

## INTRODUCTION

# BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

For a thousand years, the geography of the borderlands dictated their fate.

The borderlands lie in a flat plain, crushed between the civilizations of Europe and those of Asia. East of Poland, West of Russia, their lack of mountains, seas, deserts and canyons has always made the borderlands easy to conquer. Five centuries ago, an army on horseback could march from a castle on the Baltic to a fort on the Black Sea without meeting a physical obstacle greater than a fast-running river or a wide forest. Even now, a spy running East from Warsaw to Kiev would find nothing natural to obstruct him. Distances are great, but messages to the King or the Khan or the Grand Duke or the Czar have always been easier to send here than in the more mountainous parts of Europe, because so little stands in the way of the messenger.

The borderlands' featurelessness attracted invaders, and the most celebrated - the most threatening - always came from the East. Long after the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century, the name of the Golden Horde was still uttered in whispers, and the fame of the Turks, who attacked again and again from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth, has persisted as well. From the North came the most destructive invaders - the rapacious Swedes, who destroyed the region utterly in the great Deluge of 1655, and the Muscovites who began their incursions into the borderlands at about the same time. The least expected invaders came from the South, where Moldovan princes rose up to claim more territory in the sixteenth century, and Cossacks rebelled, setting fire to villages, in the seventeenth. Those who ruled the longest always came from the West. From the twelfth century onwards, Poles and Lithuanians administered vast regions of the borderlands, while the Teutonic Knights controlled the northern Baltic corner, reigning for so long that their descendants, the Germans, came to believe East Prussia would belong to them in perpetuity.

The invasions came and subsided, each time leaving traces: ideas about architecture and literature and religion, words and idioms, boys with black eyes or girls with blonde hair. The pagan, Lithuanian names for rivers and forests stuck; so did the love of Turkish carpets and German tools. Sometimes there were larger changes. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian nobility had abandoned their older languages in favour of Polish. In the thirteenth century, the Teutonic Knights completed the region's first holocaust, destroying the indigenous people of Prussia and replacing them with Germans.

But most of the time, the Polonizations and Prussifications and Russifications, the drives to win

Catholic converts, the crusades to build Orthodox churches, the plans to change churches into mosques came to nothing. The borderlands were simply too wide and too empty, it was too difficult for any invading nation to maintain permanent rule. Instead of uniformity, the waves of invasion created odd hybrids: the cathedral with a minaret in Kamenets Podolsky, or the town of Trakai, where five religions (Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, Moslem, Karaim) once set up their houses of worship around a single lake. Throughout most of the borderland's history, the borderland peoples - the peasants and the woodsman and even the nobility - remained various. From town to town the local legends changed; from village to village the people sang different folk tunes with different melodies.

Because of the invaders' failure to bring about change, it could even be said that there were, until recently, no nations in the borderlands - or at least no nation-states in the sense that we know them now. There were the nobility and the invaders - the Poles and Russians and Germans and Tatars and Turks - who sometimes changed roles, defeating one another only to be defeated in turn. There were the peasants: the Estonians and the Livonians who spoke Baltic tongues, the Mazurians and Kashubians who had Polish-German dialects all their own, the many descendants of the Slavic tribes - Volhinians, Podolians, Polesians, Galicians, Braclavians, now known as Ukrainians or Belarusians - who had similar words for sun, sky, and earth, but used the word "chai" for tea, if they lived in the east, and called the same beverage "herbata" if they lived in the west. In the cities and the villages there were Jews, more Jews than were found anywhere else in the world: Jewish merchants and tailors, poor Jews and rich Jews, Jews whose Yiddish dialects and religious customs differed from region to region along with those of their Slavic neighbors. Scattered among all of these peoples there were others, Armenians, Greeks and Hungarians, colonies of Tartars and Karaims, the descendants of war prisoners or merchants or heretics or criminals. For a thousand years, the peoples of the borderlands spoke their dialects, worshipped their gods, and let the waves of invaders wash over them, recede, and wash over them again.

With the nineteenth century came the first intimations of change. New ideas about nations and nationhood began filtering East, first from Napoleonic France, then from newly unified Germany, eroding older traditions, causing even those who were not noble to place themselves in national categories. In the eighteenth century, if a borderland peasant were asked about his nationality, he would probably have replied "Catholic" or "Orthodox," or perhaps simply "*tutejszy*": it means "one of the people from here." But in the nineteenth century, the children of the *tutejszy* began moving to cities, where they became Polish, Russian, German, Lithuanian, Ukrainian or Belarusian. The numbers of *tutejszy*, the people without a nation, began slowly to diminish.

This process might have gone on for quite some time, but for the unexpected collapse of three borderland empires - Czarist Russia, Austro-Hungary, and Prussia - in 1918, at the end of the First World War. In the subsequent vacuum, a handful of brand new states, together with a

clutch of ancient states which had long been ruled by others, issued proclamations of independence: Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, Hungary and Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Soviet Russia. None of these states had set borders, all had claims on their neighbours' territory. "The war of the giants has ended," wrote Churchill, "the war of the pygmies begins."

At the peace conference which followed, the established nations of the West took it upon themselves to help re-draw the borders of the region according to what, at the time, were held to be rational principles. Peoples with sufficient national consciousness were to be recognised; those without were to be incorporated into others. Rules were drawn up, plebiscites held, exceptions made for history or expedience.

But in the end, borders in the borderlands were drawn by force. During the five-year course of the Russian civil war, no less than eleven armies - from the forces of the independent Ukrainian Republic to the White Russians to the Bolsheviks to the Poles - fought for possession of Ukraine. During the 1919-1920 war between newly independent Poland and newly established Soviet Russia, a million men marched back and forth across a thousand miles of territory, and at the final battle - the last grand cavalry battle in European history - 20,000 horseman charged back and forth at one another, sabres flashing.

The borders which emerged from the battles and the negotiations hardly satisfied anyone. The Germans disliked the strip of Poland which lay between East Prussia and Germany proper; the Lithuanians were furious that the Poles had claimed Wilno, their Vilnius. The Ukrainians still wanted their own state, and a handful of Belarusians felt the same way. Some of these grievances helped fuel the Second World War: territorial ambitions led Germany to invade first Czechoslovakia, then Poland. Rather than banding together to fight Germany, Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians quarreled and argued throughout the 1930s, and failed to come to one another's assistance during the war itself.

Because border disputes and national incompatibilities had provided Hitler with an excuse to start the war, they remained in the minds of the Allied leaders as it drew to a close. Rationality and drawing borders by treaty hadn't worked, they told themselves; territorial wars were no longer acceptable. Better, neater solutions had to be found; the messy parts of Eastern Europe had to be made clean. When they first met in Tehran in 1943, Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin began to discuss the problem, sometimes obliquely. There was a precedent which they all knew about: after the First World War, the Turks had transferred more than a million Greeks out of Turkish territory. They had packed them on trains, that is, together with their cows and chickens and life's savings, and sent them away, clearing the land for ethnic Turkish settlement. "While this is a harsh procedure," noted Harry Hopkins, one of Roosevelt's advisors, "it is the only way to maintain peace."

Quietly, Churchill agreed. As for Stalin, he had already tried the same methods on Russia's ethnic Germans, on the Tartars, and on the Karelian Finns, among others, and he came up with

the plan: he simply proposed to keep those territories he had acquired in 1939 and 1940 - the Baltic states and eastern Poland, as well as the Bukovina and Bessarabian provinces of Romania - and to deport anyone who no longer belonged. Although those were lands acquired by invasion and collusion - according to the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany - America and Britain agreed to let Stalin have what he wanted.

At Potsdam, in 1945, Stalin claimed Königsberg and the northern half of East Prussia too: almost no Germans, he lied, were left in East Prussia anyway. All had fled. Russia needed a warm water port on the Baltic, and, after the long war, the Soviet people deserved to own a little bit of Germany, as it would make them feel like they had won a true victory. The other Allied leaders agreed. So the Baltic coast became his too - although millions of Germans were still there, although Königsberg Bay does, in fact, freeze in winter - and the Soviet Union had pushed itself as far West as possible.

By 1945, the job of re-ordering the borderland peoples was already half completed. Hitler had already murdered most of the borderland Jews. Occupying Soviet officers had already sent over a million Polish officials, land-owners, and soldiers to Siberia and Central Asia, along with over half a million West Ukrainians and half a million Balts. After the war, the deportations continued, grew, and developed into the largest mass movement of people in recorded history. The Poles remaining in southern Lithuania, Western Belarus and Ukraine - several million of them - were sent to the German lands in Silesia, Pomerania and southern East Prussia. Germans from those territories were then evacuated to western Germany. Balts and West Ukrainians and Moldavians who objected to Soviet rule were moved to Siberia. Germans and Romanians were removed from the Bukovina, freedom-fighters were shipped out of Ruthenia, the eastern province of Czechoslovakia.

During the years that followed, Russian became the language of administration in those territories, and Russian Orthodoxy became the only, barely tolerated, religion. Russian settlers were moved in, wherever population levels had dropped, to take the place of those who had been deported. Soviet historians wrote Poles and Germans out of history books, as if they had never been there at all, and embarked on a program of renaming cities: Königsberg became Kaliningrad, Wilno became Vilnius, the Polish-Ukrainian city of Lvov became L'viv. Within the cities, streets changed their names, and so did people. Romanians in Moldova became Moldavians, learned to write in Cyrillic, and the Latin alphabet was banned.

The idea was simple, beautifully clear. Gradually, all of the subtle dialects which were once spoken in the borderlands, all of the national variations and differences in costume and taste, all would be submerged in an onslaught of Russification. Difference would be destroyed: Stalin planned for the borderlands to disappear into Soviet Russia. Call it ethnic cleansing, to use a phrase coined later in another context, on a massive scale - or call it cultural genocide. Either way it was very successful. The West turned its face away, and did not notice while the

crescent of land stretching from Königsberg on the Baltic to Moldova and Odessa on the Black Sea was altered beyond recognition.

The region had been conquered before, but the Soviet empire cast a deeper shadow than any of its predecessors. Whole nations were forgotten; within a few decades, the West no longer remembered that anything other than "Russia" lay beyond the Polish border. Kiev was thought to be a Russian city, Lithuania was considered a Russian province; it was as if the many and various peoples of the region had simply dissolved into the colourless Pripet Marshes, the vast, muddy Belarusian swamp. The national identity of these lands could no longer be clearly defined, and in London and Paris, the history of the borderlands was consigned to dusty bookshops, the languages of the borderlands were banished to small magazines, the borderland emigres retreated into small clubs and churches. After forty years, even the memory of the many-coloured, multi-ethnic borderlands had faded away.

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It was at the end of a hot summer, just at the end of what later came to be called the Soviet "years of stagnation", when I first saw the borderlands. For a night and half a day, the train I had boarded in Leningrad had been heading south across Russia and Ukraine, stopping from time to time in small towns, each one with a down-at-heel railway station, a grimy platform, and a kiosk where one could buy sweet soft drinks and dry biscuits. I remember feeling happy, and very free: I was going out, going home, going away from Leningrad, leaving behind the rules and restrictions which had governed the two months I had spent as a student. But I also remember the frustration that one always felt travelling in the Soviet Union. At that time, foreigners were consigned to certain cities, special roads, restricted train journeys. Sipping tea from a glass, I stared out the window, wanting to know more about the flat, unkempt countryside which lay just beyond the train tracks. To me it was forbidden territory, as inaccessible as the moon.

Then, quite unexpectedly, my wish was granted. The train pulled into a much larger station. We had arrived in the city of L'viv, in southwestern Ukraine, and a surprise announcement came over the loudspeakers. Repairs had to be made, the train would stop for five hours. Passengers were allowed to disembark. It was as if someone had told me that it was possible to walk into a picture frame: I jumped out of the carriage and ran across the train station, into the forbidden landscape.

A few hours later, I was standing in a cemetery. The rain which the summer heat had threatened for so long had started to fall, and it was growing dark. All around me, laid haphazardly one beside the other, were a thousand monuments to L'viv's confused history. I pushed the weeds away from the face of one ponderous tombstone and saw the symbol *K & K* - it meant *Kaiserlich und Königlich*, imperial and royal, the symbol of Austro-Hungary - carved beneath the epitaph. Nearby, white marble graves inscribed in a lovely Polish script leaned

against another, as if in penance for some forgotten crime. Some of the tombs were Ukrainian, marked by the Greek Catholic cross; these often featured a small portrait of the deceased as well. There were also newer, Soviet graves, topped by a red star, and old stones too worn to be read. So many nations, one buried on top of the other, so many different people, jostling one another for space - the cemetery, it seemed to me then, contained the secret history which the dull Soviet landscape and boring regulations had concealed. I returned to the train, and woke up the next morning in Hungary, gazing out the window at a field of yellow sunflowers, still holding the passport which the border police had demanded, scrutinised, and wordlessly returned the night before.

Although I left Europe a few days later, L'viv continued to bother me. L'viv, or Lvov, or Lwow: it was Soviet but it was also Ukrainian, or Polish, or sometimes Jewish, depending upon whom one asked. I knew of no other places like that - except possibly Kobrin, where my father's grandfather was born. As a child, I was sometimes told that he came from Poland, sometimes that he came from Russia. When I looked at his town on a map, however, it sat inside a country which was calling itself Belarus. Only in between, and earlier, was the town in Poland, and only in the nineteenth century was it called Russia. That was a surprise; I would not have expected that link between my stable, settled family and a place with a shifty, uncertain identity. Much later, in 1989, I moved to Warsaw, where I lived through hyperinflation, the first democratic elections, and four changes of government in as many years; I watched almost as many prime ministers come to power as I could remember American presidents. Warsaw gave me a taste for instability, and as soon as I could, I went back to L'viv.

On my first trip, in the spring of 1990, I found the city much the same. The cemetery was still there, along with the cobbled streets, the ancient houses, and the neat market square that I remembered from my brief visit. But this time, in the centre of the main park, old women stood beneath the blue and yellow Ukrainian flag, discussing the fate of Stepan Bandera - the guerilla leader who fought for Ukrainian independence in the 1930s and 1940s - and selling metal pins shaped like a trident, Ukraine's national symbol. Young men, with rough skin and long hair, laughed and joked and hawked smudged newspapers with titles like "Free Ukraine" and "Democratic Ukraine." In front of the opera house, a group of men were furiously chipping away at the base of a statue of Lenin. When I returned the following day, Lenin was gone. The dull Soviet landscape which I had once watched through a train window had been altered forever.

In the West, what was happening in L'viv was already being called part of the "nationalist wave" which was then said to be "sweeping" Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. A clutch of columnists were already editorialising about the dangers of national revival in places like Ukraine and Lithuania, whose last semi-independent leaders had been puppets of Nazi Germany and whose borders would be disputed. Politicians were already claiming that independence for the non-Russian Soviet republics would lead to a destabilising collapse of the

Soviet Union, and the creation of an angry, revanchist Russia. George Bush, visiting Kiev in the summer of 1991, sang the praises of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and told the Ukrainians to abandon these dangerous nationalist tendencies: "Long live the Soviet Union," he said. Still, against his wishes, and against the wishes of the American state department, the British foreign office, and almost everyone else in western Europe, Ukraine became independent anyway a few weeks later, along with the Baltic republics, Belarus, the Caucasian republics and Central Asia.

Post-Soviet nationalism certainly would prove to be dangerous, destabilizing, and uncomfortable for diplomats. But there were other things to say about it as well. In the nineteenth century, nationalism had been considered a liberal movement, intimately and inextricably connected to democracy, and in the former Soviet Union this remained, in some instances, the case. After all, in order for democracy to work at all, citizens of the post-Soviet republics needed to vote for local and national leaders, not distant Russians in Moscow; in order for new institutions to gain credibility, they could not only be Soviet institutions with new names. The freedom to speak native languages, to read native literature, to discover the truth about national history also went along with the freedom to participate in local politics, and in the early 1990s, a cultural revival on a vast scale engulfed the nations which lay on the borders of Russia. What some called nationalism others called patriotism, and still others called freedom: the stability so beloved of international statesmen had also been a prison.

While it was true that the republics of the Soviet Union had ostensibly been at peace with one another, that peace had also been a fiction, enforced by terror, lies, and the traditional Russian belief in "divide and rule"; make little nations hate one another, the theory went, and they will have less energy to rebel against a large one; make minorities resent the majority and they will be unable to join together to rebel against Russian rule. Undoing the terror, setting straight the lies required precisely the sort of re-examination of history which the nationalists were calling for. Equally, the Soviet era could not be erased: however artificial, hatreds implanted in both the Russian colonisers and the non-Russian colonies during the seventy years of Soviet power remained. A man who has lived in a given town for forty years feels he has as much right to it as a man whose family lived in the same town for two thousand years, but has lived elsewhere for forty.

Dangerous, liberating, or perhaps both: the nationalist leaders who brought down the Soviet Union wore double-faced masks, in more senses than one. They looked back to the past, sometimes the very ancient past, to justify their actions and legitimize their claims; they also looked towards the future, hoping that by means of education or repression, democracy or war, they would be able to create new states out of old nations. They could work good or evil, create havoc or peace; but finally, it was to see how their new ideas affected the people whom they claimed to represent - the people who had once called themselves *tutejszy* - that I went back. In the days of waning Soviet power, not long after such trips first became possible, I

travelled from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from Kaliningrad to Odessa, along the western border of what had been the Soviet Union, across East Prussia, Western Belarus and Western Ukraine, through Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, the Bukovina, Bessarabia.

It was not an effortless journey. There are no guidebooks to this region, no sign posts and no obvious tourist attractions. Most of the beautiful buildings and houses have suffered from at least a century's worth of neglect. Travel here demands a forensic passion, not a love of art or architecture or natural beauty; there are many layers of civilization in the borderlands, but they do not lie neatly on top of one another. A ruined medieval church sits upon a the site of a pagan temple, not far from a mass grave surrounded by a modern town. There is a castle on the hill and a Catholic church at its foot and an Orthodox church beside a ruined synagogue. A traveller can meet a man born in Poland, brought up in the Soviet Union, who now lives in Belarus -and he has never left his village. To sift through the layers, one needs to practise a kind of visual and aural archeology, to imagine what the town looked like before the Lenin statue was placed in the square, before the church was converted into a factory and the main street re-named. In a conversation, one must listen to the overtones, guess what the speaker might have said fifty years ago on the same subject, understand that his nationality might then have been different - know, even, that he might have used another language.

By the time I got there, the region had lain for more than forty years under the ice of Soviet rule, and it still seemed, at times, as if the past were crushing the present. There were days when it seemed as if no one could talk of anything which was not tragic, as if no one could remember anything without bitterness. But then there were other days, days when I would, quite unexpectedly, meet someone who saw the past not as a burden but as a forgotten story, now to be retold; there were days when I would find an old house, an old church, or something unexpected like the cemetery in L'viv, which suddenly explained something about a place which I hadn't known. That was part of what I was looking for: evidence that things of beauty had survived war, communism, and Russification; proof that difference and variety can outlast an imposed homogeneity; testimony, in fact, that people can survive any attempt to uproot them.