

Palko, Olena and Whitewood, Peter (2023) Revisiting the Polish Vector in Soviet History and Politics. *Revolutionary Russia*, 35 (2). pp. 177-184.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2022.2155442>

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Revolutionary Russia

'Revisiting the Polish vector in Soviet history and politics'

Introduction

Olena Palko, Peter Whitewood

In 1918, newly established Poland and Bolshevik Russia became Eastern Europe's main rivals. The Bolsheviks regarded Poland as the biggest threat to their plans of spreading revolution to the west, whereas Poland strove to restore the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth within its pre-1772 borders, which would include large parts of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. Existential ideological tensions coupled with overlapping territorial claims for the borderlands made a military confrontation between Warsaw and Moscow inevitable.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the Polish-Soviet relations of the interwar period were determined by war. Following the Armistice of 11 November 1918, Vladimir Lenin annulled the highly unfavourable Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and began seeking opportunities to recover former imperial territories. In the meantime, the Polish Army seized most of Lithuania, including its capital Vilnius/Wilno, and Belarus, and took control over most of Western Ukraine, continuing its victorious eastward offensive all the way up to Kyiv. The Red Army's counterattack pushed the Polish forces back to Warsaw, only to withdraw and eventually sue for peace in 1921. Although the direct military conflict ended on 18 March 1921 with the signing of the Treaty of Riga among Poland, Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine, it did not provide for the lasting peace. The resultant border split apart the territories populated predominantly by Ukrainians and Belarusians, providing the ideological justification for the Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939 at the beginning of the Second World War, and the subsequent incorporation of these territories into Soviet Ukraine and Belarus.¹

War also provides a framework for studying Polish-Soviet relations. The 1919–21 war, in particular, remains one of the key academic enquiries, ranging from military and diplomatic accounts to social and cultural histories of the border zones.² Polish-Ukrainian relations of the period present a separate scholarly sub-field, with the key themes spanning the Polish-Ukrainian War of 1918–19, the Polish-Ukrainian reproachment of 1920, Polish-Ukrainian anti-Bolshevik military alliance, the fate of the Ukrainian population in Poland-controlled Galicia and Volhynia, all of which, however, cannot be understood outside of the wider Polish-Soviet rivalry for the control over the region.³

The Soviet invasion of eastern Poland in September 1939, and the 1939–41 occupation of western Ukraine and Belarus as part of the Hitler-Stalin Non-Aggression Pact, defines the end of this historical period. In (post)Soviet scholarship, the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland has been characterized as a "liberating mission" to free the Ukrainian and Belarusian people from 'capitalist' Poland.⁴ Western historians, by contrast, treat this act of aggression as "occupation" and "annexation",⁵ while Polish scholars refer to the Red Army invasion as

Poland's "fourth partition".⁶ Ukrainian historiography, in the meantime, emphasizes the complexity and ambiguity of this territorial expansion. It speaks, for instance, of "reunification" (*voz'iednannia*) within common border of the Ukrainian people for centuries divided between different empires. Nonetheless, this was an "incorporation" (*pryiednannia*), achieved by neglecting the norms of international law, military aggression, violence, brutal Sovietization policies and the break-up of social and cultural systems.⁷

The spectre of war never stopped haunting the Soviet leaders, however. Timothy Snyder defines the interwar period as a "cold war in miniature".⁸ Indeed, the 1926 coup d'état carried out by Poland's Marshal Józef Piłsudski, the leader of the Polish-Ukrainian offensive during 1919–20, exaggerated fears about Polish threats to the Soviet western border regions. The Communist Party's response was twofold. On the one hand, recent studies have shown how the worsening international climate and fears of a renewed war against Poland influenced the Soviet decision to militarize Soviet economy, and launch hard-line policies, such as the industrialization and collectivization of agriculture.⁹ Equally, growing Soviet security anxieties were among the contributing factors to the authorities' decision to conduct mass arrests in the early 1930s targeting, among other groups, the Union's Poles, and to launch the NKVD's Polish operation of 1937–38, which claimed the lives of some 200 thousand Poles Union-wide.¹⁰

On the other hand, the fear of war contributed greatly to the implementation of so-called soft-line policies, the Soviet nationalities policies in particular. For instance, Terry Martin speaks of two major considerations behind Soviet "affirmative action"—Soviet xenophobia and the Piedmont Principle.¹¹ By Soviet xenophobia, he means the exaggerated Soviet fear of foreign influence and foreign contamination. The 'Piedmont Principle' – an analogy with the role of the region of Piedmont in the unification of Italy – instead, defines the Soviet attempt to exploit cross-border ethnic ties to project Soviet influence abroad. Preferential treatment of non-Russians as part of Soviet *korenizatsiia*, therefore, was intended to counterbalance Polish assimilatory policies, thus attracting Poland's large Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities, including political émigrés, to support the Soviet project of socialist construction. Several studies confirm that foreign policy considerations were also vital when the Soviet treatment of the Polish community in the western border zones is concerned.¹²

This special issue turns readers' attention to the lesser studied period of 1921-26, which can be defined as a period of normalization in the Polish-Soviet relations.¹³ Following the end of the Polish-Soviet war, the two governments established diplomatic relations in 1921. The Riga Treaty of March also provided a legal framework for regulating interstate relations – it recognised the sovereignty of all parties involved, established the frontiers between Poland, Soviet Ukraine and Belarus, regulated the questions of citizenship, war reparations and the repatriation of the population, even if much of this would not be fulfilled. Separate articles provided guarantees to the respective minorities across the border of their cultural, linguistic and religious rights. Both sides also agreed to refrain from spreading hostile propaganda and from harbouring in their territories organizations which would pursue activities directed against the other party.¹⁴

The signing of the Riga Treaty coincided with the launch of the New Economic Policy (NEP) marking what is assumed to be a more moderate period in the history of the young Soviet state. During those years, the Bolsheviks arguably eschewed violence and reconsidered their tactics when dealing with their political and ideological opponents. Nonetheless, as Peter Whitewood has shown, the politics of the early 1920s was once again defined by war, rather than peace. Instead of moderating the regime as it often assumed,¹⁵ the stunning loss of the Bolsheviks on Vistula in August 1920 encouraged more widespread use of state violence and contributed to the emergence of a repressive totalitarian system, the consolidation of which became obvious in the mid-1930s.¹⁶

In this same vein, the following collection of articles reveal more about the complexities of this transformational decade in Soviet history. In an article on the years of the Soviet-Polish war, Peter Whitewood shows how the Bolsheviks' attempts to turn Polish POWs into revolutionaries between 1920–21 proved to be nothing short of a disaster. Rudimentary camp conditions; insufficient expertise, coordination and funding on the ground; bouts of violence and the spread of disease, created impossible conditions for effective political propaganda. The party leadership's aspiration to create a new cadre of revolutionaries to spearhead an uprising in Poland came to nothing. However, Whitewood shows how these years also reveal the Bolsheviks' steady accommodation with international and mutually agreed humanitarian frameworks. Guaranteeing POWs' welfare was essential to turning them into revolutionaries, and the Bolsheviks found themselves informally aligning with established international humanitarian laws, the very products of the capitalist system they sought to overturn.

In an article focused on the fractious negotiations between Soviet Russia and Poland in 1921 on the fate of archives and libraries from the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Nataliya Borys demonstrates another moment of Bolshevik failure. After losing the 1920 war to Poland, and subsequently placed in the weaker position in the peace talks that would culminate in the Treaty of Riga, the Bolsheviks' inexperience with the intricacies of negotiations over archives and libraries became quickly clear. While both sides, in the end, compromised for the sake of achieving a peace treaty, Polish negotiators secured the return of many archives actively sought. As Borys shows, this endeavour was successful, in part, because it was highly symbolic and united a broad coalition of Poles, and finding sympathisers even among the Polish communists in Moscow.

Olena Palko, in another case study from this period, examines the GPU's efforts to break the influence of the Catholic Church in focusing on the affair surrounding Father Andrzej Fedukowicz, the vicar general from Volhnyia, who was arrested in 1923, and forced to collaborate with the Soviet authorities. In doing so, Palko sheds light not only on the nature of the Soviet state's anti-religious policies of the 1920s but underlines how efforts to control a minority from above – and in this case destroy the Church hierarchy – failed in just a matter of years. Fedukowicz's suicide in 1925, and the martyr status he gained as a result, threw the GPU's improvised and chaotic approach to handling propaganda assets into sharp relief. This incentivized new anti-religious strategies for the future, including mass repression.

In another demonstration of the failure of Soviet policy in the 1920s, in a case study of early Soviet mobilization efforts among the rural Polish population of the Podolia region in

Ukraine, Frank Gelka and Stephan Rindlisbacher show how the state's inconsistent approach doomed the project of using rural soviets in support of the Bolsheviks' modernization strategy. This was particularly acute in terms of financial commitments. Gelka and Rindlisbacher show, moreover, that this was not an entirely one-sided process and how some rural soviets found ways to exercise agency amid the state's flawed efforts. Recognizing how and why the state failed mobilize rural peoples in the mid-1920s is essential to better understanding the dramatic turn towards a solution on a forced basis: the collectivization drive from 1929.

Andrey Zamoisky's article explores a similar dynamic, showing how the Soviet state moved from a 'soft line' to 'hard line' in its handling of Poles in Soviet Belarus in the late 1920s. This was not a clear-cut division or sudden moment of change. In the years before the state's turn towards collectivization, the Soviet authorities sought to play poor peasants off against the relatively wealthy; landowners faced persecution and exile from their villages. Some Poles found ways to benefit from the soft-line approach, yet this was only short-lived as Soviet policies on the ground in Belarus zig-zagged, reflecting the same inconsistency identified by the other authors in this collection. As Zamoisky shows, as failing soft-line policies gave way to more repressive hard-line alternatives, Poles, like the other minorities of the Soviet Union, suffered devastating consequences.

Taken together, the articles here underline two central points about the transformative decade of the 1920s in the Soviet Union. First, the lines between voluntarism and coercion blurred and overlapped in complex ways across Soviet strategies towards minority groups, whether national or religious. With shifting emphasises, 'revolutionary' initiatives operated side-by-side with more pragmatic accommodations, both in domestic and international spheres. But the Polish vector shaped the dynamic of the 1920s in profound ways, and more than was true of Soviet preoccupations with other nations and minorities, given the significance attached to Poland as a likely future military opponent. Repeated and failed state efforts to turn Polish minorities towards Soviet power provided a powerful incentive behind harder-line Stalinist methods.

Notes

¹ Bruski, "The Path to the Treaty of Riga", 128.

² A selected bibliography on this subject includes Wandycz, *Soviet-Polish Relations*; Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star*; Michutina, *Polsko-sowietskaja wojna*; Materski, *Na widecie*; Zamoyski, *Warsaw 1920*; Nowak, *Pierwsza zdrada Zachodu*. The most complete discussion of the Riga conference can be found in Borzęcki, *The Soviet-Polish Peace*. See also Bruski, "The Path to the Treaty of Riga"; Kumaniecki, *Pokój polsko-radziecki 1921*; Kovalenia, *Rizhskii mir*; Borowska, *Sowietsko-polskije pieriegowory*.

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- ³ For the most recent scholarship on the Polish-Ukrainian Warsaw Agreement of 1920, see the *Special issue of Przegląd Wschodni*, Tom XVI, Zeszyt 1 (61) (2020); Other works include: Karpus, *Wschodni sojusznicy Polski*; Legieć, *Armia Ukraińskiej Republiki Ludowej*; Rukkas, "Razom z pol's'kym viis'kom". On the Ukrainian question during the peace talks in Riga: Het'manchuk, *Mizh Moskvoiu ta Varshavoiu*; Bruski, *Between Prometheus and Realpolitik*.
- ⁴ Bril', *Osvobozhdennaia Zapadnaia Ukraina*; Klovov, *Velikii osvoboditel'nyi pokhod*; Trainin, *Natsional'noe i sotsial'noie osvobozenie*; Bilousov, *Vozz'ednannia ukrains'koho narodu*; Koval'chuk, Slyvka, and Chuhaiov, *Podiia velykoho istorychnoho znachennia*.
- ⁵ Gross, *Revolution from Abroad*; Snyder, *Black Earth*; Weber, *Der Pakt*.
- ⁶ Szcześniak, *Zmowa*; Eberhardt, *Polska Granica Wschodnia*; Dębski, *Między Berlinem a Moskwą*; Danylenko, "Chetvertyi podil", 59-79.
- ⁷ Rubliov, and Chernenko, *Stalinshchyna i dolia zakhidnoukrains'koï intelihtentsii*; Kozlovs'kyi, *Vstanovlennia ukrains'ko-pol's'koho kordonu*; Lytvyn, Luts'kyi, and Naumenko, *1939. Zakhidni zemli Ukraïny*; Kul'chyts'kyi, 'Koly i iak vidbulosia vozz'ednannia', 121-139; Danylenko, "Chetvertyi podil", 59-79.
- On Sovietisation of western Ukraine, see: Risch, "A Soviet West", 63-81; Risch, *The Ukrainian West*; Amar, *Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv*; Markowski, *Anatomia Strachu*; Gross, *Revolution from Abroad*.
- ⁸ Snyder, *Sketches from a Secret War*; Also in, Bruski, *Between Prometheus and Realpolitik*, 13
- ⁹ The importance of the connection between the worsening international climate and the launch of industrialisation has previously been drawn by scholars, however, not specifically highlighting the centrality of the perceived Polish military threat to the Soviet Union in the 1920s. See for instance, Davies, *The Socialist Offensive*; Stone, *Hammer and Rifle*; Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine*; Whitewood, "In the Shadow of the War", 661-84; Whitewood, "The International Situation".
- ¹⁰ On the international factor in unleashing the purges, see Khlevniuk, "The Objectives of the Great Terror"; Kuromiya, "Stalin's Great Terror".
- On the Polish national operation, see: Petrov, and Roginskiy, "Pol'skaia operaziia NKVD", 22-43; Stroński. *Represje Stalinizmu*; Rubliov, and Repryntsev, "Represii proty poliakov", 116-156.
- ¹¹ Martin, 'The origins of Soviet ethnic cleansing', 829-832.
- ¹² Iwanov, *Pierwszy Narod Ukarany*; Strons'kyi, *Zlet i padinnia*; Kupczak, 1994. *Polacy na Ukrainie*; Brown, *A Biography of No Place*; Palko, "Poles of the World Unite"; Palko, "Constructing identities, Ascribing Nationalities", 15-48
- ¹³ Bruski, *Between Prometheus and Realpolitik*; Bruski, and Wołos (eds.), *Dokumenty do historii*; Lewandowski, *Imperializm słabości*.
- ¹⁴ The text of the Treaty: <http://www.forost.ungarisches-institut.de/pdf/19210318-1.pdf> (Accessed 15 April 2021).
- ¹⁵ For this suggestion see a classic work on the Soviet-Polish War, Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star*
- ¹⁶ Whitewood, "In the Shadow of the War". On the role myth of Vistula in Polish historiography and politics see, Górny, *Polska Bez Cudów*.

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