of interpretation, namely a widely-held belief that ethnic identity is a natural feature, inherited and determined by blood.

<div align="center">III</div>

INTERNAL EXPERIENCE OF A LOCAL PEASANT COMMUNITY

In general, a peasant community consisted of people who were taught and socialized by their environment – primarily family – and those who received basic school education, often becoming functionally illiterate again soon after. This situation changed gradually in interwar times when the young generation attended public schools *en masse* and more frequently joined sports and paramilitary associations. Such activities together with political life, which imposed a new code of conduct in the communal domain, brought tensions and stirred up public opinion in villages. They also stimulated new attitudes and broadened the worldviews of peasants who adapted and recast what they found attractive or needed.

Notwithstanding numerous novelties at the time, the specific values of peasant culture – different from those typical of the nobility or the intelligentsia – were recognized as fundamental by a local community. Moreover, social practices and strategies in everyday life were shaped by and contrived according to logic and rationality which corresponded with vernacular cosmology.[32] From the intelligentsia's point of view, this mode of reasoning and the following code of conduct

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[32] Cp. John Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community* (Oxford, 1964).

were both illogical and irrational. We can see the then relationships between ordinary peasants and the intelligentsia – especially the Polish state representatives – as a situation of a constant conflict or, perhaps more adequately, as redressing a societal balance after WWI and the emergence of a new administrative power which, to a large degree, had an impact on various spheres of local life. In all of them, conflicting views or attitudes had their roots in different or differently assessed values, that is beliefs and principles – starting from judging what is useful and important and what is not, to generally accepted morality. The encounter between ideals and standards characteristic of particular groups has been portrayed in correspondence, reports, and documentation of governmental institutions which received a heavy amount of grief coming from peasants and 'lords' complaining and criticizing one another all through the interwar period.

There are a few decisive points which reveal the separateness and specificity of peasant culture in the eastern borderlands at this time, in other words, outline its localness I mentioned at the beginning of the paper. Features which made the culture distinct have been perceived by many scholars, primarily sociologists and ethnographers, as a consequence of relatively limited variety of contacts. It would be difficult to claim that for instance distant hamlets in the marshland of the Polesia region were not isolated at all and enjoyed the same amount of social exchange as similar villages somewhere in central Poland. However, boundaries established in order to state and acknowledge a comprehensive worldview were evoked by other people, namely a difference,[33] thus interactions and mobility.[34]

> The people of the 'Mazurian'[35] village use Polish words to signify culturally advanced items and *Russki* to describe things of everyday use (such as garden tools or plants).[36]

The example coming from Polesia shows a practice common in many regions of Poland where peasantry lived next to petty nobility,

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[33] See Obrębski, *Polesie*.

[34] Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo, 1969).

[35] Adj. from *Mazur*: a name for people coming from the historical Mazovia region. The name *Mazur* comes from a specific pronunciation typical of this region.

[36] See J. Tarnacki, in Paprocki (ed.), *I Zjazd Naukowy*, 44.

sometimes in separate villages, in other cases together albeit always in some respects apart from each other. In the eastern borderlands the autonomy of petty nobility might have been marked by a label 'Polish' understood, however, as a cultural rather than an ethnic distinction, and indicating a higher social status. 'Mazur' as any other cultural category was not rigid and hence exchangeable. In many instances it represented people who, an external observer would have noticed, were alike to their peasant neighbours: they led a very similar style of life, spoke the same language, and also reacted indifferently to endeavours of the Polish state.[37] In other cases, it was used to point the recent settlers who came into the eastern territories in the 1920s and 1930s. Even if of the same social background, these people were different in terms of customs and dialect they spoke. Moreover, some of them were seeking for the support of governmental authorities.

The excerpt from discussion on Polesia tells us yet another thing: social divisions also manifested themselves through the manner in which language was used. Certain things (e.g. a fork, a supper, or a barn) were associated with people of noble origin. Villagers used Polish terms to name them, ascribing these items to 'grand civilization'. Language was also valued by itself. The one used by *Mazury* (pl. of 'Mazur') was considered to be 'socially superior', held in high esteem and treated as 'better speech'.[38] The commonly spoken dialects as contrary: they were called 'simple speech', 'peasant', 'uncultured' (*niekulturny*), and *Russki*. The special, prestigious position of Polish was partly connected with the sacral and ritual functions it played – in prayers, spells, and recited poems. The language was ambivalent for peasants nevertheless, in the same way as everything behind the idiom of Polish. Admiration for Polish in one situation would be replaced by disdain in the other. Attitudes varied regionally too – while inhabitants of the northern part of the borderlands (present-day Lithuania and Belarus) were mostly praising Polish, the southern regions (currently Western Ukraine) had much more mixed feelings towards the language. The vernaculars used by the majority and in everyday situations were several variants of Ukrainian and Belarusian dialects, interweaving the local Polish and forming a typical

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[37] Cp. Kapralska, *Pluralizm kulturowy*, 147.
[38] Henryk Friedrich, 'Obserwacje nad mową wsi mazurskiej na Polesiu', in Paprocki (ed.), *I Zjazd Naukowy*, 45.

borderland phenomenon of diglossia – employment of two or more languages for particular purposes. It is noteworthy that during the interwar years the social and symbolic role of Polish was changing. There were two main factors that triggered this transformation: the previously-mentioned growing impact of public schooling and the spread of mass culture. The language previously associated with the 'lords' and marked by ambivalence could have promised some sort of social advancement. Furthermore, it guaranteed gaining access to popular culture. On the other hand, Ukrainian for instance (in this case the process is very well articulated) started climbing up the hierarchy, in connection with the efforts of the Ukrainian intelligentsia and the young generation of politically and socially active peasants who strove for the independence of their national culture.

If we turn to the southern French village of Béarn, we can see some similar features typical of peasant culture, the culture that so sharply and directly indicated strangeness. "The most appreciated jokes have for theme the clumsiness and the ridiculousness of the peasant." Bourdieu, drawing on his fieldwork data, emphasizes the ambivalence of villagers which were orientated towards the selves and 'others' – town dwellers and civil servants. His study illuminates how such mixed attitudes might refer to various, other than language, ethnic, or national categories. These attitudes are not individual assessments of what sounds or looks nice and what does not but they are socially embedded and integrated into a system of 'categories of judgment.'[39]

> Belarusian [language], Belarusian names, are not used here at all, they are replaced with the word 'simple', 'simple man', or just 'man' as opposed to 'Jew', or priest, or member of the intelligentsia.[40]

Nearly identical terms depicted a language (for instance 'simple') and the self ('simple man'). What it means is that certain idioms such as 'simple', *Russki*, or 'Polish' embraced the overall identity, that is the selfhood in its relationship to collective identity of a community.

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[39] See Loïc Wacquant, 'Following Pierre Bourdieu into the Field', *Ethnography*, v, 4 (2004), 394.

[40] Wincenty Krzysztofik, *Jasieniówka, wieś powiatu sokólskiego. Monografia ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zmian wywołanych komasacją gruntów* (Poznań, 1934), 194.

Similarly, this is visible in the phrase 'Christened to Polish'.[41] It is important to state it again: it does not mean that peasants identified language with nationality, language with religion or either way. Yet the social, ethnic, language, and religion components were subordinated to 'localness', having their meaning and relevance only in the relationship to a community, to its local knowledge and cosmology. The antithesis, drawn in the example above, is the crux of the peasant worldview in which a 'man' opposes 'not-a-man'.[42] Thus, not only national, but ethnic categories too cannot entirely define identity practices and related social interactions.

Who is 'not-a-man' then and in what sense? Certain features or rather attributes were involved in the interaction with the exotic 'others'. 'Not-a-man' does not know how to speak properly, does not know the right words – his/her speech is not understandable.

> They [Lemkos] didn't know how to speak Ukrainian, just like that: *lempak*, *lempak* [laughs]. That language they spoke was neither Czech nor Ukrainian; they call potatoes *bandurka* [laughs].[43]

The otherness meets despising and triggers 'compensatory laughter'. This laughter, points out Benedyktowicz, "covers up the fear and anxiety towards concern and danger arising from obscurity, 'abnormality' of the Other." The story that revolves around strangeness of Lemkos – highlanders from the Carpathian mountains who were resettled east in the 1940s – recognizes their incapability of proper speech (since 'others' are 'mute'). Soon later we learn that oddity and curiosity of Lemkos which caused suspense had to be treated with derision and jeering in order to counterbalance the experience of the ridicule and compensate for the threat it brought about. "[Lemkos] were handicapped; we liked laughing at them a bit. So… so retarded, such not [suitable] for this, not for that… ." Such people, according to the speaker, needed to be 'civilized', 'taught culture' by 'our people'.[44]

Although it has not been formulated, these exercises in civilization must have caused shame on the other side of the encounter.

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[41] Interview: a woman, b. 1924, village Wojutycze, county of Sambor.
[42] Zbigniew Benedyktowicz, *Portrety 'obcego'. Od stereotypu do symbolu* (Anthropos, Cracow, 2000).
[43] Interview: a woman, b. 1924, village Wojutycze.
[44] *Ibidem.*

The next attribute typically connected with otherness is a peculiar outfit. "Boykos [the East Carpathian highlanders] speak badly and dress badly", they wore *sirak* (a homespun coat), white trousers, and a shirt outside, according to the 'Mazurian' custom.[45] The traditional, unfashionable style provoked sneers and laughter. We can easily imagine that on another occasion some fellows could be nicknamed 'Boykos'. "This attire Poles call *Russki* and Ruthenians *Hutsulski*", the ethnographer Józef Gajek observed in the late 1930s during his field trip to the villages of Podilya, located in the southern part of the eastern borderlands. In this exchange of names we should notice that – although Gajek talked about places penetrated by the national activists – villagers persistently followed their social hierarchies.

There are numerous other examples which demonstrate why ethnic categories fail when applied to the eastern borderlands convention of social life. It was considered offensive to call someone 'Hutsul' or, interchangeably, 'shepherd'. Being a 'shepherd' was acknowledged a deeply degrading experience, yet another reason to be mocked. Perhaps the most humiliating insult – 'goatherd' – referred to someone who, instead of buying a cow, contented oneself with the 'Jewish purchase'.[46] In popular culture a goat was commonly associated with Jews.[47] In the local world everybody needed someone or something else to refer to – look down on, and, the same time, admire.

The situation of facing the strangeness of others was in fact a very familiar experience. Labelling and sorting items of everyday use and the surrounding environment into what is 'Polish', sometimes replaced by 'Mazurian', 'noble' or 'lordly' and into what is *Russki* or 'peasant-like' secured a safe sphere of social contacts and made it workable. Some differences in associations and meanings depended not only on the speaker (interconnected to his/her community) but also on the type of interaction. A saying 'The one who drinks from the *Russki* pot will get canker sores', gave a warning to the Galician petty nobility urging to keep its distance from the peasant neighbours – also known as 'swarms'.[48] From the outer perspective such practices of

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[45] Wrocław, Archiwum Polskiego Towarzystwa Ludoznawczego (hereinafter: APTL), Olga Gajkowa, 433.

[46] APTL, Józef Gajek, 478.

[47] Alina Cała, *Wizerunek Żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej* (Warsaw, 1992).

[48] Adam Fischer, *Zarys etnografii Polski Południowo-Wschodniej* (Lvov, 1939).

gaining advantage and demonstrating superiority might seem ostensibly inconsistent, sometimes even incomprehensible, such as in the following example:

> Oh, no! God forbid! Until now, when I came here [to Silesia after resettlement], they [the present-day neighbours who came from mixed communities] say, that Ukrainian man takes Polish girl, and the Ukrainian gets married to the Pole… in our village, even in the church [*tserkva*, that is the Greek-Catholic church], here were standing Poles, nobility – as they were called – and there Ukrainians … there was a division in the church. [49]

This forceful utterance was given by a person who undoubtedly cherished his 'noble' status, spoken, however, in a local vernacular with many Ukrainian words, and – to make it even more paradoxical – who used to go to the Greek-Catholic church but not to Polish schools. The haughty manner and the attitude of disdain derived from a belief in kinship and better roots of petty nobility as contrasted with peasant. Any inconsistency, we might detect in this or other descriptions, is out of the view of my actors. They struggled for maintaining essential equilibrium and divine order which – if disturbed or at stake, required efforts to bring the situation back to normal. Feelings of anxiety or fear towards otherness were ordinarily accompanied by fascination and desire, explicit in a reverse relationship peasants had to people of a better social standing. Figuratively speaking, such 'encounters' resemble contacts with anything borderline – lying between the sacred and the profane world.

IV
CONCLUSIONS

The fluid character of the roles peasants ascribed to 'others' – fellow villagers, their Jewish neighbours, 'lords', and other 'unusual states' people could be temporarily in – is not a phenomenon that occurred in peasant culture exclusively. In the indeterminate 'borderland situation' these roles multiplied and some of them were more prone to be swapped. The imaginary corresponded very well to the real. The cultures interwove each other, borrowing and adopting practical

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[49] Interview: a man, b. 1920, village Wysocko Wyżne, county of Turka.

or purely attractive elements such as clothes, language expressions, sayings, and songs. Interconnected communities conceived a special category which ordinary peasants employed to define themselves: 'we, the mixed people'.

The attitude towards otherness – between attraction and rejection – and the auto-stereotype, in particular the assessment of what one's own culture is worth – marked with approval or with strong reservations – ultimately interacted with the reception of national values. We could again juxtapose the northern part of the borderlands, namely its cultural richness on the one hand, the variety and weakness of the 'extra-local' influences on the other, with the Galician case in the south, where among the peasantry the Polish and Ukrainian national projects primarily competed. In the former case, although social hierarchies were particularly strong, the evaluation set by peasants on what belonged to the 'lords' world' demonstrated itself with less conflicting attitudes and was closer to admiration than rejection. Therefore, the rather reluctant or indifferent disposition towards what was peasant – 'simple' and 'uncultured' – marked by embarrassment and inferiority practically stayed unchanged till WWII and, still in the 1990s, could be observed in many Western Belarusian villages. In Eastern Galicia, where in general peasants took more pride in their status than elsewhere in the borderlands, certain elements of culture such as embroideries or other elements of folk art, disseminated and propagated by Ukrainian activists, began to acquire popularity and rural culture – being praised – gradually gained prestige. Especially in this area, the wide spectrum of images and their meanings was adapted and transformed into a new convention: frames of competing national discourses, consequently, were becoming a part of the 'ethnic conflict' that affected everyday life and disrupted the unity of communities. Irrespective of surrounding national competition, social experience was still shaped by the existing societal model. In everyday practice the seemingly fixed society drifted towards the higher, the better, and the desired positions. Contrary to what the intelligentsia said in reports on the 'backward' and 'obstinate' villagers, novelties coming from cities met with respect and admiration. It might have taken some time before things or fashions spread and were accepted by peasants. Nonetheless, in these areas – as elsewhere among the peasantry – the 'civilization' idiom more and more often

equalled urbanity,[50] which replaced its association with 'noble', though leaving prestige as one of the central values for the ordinary people.

The body of personal accounts created by peasants is particularly rich in Poland, thanks to the 'social memoir' movement – the previously mentioned contests set up by sociologists – and collections of letters, mostly written to peasants' press. But records which would give us explicit evidence of how the average thought and acted are few. As in other studies of largely uneducated groups, here also we have to rely on what is incidental or inconsistent, and often contradictory.[51] The picture of rural culture based only upon 'social memoir' and related narratives would be one-sided and extrapolated from an important, although relatively narrow experience of activists only. Similarly, the societies characterized in my article cannot speak for the whole peasantry of the eastern borderlands. They do so for those lacking social leverage and who, objectified in Polish historiography, primarily appeared as numbers. Apart from drawing on interwar discussions about censuses and relying heavily on statistics, the historiography aimed at grasping the so-called ethnic and national relations from a political angle, automatically excluding people who did not become subjects of political activities. Regardless of how accurate these analyses are, the 'nationality issues' in the eastern borderlands cannot be unravelled without a closer look at ordinary peasants: their cosmological model of life, values, and the convention which structured the culture of their communities.

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[50] Cp. Sydel F. Silverman, 'Agricultural Organization, Social Structure, and Values in Italy: Amoral Familism Reconsidered', *American Anthropologist*, lxx, 1 (1968), 16.

[51] Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, 1976), xxi.