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

The outbursts of massive ethnic violence in the Yugoslav successor states following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 surprised and worried many contemporary observers, as did other upsurges of ethnic nationalism and conflict in a number of post-communist countries. What were the causes of these sudden and intense outbursts of ethnic hatred and where would the next ethnic war begin? There were plenty potential causes of ethnic conflict between the newly established democratic Poland and Ukraine as well: 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. 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. This study starts from the question how and why in Poland in the 1990s revitalized ideas of a modern ‘nation-state’ found a peaceful articulation. It asks 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 violence between Poles and Ukrainians remained absent, despite a history of Polish-Ukrainian hostility and violence?

The above questions are tackled through multiple approaches, which include macro and micro level investigations, as well as anthropological and historical research methods. Chapter 1 outlines the methodological and theoretical foundations of this study and establishes its main focus. Particular attention is given as well to the overall transformation of Polish society over the past six decades as to the interface between macro and micro level processes. The assumption that underlies this study is that peace is not a natural, self-explanatory outcome of things, but the result of complex and often contradictory processes, which deserve both theoretical attention and systematic empirical study. As the title suggests, peace is worked on at every step in the process; it is the product of a continuous struggle involving especially those who are part of the contested domains of modern statehood. 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. 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 with the Polish-Ukrainian wartime conflict. In spring 1943 the independence-seeking Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukrains’ka Povstans’ka Armiia) commenced a campaign of ethnic cleansing in Volhynia and Galicia that cost the lives of tens of thousands of Polish civilians. This ethnic cleansing campaign, which aimed at securing Ukrainian control in Poland’s formerly eastern territories, 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 of people. Chapter 2 addresses the question why the wartime Polish-Ukrainian conflict spiraled into such large-scale lethal violence. Two complementary explanations are offered. The first one deals with the larger political context in which the conflict took place. A second explanation addresses the consequences of the conflict for local relationships. 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 phenomenon.

Bearing in mind that the term ethnic cleansing has become commonplace in descriptions of specific genocidal practices as in, for example, former Yugoslavia, chapter 3 addresses another side of ethnic cleansing: the implementation of an unparalleled process of demographic engineering in the former Polish People’s Republic during the immediate postwar years. In the mid 1940s Poland’s new communist leadership willfully built the future of the new People’s Republic on the massive expulsion and deportation of almost all of its ethnic and national minorities. A decade later the communist government adopted a policy towards the residual minority populations that today would be termed ‘affirmative action’. This policy was characterized by an effort to redress discrimination as well as the effects of such discrimination in earlier periods. To that purpose active measures were taken to ensure equal social and economic opportunities for minorities. Chapter 3 explores the background of the Polish government’s wavering policies towards its ethnic and national minorities by focusing on Poland’s Ukrainians. It is demonstrated how these seemingly contradictory policies were prompted by the same underlying political motivations. Ethnic cleansing and affirmative action are interpreted as two divergent political answers to a single political question: how can a state obtain control over and acquire legitimacy among its majority and minority populations?
Chapter 4 explores the background of social engineering in the mountainous Bieszczady region in the 1950s and 1960s, when Poland’s political leadership ventured to impose a new socialist order in an area ravaged by war and ethnic cleansing. State social(ist) engineering had been effective in two important respects. Firstly, it had largely polonized a formerly Ukrainian area, and secondly, it had laid the foundation of a socialist infrastructure in the villages. Meanwhile it had evidently failed to meet a number of its prime objectives. This chapter explores how and why the state engineering project failed in the Bieszczady and addresses two questions: first, what were the conditions that gave rise to the failure of social(ist) engineering, and second, what were the consequences of this failure for relationships at the local level? The chapter suggests that the relative weakness of the Polish state vis-à-vis the local setting was crucial for later developments in the region. Despite the state’s ability to use coercive power to bring its ideal designs into being, in practice it left plenty of room for local residents to proceed independently from the state-imposed structure. This relatively high degree of autonomy facilitated the formation of a society with a dynamic of its own, that is, one in which power was contested by diverse social groups, and subsequently, one in which the resulting balance of power was self-attained rather than enforced from the outside.

A parallel phenomenon occurred in the field of religious policies towards minorities. Chapter 5 points out how the liquidation of the Greek Catholic church by the Polish socialist state in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with the cultural oppression of Poland’s Greek Catholic Ukrainians. Archival documents and interviews provide detailed insight into how the Greek Catholic community in the village of Komańcza coped with the intense political persecution by the socialist state, and how it managed to survive as a community, while maintaining its cultural identity. The state-enforced closure of the Greek Catholic parish church left the villagers deprived of the main symbol of their cultural identity. This temporary ‘culture void’, resulting from the attempted elimination of shared practices and traditions, gave rise to a sectarian conflict in the village. The battle over the true cultural values eventually led to a schism within the Greek Catholic community and the foundation of an Orthodox parish by some of the Greek Catholic families. The case study shows that even under extremely repressive circumstances people may find ways to develop their own defense strategies and, by this means, manipulate the outcome of state policies. Local initiatives forced the state authorities to seek compromise solutions. In the long run, local opposition and accommodation and state-church compromise effectively undermined the success of repressive state policy.

After the 1990 election of Poland’s first postwar non-communist government, Poland’s Lemkos, who during the socialist era had been classified as Ukrainians, began to voice their specific concerns and participate in Poland’s public and political life more intensely than ever before. Chapter 6 discusses the impact of the socialist past on processes of
identity formation and political mobilization among Poland’s Lemko minority as they occurred in the 1990s. Drawing from the example of the Lemko emancipation movement in Poland, the thesis that Eastern Europe’s once-socialist societies are strongly predisposed to ethno-nationalist conflict is put to the test. The chapter demonstrates that two features from the socialist past have contributed to a strong disposition of Poland’s Lemko minority to ethno-nationalist appeals and rhetoric: the dominance of an exclusivist Polish nationalism and the socialist ‘economy of shortage’. But even though Lemko leaders do rely on nationalist rhetoric in their efforts to achieve political mobilization, such nationalist appeals do not fundamentally threaten the current peaceful relationship between Lemkos and Poles in Poland. One explanation for the relative harmlessness of this type of minority nationalism lies in Poland’s history of forced expulsion, deportation and assimilation, due to which the Lemko minority no longer constitutes a significant power in local and semi-local politics. Their numbers are too low and their internal political divisions too strong for Poland’s Lemkos to effectively mobilize for collective action. Ironically, the strong internal divisions within the Lemko minority in fact help ease potential tensions between Lemkos and Poles in Poland.

Chapter 7 seeks to explain why the region of which the Komańcza rural district is part—once the scene of war and massive ethnic violence—has developed into a predominantly peaceful society. The current emphasis on interethnic tolerance in the Komańcza district is explained in terms of the overall transformation of Polish society. Several long-term macro and micro processes stand out as fundamental to this transformation. The integration of the local village communities into Poland’s postwar state structure, following the massive destruction of the prewar multiethnic society during the 1940s, helped consolidate interethnic cooperation in several ways. Firstly, it involved the extension of weak ties and the weakening of strong ties in village networks, which in turn, spurred processes of individualization within the village communities. Secondly, it produced new social cleavages, drawing dividing lines not just between, but also within ethnic groups, and prompted the establishment of social ties linking individuals across ethnic boundaries. While all this allowed for the gradual establishment of new identities and relationships beyond the family, group, and community level, it also contributed to a broadening of views and ideas. Moreover, the mutual dependencies and conflicting loyalties between village residents, induced by the prevalence of cross-cutting ties, hamper those wanting to mobilize along lines of ethnic or religious cleavage.

The concluding chapter seeks to formulate a comprehensive answer to the question why massive ethnic violence remained absent in Poland after 1990. Three factors stand out as crucial to Poland’s current peaceful conditions: the development of a strong state, the establishment of a near homogenous nation, and the successful assimilation and integration of individuals and groups in Polish society. The recovery of the monopoly of violence by
the Polish state during the late 1940s helped pacify and stabilize relationships between individuals and groups, including those between Poles and Ukrainians. The ethnic cleansing policies of the late 1940s and early 1950s reduced Poland’s minority populations, including Poland’s Ukrainians, to such negligible numbers that they were rendered a harmless factor in Polish politics. Finally, the successful assimilation and integration of individuals and groups in Polish society transformed relationships at all levels of society away from violent interaction and in the direction of stable and peaceful relations. Four decades of persistent nation-state building laid the basis for Poland’s political direction after 1990: the nonviolent transformation from a communist to a democratic state administration; the promotion and protection of minority group rights by Poland’s central authorities; the political rapprochement between Poland and the neighboring German, Lithuanian, Byelorussian and Ukrainian states.

Today, a resort to violence is generally considered obsolete and counter-productive. This is not just the norm propagated by Poland’s mainstream political leadership; it is a generally accepted belief by the great majority of Poland’s citizenry. The case material suggests that under certain conditions peace is robust enough to reinforce peace. It is by means of this reinforcement that during the 1990s Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation could gain momentum. In other words, neither ethnic cleavage nor ethnic conflict will necessarily result in violent escalation. The shift from nonviolent to violent modes of conflict is a phase shift, and so is the reverse process. This study has directed particular theoretical attention to the ‘peace’ phase, in which nonviolent modes of conflict predominate. It is argued that macro level conditions interact with micro level conditions to form a foundation for trust and security that gives rise to the expectations that determine behavior. While there may be similarities in these conditions between a society in the ‘peace’ phase and a society in the ‘violence’ phase, there will be significant differences in the degree of trust and security experienced by the population in their day-to-day interactions. Therefore, interethnic ‘noise’ will be interpreted differently and responded to differently. This explains why, despite the existence of tensions, massive ethnic violence remained absent in Poland after the regime change in 1990. In contrast to the situation in some other former communist countries, Polish society had developed a high degree of stability, which engendered a basic degree of confidence in the government and provided the basis for interethnic relations based on trust.