The Borderlands (‘Kresy’) are for us hell, for you, paradise. A conversation with Yaroslav Hrytsak.

Katarzyna Wężyk, Gazeta Świąteczna 25 July 2015

We aren’t able to agree on the matter of Volhynia in the immediate future. Could Poland come to terms with Jedwabne in the case of Russian aggression? Katarzyna Wężyk is in conversation with Yaroslav Hrytsak.

Katarzyna Wężyk: May I use the term The Eastern Borderlands (‘Kresy Wschodnie’)?

Yaroslav Hrytsak: By all means. Of course, this is politically and historically incorrect, but it does not matter that much to me.

It is said the history of these lands raises emotions exclusively on the Polish side?

As far as the Ukrainians are concerned, the matter almost doesn’t exist. Only in the minds of certain individuals. If we look at myths, symbols, images which have been prominent for the last few years, it would appear that Ukraine has only one neighbour: Russia. If we look at, say, television or if we read the press, we get the impression that Poland is some sort of small country near Mexico. Knowledge about our common history is even less. It is frankly minimal.

Of course there are exceptions—people who frequently visit Poland or work there, in these instances, the awareness is obviously greater. There are people, such as in my native Lviv who grew up in Polish culture. But the generation that remembers interwar Poland has practically gone. There is no one who is able to sustain this memory physically or intellectually.

It is the end of the world of the Polish Borderlands.

It is a bit of an historical irony, isn’t it, because didn’t those people cultivating an Ukrainian nationality grow up in opposition to everything to do with Poland?

This is the crux of the matter: We are not talking about history—we are talking about historical memory. This is completely different. Historical memory is dependent not on what we remember but on what we forget. In addition, the lack of knowledge does not mean that Poland has a bad reputation among Ukrainians. Quite the opposite. When in public opinion surveys the question is asked on what country ought Ukraine to model itself, the most frequent choice is Poland – a symbol of a post-communist country where things have worked out, the closest example of Europe. The less knowledge there is about the past, the more positive are the emotions you find.

Let us deconstruct Polish historical memory an important component of which is the myth of the Borderlands. In short, it looks like this: a state without stakes,
**szlachta** democracy and a European power in the form of the Commonwealth of Two Nations (Poland and Lithuania). In the 17th century, as Sienkiewicz teaches us, we didn’t give in to the Cossacks, the Swedes or the Turks. We went a bit overboard with our golden liberty so that our neighbours could take advantage of it dishonourably and carry out the partitions. Because of this, however, we were promoted to being the Christ of Nations which in every generation organized heroic though unsuccessful insurrections. After attaining independence, the Polish youth in Lviv recaptured the city and Lviv became Polish and we begin the twenty years of idyll of the Second Republic. Finally, the Second World War and the massacre in Volhynia, utterly unpredicted, since in the Borderlands, everybody lived in harmony and now suddenly neighbours were taking up axes. How does this look from the Ukrainian side?

With respect to myths about the Eastern Borderlands, the best approach for me is that of the French historian, Daniel Beauvois; for him the legacy of the Commonwealth in the Borderlands is similar to the connection of France to the Maghreb.

**In other words, to avoid wrapping the matter in cottonwool, colonialism.**

Yes, indeed. Colonialism always takes care to describe itself in positive terms in order to demonstrate that it is not a conquest maintained by force but a civilizing mission. Please remember, that the Ukrainian nation moulded itself as a peasant nation and peasant memory of the Commonwealth is very, very bad. This concerns not only Ukrainian peasants but also Polish peasants—may I remind you of the Galician massacre of 1846.

Now this memory is exploited for nefarious purposes. Russia claims that Poland was always a colonial power and wished to expand its sphere of influence and that what is happening in Ukraine is the clash of two empires—to be precise, of Poland and Russia.

**Only the first is fifty times larger than the other.**

If we look at the matter in a historical context, the Commonwealth was one of the largest states in Europe. At one point, it was larger than the Muscovite Empire.

The myth of the Borderlands embodies two equally irrational extremes. The first is the conviction that the Commonwealth was a paradise on earth and everything would have been fine if it were not for those nefarious Muscovites, Ruthenians, Jews and Germans. The other myth states that what we are talking about is a greedy imperial power that invaded its neighbours, took away their lands and exploited their inhabitants and that its chief purpose was to destroy Russia. And that all of the history of eastern Europe is a struggle between the imperial ambitions of Russia and Poland.

In Ukrainian history we have two narratives. The first draws attention to the colonial factor in the politics of the Commonwealth. It reflects some objective realities and is a part of the history of Europe: in 1492, Columbus discovered America and in the succeeding century, the Spaniards began to export (to Europe) tons of silver and gold that
led to a revolution in prices. When the price of wheat, of which Ukraine was the main producer, rose, the aristocracy found it profitable to exploit the Ukrainian peasantry and impose on them a more onerous serfdom in order to have an unfree work force.

But there is another, newer narrative. Its authors are people who were born around the First World War and in the interwar era found themselves in Poland, they were educated in Polish schools and were heavily influenced by Polish culture: Omeljan Pritsak, Ihor Shevchenko and above all, Ivan Lysiak-Rudnicki and Roman Szporluk. For them, Poland was something not so much theirs, as it was never theirs, but it was valuable. It was a window to the West.

**The West came to Ukraine clad in a Polish nobleman’s robe (kontusz).**

Yes. Ihor Shevchenko expressed it most clearly but they all perceived Poland’s role the same way. They believed Ukraine is different from Russia not because of another language or culture—actually the languages and culture are quite close—but because of different political traditions. These traditions derive from the fact that Ukraine was connected to the West through the Commonwealth.

If we had gained independence in 1918, there would have been no chance of a Ukrainian Stalin because we have no tradition of autocracy. The state in Ukraine was never strong, however, society was strong.

Just as in Polish literature there exists the myth of the Eastern Borderlands, so in Ukrainian folklore, we have the myth of Ukraine, not so much as a state or even a nation but as a utopia, that is somewhere far, far away, beyond the great river, where, and this is important, ‘there is no lord, no Jew, no Jesuit’.

**But the Orthodox priest (‘Pop’) is there?**

We don’t speak about who is there but who or what isn’t. Above all, where there is no exploitation. This myth of Ukraine (not of Ruthenia or of Little Russia) is taken from Cossack chronicles and in the nineteenth century, it evolved together with the appearance of socialism, nationalism and other isms. Until the nineteenth century, utopia looked to the past, to a golden age that will never return. In the nineteenth century, a fundamental change occurs: along with the appearance of the idea of progress, utopia is no longer behind us but ahead of us: at the end of the road a great happiness awaits us, a state in which, according to the Marxists, all will be equal and in which, according to the nationalists, the nation will be sovereign. After all, in Ukraine, as was initially the case in Germany and in Poland, the national movement was very left-wing. Mickiewicz’s son called Shevchenko and his colleagues ‘communists’; of the Ukrainian activists in Kyiv in the years 1860-1870 it was said that they carried the poetry of Shevchenko in one pocket and *Das Kapital* in the other.

Then the clash between the two myths begins: the (Polish) Eastern Borderlands—a land flowing with milk and honey where everybody lives in harmony and the (Ukrainian)
myth of a beautiful Ukraine where everything will be good and just, where there will be no foreigners and we will decide our own fate.

Zofia Kossak-Szczucka wrote in Pożoga (Conflagration): ‘Around the house, silence, bliss and complete faith in the world existed’ and ‘in our world, Harmony and Order reigned and everything was good’ since ‘in our treatment of those around us only good things emanated…we never harmed anyone’.

Well, of course, how could we possibly harm anyone.

How was it in the Polish manor—what is to be said about Kossak-Szczucka’s remarks?

This is typical of the discourse of colonists. The French write the same way about Algeria or the British about India. Beautiful country, exotica, the locals are very charming...

...And simple.

A bit stupid, dim-witted and generally childlike. That is why we have to be there in order to civilise them. They are not able to do anything for themselves.

In Ukrainian folklore, Poland appears as a symbol of exploitation and lawlessness. Taras Shevchenko wrote this poem ‘To the Poles’:

Proud were our mothers
Because they gave birth to the free.
Yes, brother Pole, we had
Freedom and strength.

And here in the name of God
Came the Jesuits
The beloved hut was set on fire
And we were washed in blood!

O that is how it was, brother! In the name of God
Our paradise was disturbed,
And from it flowed a sea of blood,
And the hut—they burned...

His tone is not one of mockery. Rather, he writes with bitterness about how unjust this myth is. Because he inhabits this myth and for him it isn’t a paradise but a hell. People used to say that the Commonwealth was paradise for the nobles and the Jews but hell for the peasants. Because really the landowning class could not manage this social space and all this idealisation of the peasantry—this conviction that the peasantry were so charming and basically good—arose only in the nineteenth century. Until that time, the image of the peasantry was very negative, a bit like the racist view of the African-American: the
peasant is wild, cruel, stupid and cunning. This talk of charming peasants appeared more or less during the time of Romanticism.

The problem is that it is difficult to fight against myths.

**Which one?** **The myth about the wild peasantry or about the faithful but simple peasant who bows and scrapes before his lord and master and is happy?**

Against any myth. A myth becomes a myth when one accepts it uncritically. It appeals to the emotions not to reason. It is created not by sociologists but by poets. As Osip Mandelstam said, with us, poetry is taken very seriously—in our country, people are killed for it.

Let’s take my family history as an example. My parents were born in the Polish Republic in 1931 and 1932 respectively into peasant families. They could recite the poetry of Shevchenko for hours and both had an anti-Polish point-of-view.

When I was a teenager, like my friends, I used to listen to Polish radio—again the West was clad as a Polish nobleman, because we were looking, of course, for rock music which was forbidden in the USSR. My parents were not amused by this. ‘If you only knew what they did to us, you would not turn this on. You don’t understand what kind of wrongs they committed.’

**What kind?**

My father quickly became an orphan and his chief memory of those times was hunger. He told me that on one occasion some very well dressed young Poles came to our village from Stryj which was near to where he lived in order to organise a football match for Polish children and after the game they distributed buttered buns to the players. There was so much that the Polish children eventually became bored and used the buns as balls in order to avoid giving them to the Ukrainian children who with hungry eyes were observing this ‘nobleman’s game’.

My father also remembers how Polish pupils in his school once grabbed hold of him, threw him to the ground and forced him to open his mouth to see whether he had a black palate.

You look with disbelief but that is how it was. Almost all Ukrainians of the older generation had similar experiences. At that time, my parents were still children but what awaited them in their lives? Their country was poor; most jobs belonged to Poles and their best choice was to emigrate. Mykola Lebed, one of the leaders of the OUN said that in the 1930s, as a student, he returned from Lviv to his native village. He was very hungry and the only food he found in the hut was what was cooked for the dog. Then he understood: Either he would accept his fate and live in a state of humiliation and hunger, or he would rebel. He became a nationalist.
Ivan Lysiak-Rudnycki wrote wisely that Polish interwar policy towards the Ukrainians was worse than a crime, it was a stupidity. Instead of trying to fashion the Ukrainians into allies, particularly in Galicia, since, after all, the common enemy was the Soviet Union, they did everything to alienate them. The worst policy was the encouragement of Polish colonisation in these lands.

I grew up in a village where houses had been specially built for Poles in the thirties. And even in my period living there, these were the best houses in the whole village. Because the Poles received assistance from the state to build them.

For the Ukrainian intelligentsia, the worst was the humiliation, the taking away of human dignity. This was best explained to me by Larysa Krushelnytska, the director of the Vasyl Stefanyk Library of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Lviv: Both the Russians and the Poles harmed the Ukrainians but the Poles were worse, because the Russians only took the body while the Poles wanted the whole soul.

I grew up on Polish literature, all my generation experienced the ‘Solidarity’ movement, but I understand the origins of the anti-Polish sentiments of the older generation.

**Because they remembered the humiliations?**

Terrible humiliation—the worst but the most widespread memory linked with Poland in that generation.

Fortunately, times are changing. After the Orange Revolution, I spoke to Yevhen Nakoniechny who is of that generation. He told me something very important and moving: ‘All my life, I disliked the Poles and how agreeable it is to admit that I was wrong.’

Of course, myths have their place, but when a turning-point occurs, a new political agenda is set in motion, everything changes. In my opinion, the last twenty to twenty-five years in Polish-Ukrainian relations amount to a geopolitical revolution, they can be compared to what occurred in German-French relations in the post-war years. To the extent that the Franco-German reconciliation of the 1950s was a cornerstone of the future of Europe so the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation gives a chance to expand this Europe to East. And if it is not actual entry into the European Union, then at least it is in the spirit of that Union which is built on reconciliation.

The problem is centred on whether that revolution will survive. Have we already crossed the Rubicon in our mutual relations?

**What role in this budding friendship does the common fear of Russia come into play?**

This is a very important factor, but only one of many. As the Anglo-Saxons say: ‘a’ factor but not ‘the’ factor. I know what I am about to say is politically incorrect—Stalin
is very important in this equation. Because of this: he kicked the Poles out of Ukraine and the Ukrainians out of Poland; he created two ethnically homogeneous states. Would today’s reconciliation be possible if the Poles still constituted the majority in Lviv?

It may sound cynical but Jerzy Giedroyc would not have not been possible without Stalin. Otherwise he would not have been able to propose the formula—for the future of Poland, it is important to recognise that Vilnius is Lithuanian and Lviv, Ukrainian.

The fear of Russia is very important, particularly today when it appears to be justified. But it is not the only reason for the rapprochement. Equally important is the attractiveness of the European project as an alternative for Ukraine itself which is a very corrupt country and is in need of change.

For example, in Lviv at the beginning of this century, we were working to soothe the conflict over the Eaglets Cemetery (Cmentarz Orląt). Our incentive was not fear of Russia. We were afraid that this new source of antagonism with Poland would ruin our chances of entering Europe.

**There remains, as our British hosts like to say, the elephant in the room, in other words, the subject hanging over Polish-Ukrainian relations. The Volhynian massacre. Is there a possibility here of reconciliation?**

In my understanding, we cannot, in the near future, reach a reconciliation on the matter of Volhynia. I say this with bitterness and even shame because I believe this to be our, more, my personal failure. In 2013, at the 60th anniversary of these events, we tried to employ, in the case of Lviv, the well-known formula which was used to reconcile Germans and Poles: ‘We forgive and we ask for forgiveness’. This could have been effective but it didn’t work out. Some were outraged, others could not swallow this formulation: maybe they would have wanted to use it, but they feared the reaction of public opinion.

Not only the majority of Ukrainians but even our moral authorities cannot admit to historical wrongs. They believe that this is a humiliation. It is a repetition of the humiliation they had already experienced between the wars. They also fear that when they admit to this fault, Kremlin propaganda will immediately take advantage of it.

I believe that the Ukrainians ought to admit to their faults. But I don’t believe that this will happen quickly. So that is why I always ask my Polish colleagues for understanding and patience. This does not mean that the Ukrainians are ordinary butchers but rather that they still feel this sense of humiliation.

Poland – Ukraine. This is a very difficult topic on which to achieve maturity.

**The admission of guilt over Volhynia would upset the Ukrainian narrative that they are the innocent victims of their neighbours and of history. In Poland, we have similar examples. That is why Jedwabne was such a big national trauma. For the**
most part, we accepted that this was really disgraceful, but that it is part of our history.

Perhaps I can put it like this: can you imagine the discussion over Jedwabne taking place in the communist era?

**In the 1980s, we began to discuss Polish antisemitism.**

The historians, yes, but there was no public discussion. Do you think Poland could have handled the Jedwabne issue faced with Russian aggression or even the threat of it? In order to make possible a discussion of this type, there has to be a basic feeling of security. So how do the Ukrainians understand this situation? We are threatened by the Russians, we are talking about the survival not only of the state but also of our children who are fighting, and the Poles, on top of this, are making demands that we ask for forgiveness for Volhynia.

**And this is why the Ukrainian intellectual class reacted in a knee-jerk fashion even to the announcement of the film about Volhynia?** There were claims that this would be ‘a school for hate’, that ‘Smarzowski will pass on to the new generation of Poles and Ukrainians an old bone of contention’ and that ‘we will regress a hundred years in Polish-Ukrainian relations’.

I try to stay away from such discussions as much as possible, because it would only make matters worse.

I don’t like historical memory. I treat it as a physician does a disease, particularly when it becomes dangerous. Historical memory constitutes some of the most powerful chemistry in our brains. Up to a point, it can have healing properties, but beyond that, it becomes a poison. And I am always afraid that both on the Ukrainian and the Polish side, political circles may be found who will want to use it as poison.

When transformations occur, people ought not focus too much on historical memory. Particularly in states such as Ukraine which is very divided over the legacy of the Second World War. The Poles forget that what is necessary is not only Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation but also Ukrainian-Ukrainian reconciliation. You have Volhynia, but Ukrainian society is divided over the UPA and Bandera.

**How can Ukrainians live in a divided society. In the West, Bandera is a hero, in the east, a fascist.**

It is possible to live like this because there are always more pressing problems than historical memory: personal security, corruption, poverty. And this was evident in the Maidan. Historical memory did not dominate events there.

**You had the Right Sector.**
Yes. But when they tried to hang Bandera’s portrait in the headquarters of the Euromaidan, it remained there only for two hours. Most of the leaders insisted that it be taken down and be replaced with Shevchenko’s portrait.

In the recent revolution in Ukraine, national identity was not the issue, values were the issue. It was not an accident the activists themselves called it a revolution of dignity. This was a revolution of the younger generation and of the new middle class, which has very different values and doesn’t wish to live in a state of the type which exists at present. A revolution against social injustice, against the regime of Yanukovich who, in his avarice, went beyond even our rather elastic sense of tolerance of corruption. One of the slogans of the Euromaidan, written in large letters on the barricades (by the way, in Russian) was ‘Poymite – nas uzhe eto vsi dostalo’ or “Please understand us—we have had enough”.

In this sense, the Euromaidan was similar to Occupy Wall Street, the protests on Taksim Square or on the Bolotnaya Square in Moscow. Only the participants in those protests lost while those on the Maidan won. And here the nationalist factor comes into play: those revolutions have a greater chance of succeeding which have a national dimension. And on the Maidan, this dimension was very strong. Its participants protested against the system, whose personification was not only Yanukovich but also Putin.

Without the Right Sector, the Euromaidan would have remained a big happening like Occupy Wall Street and most probably it would have ended like it. But after the revolution, Right Sector won only one per cent of the vote in the elections. And here we have the essence of the whole process; the Ukrainian revolution would not have been able to succeed without Ukrainian nationalism—but nationalism has no chance to win in the revolution.

Of course, for Putin, the Maidan was nothing more than an explosion of Ukrainian nationalism. If he had reacted otherwise, he would have had to admit that the protestors on Bolotnaya Square were right and his regime is similar to the regime of Yanukovich. I understand why Putin thinks that way. I don’t understand, however, why so many people in the West, including people in Poland, accept Putin’s way of thinking and concentrate their attention mainly on the Right Sector.

**Because many Poles have a rush of blood to the head when they hear the slogan ‘Bandera’. And here we return to historical memory and the possibilities of reconciliation.**

In order to attain reconciliation, Ukraine must be integrated into the European Union. Because this will give us a feeling of security. Why do so many Ukrainians want to be in the Union—not only because they want to be prosperous, though this is very important. Entry into the Union gives us the chance that Ukraine will stop being the Palestine of Eastern Europe. After all those nightmares of the twentieth century, the Union will be a safe harbour. That’s the way they think.
European integration will give us the chance finally to come to terms with history. Tony Judt, a brilliant historian whom I like very much, said once that the confession of guilt, the recognition of complicity in the Holocaust is an entry ticket for the train of European integration. A very powerful image, because it demonstrates that in order to enter Europe, we have to overcome history. And I have the impression that Ukrainians want to board that train without a ticket. But we must overcome that history because it holds us back and prevents us from going forward.

Wouldn’t be easier if you made a clean break? You know, returning two years ago to the Maidan, I stopped in Lviv and went to the Kriyivka bar which is advertised as ‘the last hiding place of the Ukrainian Insurrectionary Army’. You probably know it?

I do, but I have never been there and I have no intention of doing so. I don’t like a business that trades in stereotypes.

Partisan kitsch for the tourists, a kind of Disneyland UPA. I went to drink beer and suddenly a twenty-something boy grabs me by the arm. He holds a replica of a Kalashnikov rifle that he took off the wall and he wants to take a photo with me. I tell him that I am a Pole, so it is rather unnecessary. I see complete surprise on his face. He didn’t understand what the problem was. Maybe ignorance is better than hostility?

I am not a supporter of the approach that time heals wounds and all we have to do is simply wait. This won’t work. Madeleine Albright once said, ‘Reconciliation is like riding on a bicycle. When you stop pedaling, you quickly fall off’.

On the other hand, you have to understand how the Bandera myth works in Ukraine. It is a myth of opposition to the aggression of the USSR and Russia.

The UPA is a kind of Ukrainian AK?

Exactly.

In the current Ukrainian context, the Bandera myth has nothing to do with Poland and Poles. The anti-Polish component of this myth, like the Jewish component, plays no part. My friends in Germany frequently ask me: why don’t you condemn the Bandera myth? I reply, that Bandera as a person and how he functions in historical memory are two different matters. A Russian liberal journalist once wrote: ‘If Bandera only knew who uses the slogan, “Glory to Ukraine—Glory to the Heroes” on the Maidan, he would turn over in his grave.’

When we worry about historical memory, it doesn’t mean at all that we are struggling to understand the truth about history. Ernest Renan was right on the mark when claimed that getting history wrong is part of being a nation. When we discover the real history, we stop being a nation. A good historian is a permanent threat to national historical memory.
Historical memory can be a poison, but it does not necessarily mean that getting history right could be the best antidote. This is the task of the historian not of society. Historians can remain faithful to their profession and, at the same time, serve society, if they show the differences between reality and historical memory. Then it will turn out that no nation has a monopoly on historical truth and our national truths are relative. And if that is the case, it is always possible and even necessary to reach a reconciliation with each other.


This discussion took place in Cambridge during the conference ‘Past as Prelude: Polish-Ukrainian Relations for the Twenty-First Century’ organized jointly by the Cambridge Polish Studies Programme and the Cambridge Ukrainian Studies Programme at Sidney Sussex College. The panelists from Poland and Ukraine debated current Polish-Ukrainian relations, common history and the differences in its interpretation as well as perspectives for the future. The conference took place with the support of the Oxford Noble Foundation.

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Translated by Michael Zurowski