Struggling for peace: understanding Polish-Ukrainian coexistence in southeast Poland (1943-2007)
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We were fighting by Leshnov. A wall of enemy cavalry rose all around us. The new Polish strategy was uncoiling like a spring, with an ominous whistle. We were being pushed back […] The front at Leshnov was being held by the infantry. Blond and barefoot, Volhynian muzhiks [peasants] shuffled along crooked trenches. This infantry had been plucked from behind its ploughs the day before to form the Red Cavalry’s infantry reserve. The peasants had come along eagerly. They fought with the greatest zeal. Their hoarse peasant ferocity amazed even the Budyonny fighters. Their hatred for the Polish landowners was built of invisible but sturdy material.

Isaac Babel (1924: 116)

Introduction

This fragment from the 1924 collection of stories Red Cavalry by the Jewish Russian writer Isaac Babel provides a clear and succinct survey of the social history of the border area between Poland and Ukraine in the first half of the last century: the largely impoverished, illiterate and agrarian local population; the feudal relations in the villages and on the estates; the tense relationship between Poles and Ukrainians; and, lastly, the long tradition of ethnic violence in the region (cf. Klier and Lambroza 1992; Hryniuk 1993; Magocsi 1996; Sysyn 2003). Babel wrote Red Cavalry on the basis of his wartime experiences as a correspondent and soldier in the First Cavalry Army during the two-year war between Poland and the Soviet Union (1919-1920). The region had just witnessed the end of another war, that between the brand-new Second Polish Republic, which had re-emerged from the ruins of the First World War, and the equally young West Ukrainian People’s Republic (1918-1919). Both wars, which were concluded in favor of the Polish Republic, had a disruptive effect on the lives of large sections of the population of

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Volhynia and Galicia. The ongoing front line fighting, the partisan struggle, banditism and pogroms cost more than a million lives between 1918 and 1920.

These events were a foretaste of the horrors of war that were to take place on a much larger scale only two decades later. The invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in September 1939 marked the beginning of a particularly violent period. The level of violence was determined to a large extent by the destructive intentions of the respective regimes. Six years of war, occupation, poverty, hunger, reprisals, deportations and genocide claimed millions of victims among the inhabitants of occupied Poland and Ukraine. In addition, the civilian population suffered another, equally bloody war, when the nationalist Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukrains'ka Povstans'ka Armiia, UPA) commenced a campaign of ethnic cleansing in 1943 that cost the lives of tens of thousands of mainly Polish civilians and provoked a Polish-Ukrainian civil war, in which rival nationalist Ukrainian and Polish partisans engaged in a life and death struggle, claiming the deaths of several other thousands.

The question that is raised in this chapter is why the wartime Polish-Ukrainian conflict spiraled into such lethal violence. Two complementary explanations will be offered. The first one deals with the larger political context in which the conflict took place. The excellent analysis of the wartime Polish-Ukrainian conflict by the historian Timothy Snyder (2003) in *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999* will provide the basis for reflection on the political context of the conflict. A second explanation addresses the consequences of the conflict for local relationships. The vicissitudes of Waldemar Lotnik, who became caught up in the bloodbath as a teenager and as a Polish resistance fighter, will serve as a source for reflection on the dynamics of political violence. Lotnik published his memoirs in *Nine Lives. Ethnic conflict in the Polish-Ukrainian Borderlands* in 1999. On the basis of these complementary accounts it is demonstrated how three factors can lead to an escalation of conflict into destructive violence and war: the emergence of a political power vacuum and the concomitant disappearance of the state monopoly of violence; the intensification of the struggle for survival on the part of groups and individuals; and the presence of evil as an everyday—and therefore extremely brutalizing—phenomenon.

**The survival instinct of population groups: the Polish-Ukrainian conflict 1939-1944**

Babel experienced it in person—the political dispute concerning the legitimate leadership of Volhynia and Galicia was going on long before the start of the Second World War. Poles formed a minority in the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands: Poles and Ukrainians

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1 The memoirs were recorded and edited by Julian Preece, a lecturer in comparative literature at the University of Kent in Canterbury.
comprised equal thirds of the population, while the remaining third was divided among Byelorussians, Jews and a smaller number of Russians and Lithuanians (Davis and Polonsky 1991: 3; Gross 1991: 64). The region’s rural population comprised largely of Ukrainians predominating in the south, and Byelorussians, Russians and Lithuanians inhabiting the northern provinces. The urban population consisted largely of Poles and Jews, but as this was foremost an agrarian region (81 percent rural) Poles and Jews inhabited the rural areas as well (Gross 1991). Aiming at the political control of this highly fragmented periphery in which non-Poles dominated, the Polish interwar government embarked on a policy of Polonization. Hence, it adopted Polish as the official language in state institutions, including schools and universities. In addition, it excluded non-Poles from government service. Most significantly, while turning a blind eye to the already existing land shortage, the central authorities facilitated the settlement of tens of thousands of Polish colonists (many of them war veterans) on the region’s estates (Gross 1991: 64; Petersen 2002: 122). “By every status indicator—language, educational policy, government and military service, land redistribution”, writes Petersen (2002: 122-3) “Poles were on top”.

The repressive and discriminative state policies created bad blood among members of the minority populations. Opposition to Polish domination was strongest in Galicia. During the 1930s, small groups of Galician Ukrainian extremists organized armed attacks on Polish estates and committed numerous acts of sabotage (Mazur 2001; Petersen 2002). Galicia was also the base of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Its founders were veterans of the Polish-Ukrainian war who had seen their dreams—an independent Ukraine—crushed by military defeat. The radicalism of this group of Ukrainian nationalists was manifested at several levels. At the strategic level, they aimed at the complete overthrow of the status quo, and thus, of Polish (or any other form of foreign) political domination in the region. At the political level, they claimed absolute control over all territories (including parts of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and the USSR) in which Ukrainians predominated. At the ideological level, they promoted the idea of a homogenous, ethnically pure Ukraine. Accordingly, during the first congress held in 1932, the OUN leadership decided that “only the complete removal of all occupiers from Ukrainian lands will allow for the general development of the Ukrainian Nation within its own state” (quoted in Snyder 2003: 143). These so-called “occupiers” comprised all non-Ukrainians who lived in the alleged Ukrainian territories, including Poles, Slovakians, Byelorussians, Jews, Romanians, Russians, and Lithuanians.

Adhesion to the principle of ethnic cleansing in word is not the same as the actual implementation of an ethnic cleansing campaign, especially if one bears in mind that the rhetoric of the expulsion of population groups was common parlance in Poland as well as in other parts of Europe in the 1930s (Kersten 2001; Snyder 2003). In the 1930s, the Polish
police and military still had the upper hand: they ruthlessly, but successfully, repressed violent Ukrainian opposition (Mazur 2001; Petersen 2002). Meanwhile, Poland’s political establishment marginalized the OUN by branding it a ‘terrorist organization’ and denying it a legal existence (Motyka 1999; Snyder 2003). Snyder (2003) stresses that during the 1930s the OUN merely operated on the margins of society and was supported only by a handful of war veterans and a smattering of disenchanted intellectuals. The moderate nationalists, represented by the Ukrainian National Democratic Alliance (UNDO), had a far wider coverage than the OUN. Also other political movements, including socialism, agrarianism and communism, enjoyed much larger support among the Ukrainian population (Snyder 2003: 152). However, the renewed question of legitimate leadership of the region following the outbreak of the Second World War turned the political balance upside down.

The Soviet invasion of Poland’s eastern provinces in September 1939 and the subsequent Germany invasion in June 1941 opened up new perspectives for Ukrainian nationalists (Map 2.1). Even moderate nationalists who had previously followed the parliamentary road in favor of the Ukrainian cause saw no reason to support the return of Polish control in the area. Meanwhile the masses were out to exact revenge on those who had been instrumental to, or otherwise symbolized, Polish political domination. In the process, several thousands of people died, mostly Polish settlers, who were killed by their neighbors (Gross 1991: 65). The Soviets encouraged such local initiatives and made full use of local anti-Polish sentiments to establish control in the area. But whereas Soviet policy did succeed to reverse the ethnic hierarchy in Poland’s former eastern borderlands (with Poles at the bottom and Ukrainians higher up in the social hierarchy), it had not been able to win over the non-Polish masses for a ‘proletarian revolution’. “Many Soviet civilians […] were glad to see the Soviet regime go”, writes Karel Berkhoff (2004: 3). Especially the events in the months before the defeat of the Soviet army revealed that the Soviet regime “neither trusted nor cared about those citizens who were slipping from its control” (Berkhoff 2004: 33). Political deception, intense political persecution, deportations, and an effective scorched-earth policy left the apprehensive masses on the verge of anarchy and starvation.

Nazi Germany’s invasions of the Soviet Union in June 1941 ended Soviet rule in the area, producing again a power vacuum that, to quote Petersen (2002: 96), triggered “masses of leaderless individuals milling around in the streets, celebrating the end of the hated Soviet occupation, looking to even scores with collaborators.” This time, their principal victims were Jews, who became collectively accused of collaboration with the Soviets. The new German authorities conveniently exploited the anti-Jewish and anti-Polish sentiments among the non-Polish populations. They too recruited Ukrainian policemen to assist in mass killings, this time not of local Poles but of local Jews; they
engaged the Ukrainian Central Committee (a German imposed political body of Ukrainians) to create Lebensraum for Germans; they never protested when Ukrainians used their power and arms to persecute Polish civilians in Volhynia in 1941 and 1942. But when Ukrainian partisans turned to challenging Nazi rule, the German authorities changed sides and instead supplied Poles with weapons. These (fruitless) attempts by the Germans to preserve control in the region inevitably led to the exacerbation of tensions between Poles and Ukrainians and to an exceptionally rapid growth of nationalist armed groups (Snyder 2003).
“The Soviets and Germans reversed status orderings and destroyed stable hierarchies”, concludes Petersen: “Powerful emotions followed, strong desires developed, violent actions resulted” (2002: 135). But even if the wartime collapse of power relations created new political opportunities and, by that means, provided the basis for radical ambitions and violent actions, such a collapse in itself does not explain why violence between Poles and Ukrainians became so virulent and so widespread. “Most fundamentally”, writes Snyder (2003: 158) “how Poles and Ukrainians treated each other was transformed by their contact with the practices of the occupiers, both of whom classified individuals and deported or killed according to classification”. Between 1939 and 1941 hundreds of Ukrainian militiamen assisted in the Soviet deportation of at least 400,000 Polish “class enemies” (some 3 percent of the total population in Galicia and Volhynia), of which an estimated 20,000 were killed (Snyder 2003: 163). Subsequently, between the summer of 1941 and the winter of 1942, some 12,000 Nazi-trained Ukrainian policemen (mostly young men) took part in the killing of more than 200,000 Jews in Volhynia (Snyder 2003: 160). The presence of thousands of Ukrainian men experienced in genocide had a sure impact on the form and scale that the Polish-Ukrainian conflict would eventually assume.

The Soviet and Nazi occupying forces had done much to wipe out the cultural, political, and professional Polish and Ukrainian elites and their organizations. This was not without considerable consequences. Snyder (2003: 163) makes a point of stating that the “demoralization and decimation” of the Ukrainian and Polish elites was “perhaps the most important cause of the Ukrainian-Polish conflict.” The collapse of the old framework of political and moral leadership contributed to a further militarization of society and to a considerable narrowing of the political spectrum. Authority in occupied Poland was no longer represented by political parties, governments or civil representatives, but by military organizations such as partisan armies and self-defense militiamen. When the conflict was at its fiercest, it was military superiority rather than moral responsibility that played the decisive role, so that the moderates eventually lost ground to the extremists.

On the Polish side the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK) was by far the largest and most efficient army; moreover, it was recognized and supported by the Polish government in exile. Other groups of Polish partisans were under the command of the Polish Home Army, but represented a particular political current (such as the Peasant Battalions), while yet others (such as the extreme right-wing National Armed Forces, NSZ) opposed the Polish Home Army. It is indicative that the Polish government in exile in London, which was recognized by the Western Allies, had no authority at all in Volhynia, not even among its ethnic Polish subjects. The government representatives in London were painfully surprised by the participation of ethnic Poles in the German administration and by the massive influx of ethnic Poles into the German police after the
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first Ukrainian attacks on Polish villages in the summer of 1943. The government in exile was powerless in the face of these events (Snyder 2003: 173).

On the Ukrainian side, the contrast with the prewar situation was even sharper. There was no representative of the state to help organize a home army or to act as a political intermediary. Of the broad political field that had existed before the war, only the extreme right was left as a political force. It was in fact the OUN, the organization with very little political support among the local population during the interwar years, that survived the Soviet and Nazi occupation. Moreover, even within the Ukrainian right the radical political visions soon overruled the moderate ones. The radical wing of the OUN eventually succeeded to take over the leadership of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) by remorselessly eliminating its political rivals, which in fact involved a true fratricide that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians (Snyder 2003: 164). In the absence of any political opposition, the OUN-UPA leadership committed itself to the most radical of all solutions: the physical elimination of the Poles from the alleged “Ukrainian lands” (Snyder 2003: 165; Berkhoff 2004: 281).

In the spring of 1943, after a series of German military defeats along the German-Russian front, Ukrainian policemen left en masse German employ to join the UPA. As soldiers of the UPA, they embarked on a second genocidal mission: the systematic
expulsion and killing of the local Polish population. UPA soldiers and special security forces systematically selected and attacked villages that were partly or entirely inhabited by Poles. For attacks on larger Polish settlements or on mixed Polish-Ukrainian settlements, the UPA partisans mobilized local peasants, who were offered material inducements to join in the slaughter (Snyder 2003: 169-70). By July 1943 virtually all of the Ukrainian partisan groups were allied with the UPA, making it large enough, with its 20,000 or so troops and some 40,000 soldiers, to conduct simultaneous actions in a substantial area (Snyder 2003: 170; Brown 2004: 221). Estimates of the number of Poles killed by the UPA in Volhynia and Galicia between March and December 1943 range from 40,000 to 60,000 men, women and children. These figures include Jews who had survived the *Endlösung* and who had gone into hiding in the villages (Snyder 2003: 170; Brown 2004: 221).

As a reaction to the UPA attacks, thousands of Polish men and women joined the Soviet partisans, who created new Polish units, and the German occupying forces, who armed them in exchange for information about the UPA (Berkhoff 2004: 294). Many others sought refuge in villages and towns with larger Polish populations where they, again helped by Germans or by the Home Army, established self-defense outposts (Snyder 2003: 172). The Soviet partisans, the Polish partisans, the Polish *Schutzmannschaften* and self-defense units began the counterattack in the autumn of 1943, when they plundered and wiped out the population of countless Ukrainian villages. Attempts by the Polish government in exile to mediate in the conflict were in vain. Repeated calls by the Polish Home Army to the Polish partisans and self-defense militias to join the Home Army and to stop the killing of defenseless civilians fell on deaf ears (Snyder 2003: 173-4). There was no turning back for any of the fighting parties. As Brown has written:

> All […] groups fatally punished villagers who helped the other side. As villages burned and the survivors were left homeless, they went to the forests and joined one underground group or another. As a result, many people signed on to the nationalist or Soviet partisan cause not out of conviction, but because they had nowhere else to go (Brown 2004: 221).

The Polish reprisals against the Ukrainian civilian population provided propaganda material for the UPA. A notice from the UPA periodical *Idea and deed* from July 1943 reads: “The Ukrainian population in the northwestern Ukrainian lands has started to respond to the terror and provocation by the Polish settlers, secret agents, and Communist cells with self-defense, destroying all hidden enemies of the Ukrainian people” (quoted in Berkhoff 2004: 292). In fact, the systematic use of propaganda and nationalist rhetoric played a decisive role in the outbreak of a total civil war between the two populations. “By murdering individuals in the name of the nation,” writes Snyder (2003: 175), “ethnic cleansers not only humiliate, infuriate, and nationalize the survivors, they make individuals
of their own group the targets of national revenge.” What had started in Volhynia as an attack on people within carefully selected locations became, through the predictable reprisals, the nationalist vocabulary and the propaganda, a war of one people against another. This self-fulfilling prophecy of ethnic violence is, according to Snyder, “a simple political truth that ethnic cleansers have exploited throughout the twentieth century” (2003: 175). In wartime Volhynia and Galicia this “simple political truth” culminated in the following OUN-UPA order:

> Liquidate all Polish traces. Destroy all walls in the Catholic church and other Polish prayer houses. Destroy orchards and trees in the courtyards so that there will be no traces that someone lived there. Destroy all Polish huts in which Poles lived earlier […] Pay attention to the fact that when something remains that is Polish, then the Poles will have pretensions to our land.²

Ukrainian and Polish cleansers had the political tide on their side. Years of foreign occupation, intervals of power vacuum, as well as the extremely brutal Nazi and Soviet persecutions had made the extremists on either side the most successful political force in Volhynia and Galicia in 1943. In a setting where legitimate political rule was contested, mass killings were sanctioned, and civil society was decapitated, the Polish-Ukrainian conflict assumed genocidal proportions.

The individual will to survive: the vicissitudes of a Polish partisan 1939-1946

The OUN-UPA ethnic cleansings sparked a Polish-Ukrainian civil war that spread rapidly over large areas. Starting in Volhynia (the northern part of Poland’s former eastern territories) the war extended to Galicia (south) and to the Chelm and Lublin provinces (west). By winter 1943, Ukrainian and Polish partisans were locked in an extremely bloody armed conflict on the west side of the Bug river. Village after village was leveled with the ground. Meanwhile, Polish partisans of the Peasant Battalions (Bataliony Chłopskie) committed the same crimes against humanity that the Ukrainian freedom fighters had done. Even units of the Polish Home Army took part in the attacks on Ukrainian villages from the spring of 1944 on. All in all, Polish and Ukrainian partisans in the Chelm and Lublin provinces each managed to wipe out some 5,000 of the civilian population of their opponents in the period between 1943 and 1944 (Snyder 2003: 176). One of the Polish partisans who became involved in these bloody Polish-Ukrainian confrontations was Waldemar Lotnik.

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² Excerpt from TsDAHO Ukrainy from early 1944, quoted in Brown (2004: 221).
Initiation into political violence: the German enemy

Waldemar Lotnik, born in 1925 in Modryniec, a village near Lublin, was fourteen years old when the war broke out. As the son of a Polish officer Lotnik was particularly receptive to the sense of adventure and heroism evoked by resistance to the German occupying forces. Three of Lotnik’s five uncles joined the partisans. And there was Baron, a youth from the village, who went into hiding in the woods together with his Jewish girlfriend and her brother. Baron had managed to get his hands on weapons during the disturbances in September 1939 and made a living by robbing local Ukrainian farmers and officials. His actions gradually took on more of a political character, and when he had killed a Ukrainian overseer whom the villagers hated and two SS men within a week, his days were numbered. The corpse of Baron, riddled by machine-gun fire, was hung up in the centre of the village with a notice in German, Polish and Ukrainian attached around his neck saying: “Anyone who raises his hand against a German citizen or soldier will be punished like this murderer” (Lotnik and Preece 1999: 25). The deterrent had the opposite effect: it confirmed Lotnik’s conviction that it was better to take up arms against the enemy and to die a hero’s death rather than to patiently suffer humiliation at the hands of the Germans.

Lotnik ran away from home twice to join the Polish resistance but each time he returned unsuccessfully. It was not until the spring of 1943, by which time he was eighteen years old, that he managed to join a local unit of the Peasant Battalion. He was accepted after he had given proof of his dedication with a local youth resistance group that organized evening attacks on German depots modeled on the example of their dead hero Baron. Lotnik’s decision to join the Peasant Battalion was both idealistic (his grandfather had been a member of the Peasant Party before the war) and pragmatic (it was the only armed group of partisans that was active in the neighborhood). From the summer until the late autumn of 1943 he took part in sabotage actions and attacks on German targets. Until the spring of 1944, when the unit was overwhelmed by a superior force of 20,000 Kalmuk soldiers, the turnover among the soldiers was reasonably balanced. New recruits from all strata of the population rapidly replaced the dead and wounded. Larger groups, including units of Polish police who had deserted from the Nazi Wehrmacht and locally operating Polish groups of partisans, also joined the Peasant Battalion unit. At crucial moments the

3 Soldiers from the Caucasian and Asiatic Soviet republics. The Kalmuks originally formed an important part of the Russian Red Army, but they deserted from the Red Army in large numbers in the course of the war.
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unit could also count on the support of the stronger and better-equipped communist and nationalist resistance groups.\(^4\)

*Escalation of political violence: the Ukrainian enemy*

In the autumn of 1943 the focus of attention of Lotnik’s unit increasingly shifted from attacks on German targets to the defense of the Polish civilian population against attacks by Ukrainian militiamen. Lotnik’s unit drifted away from its original mission—the liberation of Polish territory from the German occupying forces—and became ever more deeply involved in a war with divisions of the UPA army and irregular Ukrainian armed groups. This war effaced everything else and was so violent that Lotnik’s recollections of his period as a partisan are mainly linked to the six months in which he took part in this war, from the autumn of 1943 until his arrest by the Germans in April 1944.

The bloody confrontations began with a relatively small and insignificant incident: the surprise visit by a German *Wehrmacht* soldier and two Kalmuk escorts to Laskuv, a village that was the base for Lotnik’s unit. The German soldier went back home in the evening. The two Kalmuk soldiers, blind drunk, stayed behind, but were shot when they tried to get their hands on the two daughters of their host. When the German soldier returned on the following day to pick up his escorts, he was shot as well. A German attack was now inevitable; the Germans arrived on the following day in the early afternoon. A heavily armed German military convoy with more than a hundred *Wehrmacht* and SS soldiers was driven from the village without much difficulty by Lotnik’s unit. The Germans failed to react, but as if it had been arranged, the Ukrainian militiamen shifted their attention from the east of the River Bug, where they had been burning down Polish villages and wiping out the population, to the Lublin province on the west side of the river.

During a first wave of liquidation, conducted by a Ukrainian death squad, seven Polish resistance fighters were tortured to death, including two of Lotnik’s uncles who had temporarily returned to their parental home. Lotnik happened to be out on a mission that night and was passing the house. He followed it all from a safe distance and swore to avenge the violent death of his uncles. Once he had returned to his unit, it was clear to everyone that something was about to happen. The Peasant Battalion set out for Modryn, the Ukrainian village next to the village where Lotnik had been born. Just before arriving in the village, the commander gave his men the following order: “Don’t burn, don’t loot. Just shoot young, able-bodied men. If anyone resists, make sure you shoot him before he shoots you. We have to teach them that they cannot take out selected Polish citizens and kill and torture them” (1999: 65). Sixteen Ukrainian men were executed in Modryn that

\(^4\) In fact Communist and nationalist resistance groups fought one another during the wartime but they both maintained contacts with units of the Peasant Battalions.
evening. It was an easy job; the families were familiar to Lotnik’s unit and the victims and their families did not put up any resistance. The first step towards a ruthless war had been taken.

A week later the Ukrainians retaliated by completely burning down a Polish settlement and raping the women of the village. The Peasant Battalion replied with an attack on a Ukrainian village, which was bigger than the Polish village that had suffered the same fate. This time, two or three men from Lotnik’s unit disobeyed the commander’s orders: they killed women and children too. The Ukrainians retaliated by seizing a village with five hundred Polish residents and torturing to death everyone who fell into their hands. At this Lotnik’s unit attacked two large Ukrainian villages. The Ukrainians replied by deploying all of their men in a massive attack on no less than five Polish settlements. German-trained Ukrainian troops who had been deployed in wiping out the Jewish population on the east side of the River Bug also took part in this operation. The fighting, Lotnik concludes, grew bloodier and bloodier and escalated completely:

Each time more people were killed, more houses burnt, more women raped. Men became desensitized very quickly and kill as if they knew nothing else. Even those who would otherwise hesitate before killing a fly can quickly forget they are taking human lives. In fact, in order to kill it is necessary to forget that the victims are human; as soon as contact is established, it becomes difficult to pull the trigger. On both sides teenagers were the worst perpetrators of atrocities (1999: 66).

The scenes in the villages were indescribable, but Lotnik, who was confronted by them every day, still has them imprinted on his retina.

We moved through three Polish villages twenty-four hours after a Ukrainian attack. Houses and ruins still smouldered; charred bodies littered the ground in front of the buildings; the corpses of small children, who had been thrown onto the burning roofs, now lay where they had fallen, their heads smashed open […] The naked remains of women often showed signs of mutilation—their vaginas had usually been slit open. Even small girls had been carved with knives and bayonets […] We dug a few graves and carved the number of bodies buried in each onto makeshift wooden crosses. Many remained unburied (1999: 66-7).

Numbed by the excessive consumption of alcohol during the breaks in the fighting and with the adrenaline pumping through his veins during the orgies of violence in the villages, Lotnik, who was the youngest of his unit, was no better than the other soldiers. He too plundered, killed and raped, careful throughout it all to maintain his reputation as a fearless resistance fighter. “I wanted my comrades to trust me and respect me,” Lotnik explained, “killing was the only way to earn their respect” (1999: 73). This desire did not prevent the suffocating corset of the principle of an eye for an eye from sometimes becoming too tight
for him. Lotnik describes a number of moments when he was no longer able to do what was expected of him: to rape and kill his defenseless victims. He rescued one girl from the hands of a comrade and let her escape, and responded to a mother’s prayers not to shoot her son dead; the bullets only grazed her son and Lotnik left him behind as if he were dead. One day Lotnik disobeyed the commander’s order to shoot an old man. The commander then shot the man himself. To Lotnik’s great relief, the commander never mentioned the incident again.

In clear moments, Lotnik felt particularly uneasy about the excessive violence that was used against their Ukrainian victims. He is confident to state: “I never saw one of our men pick up a baby or small child with the point of a bayonet and toss it onto a fire; I saw the charred corpses of Polish babies who had been killed that way.” But he asserts in the same breath: “If none of our number did that, then it was the only atrocity that we did not commit” (1999: 59). In Lotnik’s view the excessive violence used by some members of his unit did not do the general cause any good. When one day his unit came across a pile of Ukrainian bodies, one of the younger partisans named Polecat took a wooden stake he had found lying at the roadside and shoved it up the backside of one of the corpses. Lotnik: “It was no business of mine what he did, he lived for blood and what he did to the living was far worse”. Yet later Lotnik regretted not having stopped him. “I realized that any Ukrainian who found the body would assume that the man had been impaled while still alive. I did not say anything to Polecat, nor stop him on other occasions, because he would have thought me weak” (1999: 67).

It was early 1944 when Lotnik’s unit and divisions of the AK (numbering over two thousand soldiers) participated in a corporate massive attack on two UPA bases. The attacks resulted in a brief pause in the reciprocal hostilities, but once the AK soldiers had retreated and the UPA had mustered a new force, the violence broke out again in full force. The military superiority of the UPA and the Nazi Wehrmacht resulted in a quick defeat of the Peasant Battalions in the region. Of Lotnik’s unit only fifty members survived the ambushes, hunger and cold. In spring 1944 Lotnik was caught by Kalmuk soldiers and handed over to the Germans.

Continuation of political violence: the invincible opponent

Lotnik’s arrest by the Germans by no means ended his career as a soldier. After his liberation from the Majdanek concentration camp, he went to a Soviet recruiting centre in the hope of joining the army, the navy or the air force. “We could not think of peace,” Lotnik recalled. “The food was good and we slept in barracks in the city, waiting for a full vetting” (1999: 120). After an interview with an official of the Soviet Secret Service (NKVD), Lotnik was drafted as a pilot for the air force of the Red Army. As a budding pilot under the new regime, Lotnik was recruited and trained as a Soviet intelligence agent.
A brief crash course at an elite school in the Soviet Union made an indelible impression, but failed to make him a loyal Soviet adept. After receiving a tip-off about his imminent arrest, Lotnik escaped from his superiors in May 1945.

During a vacation leave that he spent in his native village, just before his desertion from the Red Army, Lotnik became involved in yet another form of local armed resistance. A distant cousin and fellow villager had talked him into this. “Bartek told me excitedly that the Home Army needed horses and carts for the Polish evacuation and was offering hard cash for carts recovered from Ukrainian families now trekking eastward.”5 Lotnik was skeptical at first, but he joined his cousin nevertheless. “I had already seen the difference in the size of the loads carried by the Polish and Ukrainian carts, and he persuaded me that duty demanded I assist the Polish population”. During a couple of intense weeks the two cousins (with Lotnik dressed in his Soviet Air Force uniform and speaking his best Russian) successfully attacked one Ukrainian family after the other and sold the stolen booty to a Home Army collecting point a few miles away. “To Polish eyes, this was not theft but the reclaiming of goods looted from Polish villages. Our objective was to stop the goods disappearing forever into the Soviet Union”(1999: 160).

It was May 1945 when Lotnik once again joined the partisans in the Lublin province, this time to fight the Soviet occupying forces. He joined a unit of the Free Polish Cavalry that consisted largely of deserters from the Polish Red Army. The cavalry regarded its task as the defense of the Polish nationalists, who were being arrested in thousands at a time throughout the country, against the NKVD militias. Its hopes were set on intervention by the Western Allies to put an end to the Soviet occupation of Poland. Between May and July 1945 Lotnik was involved in as much action as he had been during his time with the Peasant Battalion, but this time he was no longer the youngest; he had a platoon under his command and was called lieutenant by his men.

During a meeting of Poland’s anti-communist resistance forces with the regional command of the Polish Home Army in July 1945 a delegate of the Polish government in exile announced the end of armed resistance. He reasoned as follows: the Western powers do not want to burn their fingers with Poland and will not intervene to help those fighting for a free Poland. Therefore, there is no point in continuing the struggle, and while it is still possible in the postwar chaos to escape the attention of the communist authorities, everyone is well advised to assume a new identity and to go back to Civvy Street. The commander of Lotnik’s unit followed the advice and demobilized his unit. Thereupon the

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5 In September 1944 the representatives of the Polish Committee of National Liberation and the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic (USSR) signed a treaty on the so-called “repatriation” of all ethnic Ukrainians from Poland to the USSR and of all ethnic Poles from the USSR to Poland. As a result of this treaty, around 480,000 Ukrainians left their native homes in Poland and some 780,000 Poles left their native homes in Ukraine between 1944 and 1946 (Misiło 1996).
On the escalation of violence

“...In honour of the members of the civilian militia who were killed while maintaining law and order in the years 1944-1946: Bogaczewicz Bolesław, Klosowicz Mieczysław, Kruczek Tadeusz, Solon Edward. They rest in peace.” Wola Michowa, May 2005

ex-soldiers were issued with civilian clothes, new passports, and money for the journey. They also had to surrender their weapons. “I discovered that I was more attached to my machine gun than to my horse and I kissed it farewell,” Lotnik (1999: 181) recalled. “If no one had been looking I might even have shed a tear for it—after all it had saved my life more than once”.

But even at this point Lotnik had no intention of returning to civilian life. He could not see any future for himself in a communist Poland and therefore decided to flee to the West. When Lotnik reached liberated American territory in August 1945, he immediately reported to the Free Polish Corps, upon which he was taken on as a soldier in the tank regiment of the Second Warsaw Mechanized Weapon Division on the Adriatic coast of Italy. Exactly one year later, in August 1946, Lotnik and a group of other Polish soldiers left the Italian port of Ancona for Edinburgh. The Polish communist government had begun a campaign against the Free Polish Army in the summer of that year, alleging that it harbored aggressive intentions. In reaction, the British government established the Polish Resettlement Corps to assist the demobilized Polish soldiers with integration in civilian life in one of the Western countries. Lotnik was present when General Anders, the commander-in-chief of the Free Polish Armed Forces, convinced his soldiers to join the new, virtual corps:
I am not here to give orders or words of command. What I have are words of friendly advice from an old soldier to his fellow soldiers. Very shortly you will be discarding your uniforms and emigrating to the four corners of the earth. All I request is that you concentrate in countries where you can remain in touch and return to arms when need be (1999: 205).

Lotnik joined the Polish Resettlement Corps and, like General Anders, chose to settle in Great Britain. So at the age of twenty-two, Lotnik’s soldiering days were over and he started out on a new life as a civilian in a new country.

Conclusions

The literary form offers unprecedented opportunities for the exploration and comprehension of the phenomenon of violence that would probably make a sociologist or historian jealous. Babel’s stories about the battles of Volhynia and Galicia have in that respect a special, universal value. In an epilogue to the *Collected Works* of Isaac Babel (1979) the Dutch translator Charles Timmer reasoned that Babel was out not just to present a naturalistic description of the horrors of war, but “by penetrating the violence and by a psychological shock, to reveal the core of humanity beneath the layers of inhumanity.”

Long before Hannah Arendt (1963) drew her conclusions in a *Report on the Banality of Evil*, or Christopher Browning (1992) more recently did in *Ordinary Men*, Babel had already arrived at his sobering conclusion: cruelty and barbarism are the consequences of everyday actions by everyday people rather than the result of deviant, psychopathic behavior. Isaac Babel himself would become a victim of the violent Soviet regime and could no longer bear witness to the mass killings that were to take place two decades later in the same region.

The way in which violence sucks people in and escalates, reaching a point of no return, is the thread running through the stories of Isaac Babel, the research of Timothy Snyder, and the vicissitudes of Waldemar Lotnik. The Ukrainian serf with a bleak future, swept along by the turmoil of events, plotted revenge against his Polish lord. He did so in a situation in which violence was not just tolerated, but was positively encouraged. The war veterans of the Polish-Ukrainian war of 1918-1919 were still in their prime when the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany invaded their major political opponent, the Polish state. They saw a golden opportunity in a situation in which violence was tolerated and encouraged. The Ukrainian police who massively left German employ to join the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in 1943 lost their homes, families and relatives when they
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These Ukrainian soldiers, most of them young “lads” in their teens and twenties, exerted such strong psychological and physical pressure on Ukrainian civilians that they had no choice but to participate in the mass killings too (Berkhoff 2004: 292-8). Men like Polecat, the main torturers in Lotnik’s Peasant Battalion, had lost their brothers, sisters, parents, wives and children during a Ukrainian attack; they lived to avenge the deaths of their loved ones on the Ukrainians. The story of Lotnik shows how difficult it is to lay down one’s arms once they have been taken up; it was only in the complete absence of a setting of armed conflict that he was able to return to civilian life.

The mechanism of the escalation of violence is an exceptionally traumatic experience for those directly involved, as is shown in the epilogue by Julian Preece, the writer and editor of Lotnik’s biography. Unprepared for what was to come, Preece initially assumed that Lotnik’s experiences in the notorious Majdanek concentration camp would form the emotional core of the book. In the end Lotnik needed only some twelve hours to tell the story of Majdanek. It took him about eighty hours, on the other hand, to recount his memories of his boyhood in Kremenetz, a garrison town at the southernmost point of interbellum Poland. “What began to puzzle me and, increasingly, to irritate me”, Preece writes, “was the way he emphasized his own acts of kindness to Ukrainian schoolchildren […] The frequency and scale of his acts of generosity bordered the incredible” (1999: 207). It was not until Preece and Lotnik started to work on the material for the later chapters of the book that he realized what Lotnik had been trying to tell him, and especially why. Lotnik’s point was that during the interwar years Poles and Ukrainians had got on with one another and that the violence unleashed by their Ukrainian neighbors came as a total surprise. The urgency of this message for Lotnik lay in the fact that the outburst of violence was “inexplicable to someone of his background” (Preece in Lotnik and Preece 1999: 208).

The question of why peaceful citizens—neighbors, relatives and friends in their everyday lives—are prepared to kill one another from one day to the next is also at the centre of Snyder’s analysis. He seeks an answer to this question in the political constellation of the moment: the military defeat of Poland (1939), the destruction of the Polish and Ukrainian political elites (1939-1942), and the implementation of genocidal programs by the Soviet and the Nazi occupying forces (1939-1944). The increased militarization of society and the disintegration of the state monopoly of violence enabled a relatively small group of Ukrainian extremists to make a successful breakthrough. The definitive breakthrough of this group in 1943 set the ball rolling: the ethnic cleansing

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6 It was common German policy to execute the family of a policeman who deserted. If he deserted with his weapons, the whole of his village was wiped out. Retaliation was carried out immediately, usually with the assistance of newly recruited Polish police (Snyder 2003: 173).
actions launched by this group provoked the Polish survivors to take their revenge on the Ukrainian civilian population. The result was an intensive life-and-death struggle by two ethnic groups who once lived as neighbors in adjacent or mixed villages, who before the outbreak of the war went to the same village schools, visited each other’s churches, and even intermarried. In a context in which persecution and oppression were commonplace, this struggle for survival degenerated into an extremely bloody armed conflict.

As an eyewitness to the violent Polish-Ukrainian confrontations, Lotnik could barely catch sight of the larger dimensions of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict. That does not alter the fact that his first-hand account does shed some light on the question why violence broke out on such a massive scale and why this violence was so uncompromisingly brutal. Lotnik’s account reveals how violence implicates people, escalates and dehumanizes them: the survival instinct, that dominates all else, of people who, whether they want it or not, are dragged into the conflict; the demoralizing routine of killing; the political opportunism of those who take part in the war; and, finally, the impossibility of returning to Civvy Street once someone has been caught up in violence. Moreover, Lotnik’s testimony lends support to the thesis that civil war is brutal precisely because it is a war of neighbor against neighbor and friend against friend. “Civil war often transforms local and personal grievances into lethal violence”, writes Kalyvas (2006: 389), “once it occurs, this violence becomes endowed with a political meaning that may be quickly naturalized into new and enduring identities.” In other words, civil wars produce violence that tends to assume simultaneously a highly brutal and deeply intimate character (cf. Keeley 1996; Blok 1998; Peterson 2000; Spencer 2000; Brown 2004; Kalyvas 2006). It was this vicious—often intimate and personal—violence and retaliation for violence that gave the wartime Polish-Ukrainian conflict a particularly appalling connotation. As Brown sums up:

The battles between insurgents were often personal, fought between neighbors and family members. They skirmished for this village, that bend in the river, this churchyard. In the wake of the highly technical and efficient mass killing of the Axis and Allied powers, inhabitants of the borderlands killed each other in ones and twos with simple tools. They killed with rifles, but more often, to save ammunition, with the butts of rifles, with knives, sickles, or the blunt surface of a wall. Short on technology and firepower, they fought with brute force of muscle, and so in the [Soviet and Nazi] reports the warfare is defined as “barbaric”—described as such by men whose profession was to kill quickly, massively and impersonally behind the cover of the legitimised violence of the state (Brown 2004: 222).

The two perspectives of Snyder and Lotnik on the violent Polish-Ukrainian conflict between 1939 and 1944 complement one another on a number of major points. While Snyder puts his finger on the moment at which a political conflict between two population groups becomes caught up in a violent acceleration, Lotnik offers insight into the social and psychological consequences of the violent confrontations for those directly involved.
Snyder defines the social and political context of violence; Lotnik describes the individual experience of violence. Both perspectives are essential for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of violence. They lead us to the universal elements that play a role in the escalation of violence: the power vacuum, the struggle for survival, and the banality of evil. And they bring to light parallels with other conflict-ridden areas. Lotnik’s experiences are shared by countless others who become involved in violence: by the seventeen-year-old youth, son of a Polish-Ukrainian couple from the village of Doshne in Volhynia, who in 1943 was forced to assist in killing fellow Polish villagers to prove his Ukrainian identity and to retain his right to live (Berkhoff 2004: 295), and by the many thousands of other (child) soldiers who were and are deployed all over the world during violent conflicts—in Cambodia in the 1970s, in Bosnia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s, and in Sudan and Congo today.