Struggling for peace: understanding Polish-Ukrainian coexistence in southeast Poland (1943-2007)
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Introduction
Understanding Polish-Ukrainian coexistence

To be sure, measured against the universe of possible instances, actual instances of ethnic and nationalist violence remain rare […] Ethnic violence warrants our attention because it is appalling, not because it is ubiquitous.

Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin (1998: 424)

This book grew out of my interest in the question how populations with a troubled past coexist on a day-to-day basis, in peacetime, in wartime, and in the aftermath of war. I began my intellectual journey by investigating Polish-Jewish relations in contemporary Poland. My choice of subject was no coincidence. I was still a teenager when I watched the documentary Shoah on Dutch television. For me, and the people watching with me, Claude Lanzman’s documentary established a permanent association between Poland and the Final Solution of European Jewry by Nazi Germany: concentration camps, memorial sites, rescue and betrayal, peasant backwardness, sorrow, resentment. By the early 1990s, following the fall of communism in Poland, intellectuals and academic scholars in and outside of Poland had just begun to explore the ‘blank spots’ of Poland’s national history (cf. Irwin-Zarecka 1989; Polonsky 1990; Bauman 1992; Kersten 1992). This quest inevitably begins with Polish anti-Semitism and the Shoah. The widespread view that Polish-Jewish relations are irredeemably poisoned by anti-Semitism also impacted my own preconceptions. In 1992, when I went to Poland to carry out my research, I was fully prepared to meet with resistance and hostility on the part of my Polish informants.

However, the research findings did not meet my own expectations. During the regular visits I paid to a large number of peasant households in Jaśliska, a former town, now village, in southeast Poland, my peasant informants were more than willing to tell stories about their former Jewish neighbors, ‘their Jews’ as they would call them. Even if there was hatred and hostility between the Polish and Jewish communities in the village, it was other qualities that prevailed in the relationship: affection, commitment, admiration, surprise about ‘weird’ Jewish customs and observances, and dismay about the sudden and violent death of their one-time Jewish neighbors. These findings inspired me to focus on
patterns of reciprocity and co-operation between the Polish and Jewish communities rather than on conflict. Detailed analysis of archival materials as well as interviews with Poles living in the research village and Jewish survivors born in the village but living elsewhere today, revealed a pattern of Polish-Jewish interdependence that gave rise to a far more complex picture than is generally assumed (Lehmann 2001, 2004).

The focus on peaceful coexistence set me on a track that gained increased significance with the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The outbursts of massive ethnic violence in the Yugoslav successor states surprised and worried many contemporary observers, as did other upsurges of ethnic nationalism and conflict in countries of the former Eastern Bloc. The fall of communism resulted in violent persecutions against the Turkish and Albanian minorities in respectively Bulgaria and Macedonia in the early 1990s (Koinova 2001). The new Russian Federation began a series of wars against secessionist Russian republics, of which the Chechen wars (1991-96; 1997-99) were the most violent and devastating (Tishkov 2004). In 1990, short-lived, but violent clashes occurred between ethnic Hungarians and Romanians in the Romanian city of Târgu Mureș (Constantin et al. 2005). These and other conflicts led the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1992: 8) to conclude that “because we live in an era where all other human relations are in crisis, or at least somewhere on a journey towards unknown and uncertain destinations, xenophobia looks like becoming the mass ideology of the 20th century fin de siècle.” In a similar vein, UN ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1993: 53-4) prophesized a new Pandemonium: “There is a further fact attendant upon the end of the age of totalitarianism, which is the persistence of ethnicity […] This surely is where we must anticipate the violent clashes of communities and states in the years ahead.”

Amidst these prophecies of ethnic violence Poland remained an oasis of peace. Unlike some of my Dutch colleagues (cf. van de Port 1995; Duijzings 1999), I was able to carry out my research without physical danger. What is more, I witnessed efforts to critically explore the Polish-Jewish past and repair Polish-Jewish relations. It was only with hindsight that I discovered how relatively peacefully the emancipation of another ethnic group gained ground during the 1990s. I got acquainted with Poland’s Lemko minority during my fieldwork in Jaśłiska and during fieldtrips organized by the ethnographic department of the Kraków based Jagiellonian University. At the time, the blossoming of a Lemko identity and culture was articulated on attractively peaceful terms, involving group members as well as non-group members, scholars as well as intellectuals, specialists in Poland as well as outside of Poland (cf. Magocsi 1990; Best 1992; Dziewierski et al. 1992; Chomiak 1995; Czajkowski 1995; Michna 1995b; Sitka 1996; Hann 1997). At another level, the Polish-Ukrainian national dialogue proceeded peacefully too. Besides Poland’s Ukrainians (including the Lemkos, who since World War II officially belonged to Poland’s Ukrainian minority), the dialogue also involved the populations of the Ukrainian Soviet
Republic. The Polish-Ukrainian dialogue gained urgency with the establishment of the independent Ukrainian Republic after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Poland became its most enthusiastic defender (Snyder 2003; Grünberg and Sprengel 2005).

When I began my research in 1997 I was determined to explore the vicissitudes of a troubled Polish-Ukrainian relationship. There were plenty potential causes of ethnic and national conflict between the newly established democratic Poland and Ukraine: frontiers without historical legitimacy; new and fragile democratic rule; apprehensive political elites; memories of civil war and ethnic cleansing from the first half of the 20th century (Berdychowska 1992; Snyder 2003). But whereas wartime conflicts and ancient rivalries took centre stage in Yugoslav politics in the 1990s, in Poland the painful and controversial events in Polish-Ukrainian history were tackled in an open public debate that not just involved politicians or interest groups; it also included the academia, press, and non-governmental organizations (cf. Stępień 1990-2000; Zięba 1991a, 1991b; Misilo 1993; Stegner 1997; Snyder 1999; Ośrodek KARTA 2001; Stegner 2002; Grünberg and Sprengel 2005). The fact that diverse Polish and Ukrainian viewpoints in Poland—involving, among others, questions of national belonging, claims to lost properties (such as houses, forests and land), apologies for wrongs done in the past—were resolved by compromise rather than violent conflict prompted me to ask the negative question: Why did Poles and Ukrainians in Poland not behave like Serbs, Croats and Bosnians in former Yugoslavia? Why is it that after the regime change in 1990 massive ethnic violence remained absent in Poland, despite a history of ethnic hostility and violence?

The above research question, I found out later, was also at the heart of two other studies: one by the anthropologist Frederic Bailey (1996) and one by the historian Timothy Snyder (2003). The Yugoslav catastrophe led Bailey back to his fieldnotes from his research in Bisipara, a village community in eastern India that he had studied in the 1950s. Even though Bailey did not find an answer to the question why ethnic strife might or might not get out of hand (there were too many variables involved to make comparisons useful), he did get a clearer picture of the people he had been studying forty years before. The argument advanced by Bailey about the people from Bisipara is that certain taken-for-granted ways of coping with everyday life, the habit of calculating material payoffs and, above all, a wariness of excess tended to limit the space available for the extremes of ethnic hatred. Snyder’s study of centuries of modern nation-building in the region covering present-day Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and Byelorussia attempts to explain how modern nations arise, but also, and more particularly, why ethnic cleansing takes place and how nation-states make peace. At the heart of his study lies the paradox that, where Yugoslavia disintegrated and plunged into armed conflict in the 1990s, Poland pursued political security by means of peace negotiations and a ‘return to Europe’. Snyder’s thesis is that Poland’s foreign policy (especially vis-à-vis its eastern neighbors) was crucial in the
process of building a stable geopolitical order in Northeastern Europe in the early post-communist era.

And yet, concern about the fate of post-Cold War Europe inspired most scholars to focus not on peace, but on the alarming upsurge of ethnic and national strife. Hobsbawm (1992: 7) again: “All are comprehensible as symptoms of social disorientation, of the fraying, and sometimes the snapping of the threads, of what used to be the network that bound people together in society […] Belonging together, preferably in groupings with visible badges of membership and recognition signs, is more important than ever in societies in which everything combines to destroy what binds humans together into communities.” In an effort to assess the relevance of Hobsbawn’s argument for the post-Soviet Bloc, the anthropologist Katherine Verdery (1992: 8) confirms that social disorientation has a broad and fertile ground in Eastern Europe. The rise of, what she calls, ‘ethno-nationalism’ undoubtedly is one of its results. However, drawing on her fieldwork in Romania, Verdery maintains that East European ethno-nationalism, besides social disorientation, has numerous other causes, mainly relating to the history of the region’s nationalisms and to the nature of communist party rule.

Verdery fits into a tradition of anthropologists who have attempted to bring together ethnicity, nationalism and projects of state-making (cf. Fox 1985; Williams 1989; Cole and Wolf 1999). The major question that is being asked by her and by others is when and why ‘difference’ becomes politically relevant. Since this question is directly linked to the question when and why ‘difference’ is of lesser political importance, Verdery’s analysis is very relevant for the case at hand. Verdery (1994) sees state formation as the most salient socio-political context in which ethnicity is produced. By instituting homogeneity as normative, state building gives socio-political significance to the fact of difference: “It groups them as differences of ethnicity, gender, locality, class, sexuality and race, each of these defined as particular kinds of difference with respect to the state’s homogenizing project” (Verdery 1994: 46). A vital means for generating the homogenization of culture is national ideology, which establishes what should be the homogenous culture against which all others will be rendered “visible-as-different” (Verdery 1994: 46-7). Verdery proposes a comprehensive agenda for the study of ethnicity in relation to nationalism: to investigate both the historical processes that have produced particular political forms (‘nation-states’) and also the kinds of internal homogenization that these nation-states have sought to realize in their different contexts (Verdery 1994: 48).

Verdery fits in yet another tradition of anthropologists, namely in that of those who have tried to make sense of social trends, including (but not exclusively) the upsurge of ethno-national conflict, in communist and post-communist societies. For the sake of argument (and with due respect for the subtleties of the variety of perspectives advanced by a great variety of scholars in this field) I will here distinguish between just two
perspectives: (1) those who lay emphasis on the discontinuities in social relationships as a result of the socialist transformation (cf. Dragadze 1993; Verdery 1993); (2) those who stress the continuities in social relationships in spite of the socialist transformation (cf. Wedel 1992; Potter 1993; Hann 1996). It should be noted that both perspectives are, among others, a response to a third perspective that finds little adherence among anthropologists but that is advocated by a large public of observers of the former Eastern Bloc: those who deny any significant influence of the socialist transformation and assume the primordial character of ethnic and national sentiments. Exponents of the latter perspective take the view that such sentiments had been held in ‘cold storage’ or had been placed under a ‘heavy lid’ for four decades—once the thaw set in and the lid was removed suppressed conflicts began seething to the surface. This viewpoint is exemplified by the following excerpt from an essay by a Polish political scientist: “Neither World War I, World War II nor the Cold War had successfully driven the proverbial ‘wooden stake’ through the ‘heart’ of ancient hatreds and feelings of mutual distrust. Such emotions simply remained dormant and continued to simmer, waiting for the day when they could again bubble to the surface” (Bednarczyk 1995: 45).

The above perspectives require different levels of investigation. Emphasizing the “peculiarities of socialism”, Verdery (1993: 172) advocates a “macro-systematic” approach—as opposed to the “interactional, the psychological, or the micro-level” approach—for the study of socialist societies. In a similar way, Verdery (1994: 48) urges her colleagues to “become political scientists and historical sociologists” to analyze the nature of nation-states “with a sophistication which anthropology has not really cultivated”. In her view perhaps the work by the earlier mentioned historian Snyder (2003) would set a fine example. Emphasis upon the survival of traditional cultural forms under socialism, on the other hand, presupposes micro level investigations, as these may illustrate the significant impact of culture upon the various forms that socialism has taken locally. Chris Hann (1993b) is right to state that the importance of micro-scale ethnographic work should not be underestimated. The qualitative evidence and extended case studies, he argues, add to accounts of socialism that can usefully complement the type of understanding achieved in other disciplines. “At its best,” writes Hann (1993b: 9), “the anthropological approach can offer a fully satisfying account of ‘how the system really works’, the pays réel as opposed to the pays légal, including the influence of specific cultural traditions upon its operation.” In other words, macro and micro level approaches provide complementary insights; a full understanding can only be acquired by combining these two approaches.

So far I have said little about the vast amount of conflict literature that has been produced following the outbreak of massive ethnic violence in post Cold War Europe. Theories on violent ethnic conflict can be of explanatory value with respect to both
occurrences and non-occurrences of ethnic violence. This is indeed the direction that is taken by a number of conflict theorists (cf. Fearon and Laitin 1996; Brubaker and Laitin 1998; Fearon 1998; Laitin 1998; Kolstø 1999, 2002). Pål Kolstø (2002), for instance, has attempted to explain both the presence and absence of violent conflict in a number of Post-Soviet successor states by employing and testing a wide range of theories on ethnic conflict. The methodological challenge of such comparative analysis is real, for theories on ethnic conflict, as a rule, involve many overlapping variables (legacy of socialist Party rule, dissolution of totalitarian regimes, ethnic dividing lines, discrimination, on-the-ground resentment and fear, weak democracies, myths of eternal conflicts) that may contribute to contradictory outcomes: protracted peace or civil war. Going through the heap of possible explanations, Kolstø (2002) does find predictable patterns: theories based on an assessment of the resources and opportunities available to various groups seem to provide better explanations for the absence or presence of ethnic strife, while theories that focus on grievances and relative discrimination are of much less explanatory value.

Scholars in this conflict theoretical tradition have pointed at two important issues. First, they warn for an overestimation of the salience of ethnic and nationalist violence in the post Cold War world. Theories on ethnic conflict erroneously lead one to believe that violent, irreconcilable conflicts would emerge in areas that until now have been quite tranquil. That being the case, they suggest that peaceful coexistence (variably called “ethnic”, “interethnic” or “social” peace), rather than violent outbursts, should be considered the social norm (cf. Fearon and Laitin 1996; Brubaker and Laitin 1998; Kolstø 2002). Second, they insist that interactions in the ethnopolitical field by definition are highly conflictual. Ethnic peace should therefore not be defined as the absence of ethnic conflict, but as the absence of violent ethnic conflict. Seen from this perspective, violent and non-violent conflicts are conflicts of a radically different type. The assumption held by this tradition of scholars is that as long as the threshold that leads to killing has not been crossed, the risk of further escalation remains much smaller. “By contrast, where it has been crossed,” writes Kolstø (2002: 5), “an entirely different game of ethnopolitics is on the board”. In a similar vain, Brubaker and Laitin (1998: 426) argue that violence “is not a quantitative degree of conflict, but a qualitative form of conflict, with its own dynamics”.

Motivated by the above line of reasoning, my definition of peace in this study is the absence of violent conflict. How, then, can a violent conflict be distinguished from a nonviolent conflict? And, for that matter, when is a conflict ‘ethnic’? The fact that “heterogeneous phenomena” are “too casually” lumped together as ethnic violence points at the quite problematic nature of these distinctions (Brubaker and Laitin 1998: 423). Firstly, violence can take many forms (structural, systematic, incidental, random) and can be different in scale (ranging from a single abuse or physical injury to civil wars claiming thousands of deaths). Secondly, a conflict may be interpreted or presented as ethnic even
when it is not, or may be transformed into an ethnic issue even when originally the conflict had no ethnic significance. If we argue, as Brubaker and Laitin (1998) do, that violence is not a degree of conflict but a form of conflict, than the scale of violence is irrelevant. It also excludes cases of structural violence (in contrast to overt physical violence) where, according to Marxist theory, the mere threat of force by a dominant group suffices to suppress any resistance. In my definition, therefore, a conflict is violent when it leads to the physical abuse, injury or death of at least one person. A conflict is violent and ethnic when violence is “perpetrated across ethnic lines, in which at least one party is not a state (or a representative of a state), and in which the putative ethnic difference is coded—by perpetrators, targets, influential third parties, or analysts—as having been integral rather than incidental to the violence” (Brubaker and Laitin 1998:428).

Even when insights from the conflict literature can be useful, I should stress that my approach to the problem of peace is different from that pursued by conflict theorists: whereas their focus is on the (non-)production of violence, my focus is on the production and consolidation of peace. Put differently, my thesis is that peace, like violence, has a rhythm, dynamic and logic of its own. This approach of peace-as-the-product-of-a-process has a clear analogy with the approach of war in a recent study by the political scientist Stathis Kalyvas. In *The logic of violence in civil wars*, Kalyvas (2006: 389) argues that war, especially civil war, is a transformative phenomenon, in that it transforms individual preferences, choices, behavior, and identities. The main way in which civil war exercises its transformative functions is through violence. Hence, violence works as an independent variable once civil war begins. The view that underlies my study is that peace is a transformative phenomenon as well, and that peace, once it has been established, develops its own dynamics and works as an independent variable too. The idea of peace as a process that is produced by individuals and groups at various levels of society has important theoretical implications, which have been summarized below. I should note that this summary largely draws on the analytical discussion by Kalyvas on ‘war as a process’ (2006: 388-92).

Firstly, collective and individual preferences, strategies, values and identities are continually shaped and reshaped in the course of action, as are intragroup loyalty, disloyalty, support, and enmity. It is therefore inaccurate to assume that identities and preferences are frozen in their wartime or prewar, socialist or pre-socialist, manifestations. Secondly, individuals cannot be treated simply as passive, manipulated, or invisible actors; instead, they often manipulate central actors into helping them fight their own conflicts. Thirdly, local interests, strategies, preferences, and cleavages do not automatically overlap with those experienced, or perceived of, at the central level. From this follows a fourth theoretical implication: micro-dynamics are of utmost importance if one wants to understand occurrences of violence and non-violence. The process of inferring on-the-
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ground-dynamics from the macro level will almost certainly generate biased assumptions. Vice versa, an analysis of micro-relationships without reference to high-level politics will fail to present a comprehensive picture. Therefore, theories of war and peace should incorporate a multilevel analysis, simultaneously accounting for the interaction between rival political elites, between elites and the population, and among individuals at the local level.

The research agenda outlined above covers a wide range of themes that require different theoretical and methodological approaches. In my study of the Polish-Ukrainian relationship I have tried to incorporate them as complementary ways to answer a single research question—why did the regime change in 1990 in Poland not lead to violent ethnic conflict, despite a troubled past? The chapters all focus on rural southeast Poland where I conducted fieldwork starting in 1997, with periodic visits to the research area until 2008. Most of the fieldwork was done in the rural district Komańcza (Gmina Komańcza), now part of the southern Podkarpackie province. My choice of the Komańcza rural district was based on two considerations: (1) my acquaintance with the area during my earlier research in the adjacent Jaśliska rural district; (2) the enduring presence in the area of Poles and Ukrainians before, during and after the Second World War. Having been the locus of violent Polish-Ukrainians confrontations during and in the aftermath of the Second World War and of non-violent Polish-Ukrainian coexistence afterwards, this area presents an exemplary case to investigate the transformation of micro level Polish-Ukrainian relations. Fieldwork in the Komańcza rural district was complemented with archival research and a study of literature covering the wider region and country. The chapters were originally written as articles, some of which have already been published while others have been submitted for publication.

My exploration of the Polish-Ukrainian relationship begins where many political leaders in post-communist Eastern Europe found legitimacy for their nationalist wars—in traumatic memories of civil war and ethnic cleansing. Chapter two explores the conditions that gave rise to the Polish-Ukrainian ethnic cleansings during the Second World War. In explaining the causes of the ethnic cleansings and the ensuing civil war I follow Snyder’s (2003) analysis of the decay of political culture (including the elimination of political elites, institutions and parties) and the advancement of genocidal processes in wartime Poland. The escalating force of ethnic cleansing is illustrated with the biographical account of a Polish participant in the ethnic cleansing.

The third chapter discusses the state-initiated, non-genocidal ethnic cleansing policies following Poland’s liberation from Nazi Germany. Next to describing the ways in which the successive Polish governments pursued their homogenization project, the chapter also attempts to explain the wavering policies towards Poland’s minority populations—on the one hand violent and severely repressive, on the other allowing for controlled liberties and
offering protection. Secondary literature has been used to outline the macro-process of
nation-building in postwar Poland. This is complemented with archival documents to
highlight trends and aberrations in the nation-building process.

The issue of discontinuity resulting from the process of socialist transformation is
addressed in the fourth chapter. The chapter explores the process of social engineering in
the research area by Poland’s socialist leadership in the 1950s and 1960s. Using Scott’s
(1998) analysis of high-modernist utopian engineering schemes, two questions are
addressed: first, what were the conditions that gave rise to the failure of socialist
engineering, and second, what were the consequences of this failure for relationships at
the local level? My discussion of the intended and unintended consequences of socialist
engineering draws on a variety of sources: contemporary ethnographic studies and
publications (in particular newspaper articles and biographical accounts) as well as
anthropological fieldwork.

The issue of cultural continuities under socialism is dealt with in the fifth chapter. Next
to language, religion formed the foremost important element of the ethnic identity of the
people living in the research area. But whereas the atheist socialist state condoned (albeit
with reluctance) the Roman Catholic religion, it did not tolerate the Greek Catholic
religion. This became painfully clear when in 1961 the communist authorities proceeded to
close down the Greek Catholic parish church in the research village Komańcza. Drawing
on archival sources and interviews from Komańcza, this chapter chronicles local forms of
accommodation and resistance to a socialist authoritarian regime and illustrates how a
Greek Catholic community was able to survive and maintain its religious and ethnic
identity despite intense political repression.

The sixth chapter discusses the impact of socialism on processes of identity formation
in post-communist Poland. Drawing from the example of the emancipation of the Lemkos
in post-communist Poland, Verdery’s (1993) thesis that Eastern Europe’s once-socialist
societies are strongly predisposed to ethno-nationalist conflict is being put to the test. In
particular, her argument of the ‘economies of shortage’, that put a premium on nationalist
appeals by which competitors could be excluded, proves to be of theoretical significance in
explaining the ‘contested issues of representation’ among Poland’s Lemko political elites
in the 1990s.

Chapter seven seeks to explain the peaceful modes of interaction between Poles and
Ukrainians in Komańcza. Following Flap’s (1997: 212) lead that social network theory,
and more in particular “the crisscross argument”, may contribute to the problems of order
and cohesion in conflict-prone post-communist societies, this chapter analyses current
notions of identity as well as current modes of interaction between individuals and groups
in the research village through the spectrum of cross-cutting social ties (cf. Gluckman
1966; Granovetter 1973; Flap 1985). The case study suggests that a dynamic system of
alliance, guided by cross-cutting cleavages and cross-cutting social networks, contribute to resilience to violent ethnic conflict at the community level.

Chapters one through seven document the Polish-Ukrainian relationship over a period of more than sixty years: from the outbreak of the Polish-Ukrainian clashes in 1943 to the present. This forms the basis for the concluding chapter in which the key factors that have contributed to a peaceful articulation of the Polish-Ukrainian relationship after 1990 will be outlined. The assumption that underlies all chapters of this volume is that peaceful coexistence, like violent conflict, should not be treated as a natural, self-explanatory outcome. Peace, like violence, is worked on at every step in the process; it is a continuous struggle involving especially those who are part of the contested domains of modern statehood. My attempt will be to demonstrate just that: the contestations, complexities and contradictions—in short the dynamics—of peaceful coexistence.