Lecture Timothy Snyder (Yale University, Fall 2022)

The Making of Modern Ukraine

14 - Interwar Poland‘s Ukrainians

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JUzxdeYRZc

00:00 Okay, greetings. Happy Thursday.

I would take us outside except for the whole recording business, which we can't take outside, which makes me a little sad because it's a beautiful day.

This has been one of those New England falls that they promise you with the nice days and, like, the leaves falling from the trees.

I was driving last night back from Boston, and it was very dark and I was on country roads and there was nobody else out there and it was very foggy, and the leaves were kind of swirling down, and I kept thinking, like, there's going to be a guy with no head in my rear view mirror, like, riding me down on his black horse.

That really did make me think of that story.

So thank you for being inside.

Thank you for coming to this lecture.

What we're going to try to do today is get into interwar Poland and, in particular, interwar Poland's Ukrainian question.

01:09 I'm going to start by setting the scene, and then we'll spend the rest of the lecture trying to figure out how that scene makes sense.

So here's the scene to imagine.

It's December of 1933.

A Polish border guard is at work, but he's not at work protecting the border.

He's at work carrying someone, leading someone towards the border to cross the border into the Soviet Union, into Soviet Ukraine, not far from the Volhynian town of Dubno, very close to border post 1,381.

The two men are speaking to each other in Russian.

The border guard is the more assured, the border crosser the less assured.

As they reach the border, the border guard gives the border crosser a gun.

The crosser nervously puts the safety on and off.

02:03 The border guard gives the border crosser a white coat so he can't be seen in the snow.

He gives him a compass and reminds him that in Polish compasses, the black is the north end of the needle.

And with these supplies and with a few words of reassurance, the border crosser makes his way across the border into the Soviet Union.

How does it come to that? I mean, isn't it interesting that Poland is sending people illegally into the Soviet Union in 1933? What kind of Poland is doing that? What are Poland's aims? So let's start with what kind of Poland, because now that we're into the 1920s and 1930s,

the territorial distribution of Ukraine has changed again, as we said at the end of the last lecture.

Most of what's now Ukraine is inside the Soviet Union as a republic which is named Ukraine.

Much of what is now Ukraine, in particular districts called Galicia or Volhynia, Galicja, Wolyn, Halychyna, Volyn, are inside Poland.

03:10 So there's a new east-west division.

There are five or six million people who speak Ukrainian who are now inside Poland, roughly 15% of the population of Poland, which is a pretty sizable national minority.

For comparison, that's two or three percentage points more than there are African Americans in the United States.

So we have to contend now with Poland.

If we don't understand Poland, we can't understand the position of these Ukrainians, but we also can't understand how the Poles might be trying to answer the Ukrainian question.

So you'll all remember Poland had been a great power.

There was this thing called the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that existed from 1569 to 1795.

You'll remember from just a couple lectures ago that the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late 18th century is the central part of the advance of the Russian Empire into Europe.

04:06 The late 18th century is the time of the collapse of the Crimean Khanate.

It's the time of the collapse of the Ukrainian Cossack state, and it's also the time of the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

So the late 18th century is the moment when Russia becomes a European power, which is symbolized with a shift of the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg, actually the creation of St. Petersburg, which Pushkin famously calls a window, a window into Europe.

So the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is gone, but it has left certain very important legacies for Ukrainians.

I mean, I've stressed this point over and over again, but it's very important to remember that most of Ukraine was connected to Lithuania or Poland much longer than it was connected with the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union.

So just these hundreds of years that we've spent studying that, that's a sort of legacy.

05:00 But I'll mention three particular political legacies.

One would be the existence of the Kazakhs themselves.

So it's not as though the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth created the Kazakhs, but the Kazakhs existed in a particular form inside and at the edge of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

A second is the general idea of a republic as a state form, right? So when Ukrainians try to found states in 1918, they take the form of republics.

They take the name of republics.

That is in some way natural because it's the European norm, but it's also natural because a republic is also an important part of Ukrainian history.

A third legacy is the rule of law.

So the rule of law in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth didn't apply to everybody.

It applied to the nobility.

The Kazakhs were well aware of this, which is why they wanted to be treated like the nobility, and much of the conflict between the Kazakhs and the Polish state had to do with the rights of the Kazakhs, that Kazakhs should have some kind of rights vis-a-vis the state.

06:01 They were dissatisfied with their legal position, but they were aware that it was a state which had the rule of law, and that is also a kind of legacy.

Okay, so in the case of Ukraine, I've tried to make the argument, a little bit counterintuitive, that it was a good thing to be divided, right? So it always seems painful and it lends itself to images of martyrdom when, you know, the national body is divided into multiple pieces and so on.

But if you're going to be occupied by empires, I'm not recommending this, but if you're going to be occupied by empires, there are certain political advantages to being occupied by more than one empire, right? So just logically speaking, one of them is going to be less repressive than the other.

I mean, that may be a slightly depressing way to look at it, but one of them will be less suppressive than the other, and it's always possible that the two of them will in some way compete over you, right? Or they'll try to use you against the other, which might turn out to be to your long-term advantage.

07:00 I tried to explain the dynamics of this with the Habsburgs and the Russian Empire.

With Poland, there's a similar situation, but the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is divided between three empires.

It's divided between Prussia, which becomes United Germany, and this is a big story which is sort of on the periphery of what we've been talking about, but it keeps becoming more central.

Like, you can ignore the Germans for a while, but eventually, they make their way to the center of your attention.

I mean, that's kind of a general truth, but it's true in this class.

So we started with this little state, Royal Prussia, on the Baltic, which the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth kind of tolerates.

After the ruin, after the weakening of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, this little state Prussia decides that it's a kingdom.

It decides that its ruling family are kings.

That state, Prussia, will become much larger in the 18th century, and in the 19th century, that state Prussia, in 1870, 1871, will unite Germany, will create a unified German state.

08:00 So the partitioning power of Poland is actually not Germany, which doesn't exist yet, but Prussia.

But when Prussia unites Germany in 1871, the Poles are then the most important national minority inside that new German state, and they're subject to various repressive policies, which they respond to in a way which we would think of as involving organized civil society.

So the Germans try to buy up all the land.

The Poles organize their own groups to collect money and to preserve the land.

The Germans try to build libraries.

The Poles build libraries.

The Germans Germanize the schools.

The Poles set up their own reading societies.

The Poles publish their books.

So there's a certain style of resistance in German Poland.

We've talked a bit about the Habsburgs.

The Habsburgs are the second partitioning power of Poland.

In the Habsburg monarchy, other conditions prevail, and the Polish gentry, the Polish nobility, are able to gain experience as administrators, bureaucrats.

Some of them are elected to parliament.

They gain experience of freedom of speech.

09:00 They gain experience of publishing as they wish.

All of that experience will also matter for a reunited Poland later on.

Most of what had been Poland becomes part of the Russian Empire, and there, the political tradition is much more revolutionary, as one would expect.

The kinds of things that were possible in the Habsburg monarchy or even in Prussia are not possible in the Russian Empire.

The only kinds of politics that are really possible in the Russian Empire are underground, very well organized, conspiratorial, which leads to certain habits of mind and certain habits of practice.

So you have three different traditions, all of which have advantages and disadvantages, coming together in Poland when it is created in 1918.

One more advantage I should really mention.

So as I'm sure many of you have been thinking about, an interesting feature of the war in Ukraine now is that the people on the Ukrainian side know the language of the aggressing state, right? So basically all the Poles I'm going to be talking about in this lecture are native or close to native speakers of Russian.

10:03 And so in a tale which is going to be largely about espionage, this matters an awful lot, right? So all the Poles that I'm going to be talking about in this lecture, with maybe one or two exceptions, were educated in the Russian Empire and went through Russian schools and therefore as adults in the '20s and '30s were native or very close to native Russian speakers.

Some of them have spent time in Siberia, like Jozef Pilsudski, which only, I mean, that improves your Russian in certain ways, right? I mean, it gives you the prison part of the Russian language, which can come in handy.

Okay, so the two main traditions in Polish politics that had formed by 1918 already are the Polish Socialist Party, in Polish, the PPS, Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, PPS on your sheets, and the National Democrats.

So interestingly, the two poles, sorry, in Polish political life, it wasn't intended as a joke, it just came out that way, are already established before there's a Polish state.

11:01 And these two poles are basically the same today, by the way.

It's a very coherent development.

So the Polish Socialist Party is obviously center left.

Its dominant view is there should be a state first and then we'll build socialism later.

The Polish Socialist Party tends to be nostalgic towards the old commonwealth and to believe that some future Poland will be a federation, not a nation-state, so a kind of modernized commonwealth in which the Belarusian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian nations will somehow be present and in which the Jews will have some kind of autonomy.

That's the idea.

On the center right, the National Democrats, there's a very different vision.

Their attitude towards the history of Poland is very different.

The National Democrats say, "Forget about the commonwealth.

It fell. It was worthless.

The nobility was not the nation.

The nation is really the peasants.

They just don't know it yet.

12:01 Our job is to take the Polish-speaking peasants and to make them into Poles.

That's what a movement is for.

That's what the state is for.

We're not concerned about the Germans and the Jews and the Ukrainians and so on.

They're not really Poles.

They probably never will be Poles.

Maybe the Belarusians and Ukrainians will be, but certainly not the Germans and the Jews." So their attitude is very different.

The Germans and the Jews are national enemies, and the Slavs are maybe assimilable, but if they're not assimilable, then they can also be national enemies.

The National Democrats are thinking about a nation-state.

They're thinking about a nation-state where the nation in question is the Polish nation.

So these are the two currents in Polish politics which are already present, and when I tell the story of the '20s and '30s, it's really these two currents which are going to be alternating in power, very much like today.

Okay, so Poland, unlike Ukraine, at the end of the First World War, is regarded by the Entente as an ally.

13:03 This is really important.

By the Entente, of course, I mean the French, the British, the Americans, the victorious Western powers.

In the Paris peace settlements, they regard some countries as effectively their allies and some countries not, and this is only vaguely related to what actually happens during the war itself, and it has a lot to do with the interests of those countries, especially France, in the years to come.

So the French take the most punishment in the First World War.

It's largely fought on French territory.

The French are most concerned about the balance of power on the continent after the First World War.

The peace talks are held in Paris or in nice spa towns around Paris nearby.

And it's generally French interests that prevail.

In Poland, you have an overlap of the principle that was announced, national self-determination.

Woodrow Wilson specifies that Poland will become an independent state.

14:02 So the principle of national self-determination is applied.

But also France wants Poland to exist because France wants an ally to the east of Germany, right? If you are France...

I'm trying to think of, like...

You're playing Risk, right? Okay.

So if you're France, you always want the ally to the east of Germany, and if you're Germany, you're always afraid of, right? It's that classical situation.

So if you're France, you're not so concerned about who that is and what their regime is.

France had been allies with the Russian Empire, right, for this reason.

So the Russian Empire is done with, and what do the French do? The French say independent Poland, and they ally or they try to support the Whites in the Russian Civil War.

So they're supporting the pro-imperial forces in the Russian Civil War.

They lose, as we already know, but that's what the French we're banking on.

So the French want allies to the east of Germany.

15:02 So those two things come together this time, principle and practice, in the creation of Poland.

So the Western allies are going to support the creation of Poland, not that the Poles don't fight for it, they do, but they have two things which the Ukrainians don't.

Nobody is saying that Ukraine has the right to self-determination except for Germany in 1918, and that doesn't count for very much, and nobody thinks that the existence of a Ukrainian state is in their strategic interests except for Poland, and that in a very limited sense, which we're going to get to.

Okay, so this brings us to, you know, the basic relationship, it's kind of an intellectually beautiful thing to think about, the relationship between a revolution and borders, right? Because a revolution doesn't have borders.

A revolution is a total transformation.

When you talk about a revolution, you don't say "I want a revolution in my backyard," right? You don't say, "I want a..." A revolution is about total transformation.

16:04 So the French Revolution wasn't, I mean, it was about France, but it was also about invading the rest of Europe, right? Because it was about principles.

The Russian Revolution, as we talked about last time, was not meant to be about Russia at all.

It was meant to be a global revolution which just happened to take a starting point in Russia.

But then we get to the very practical question of what happens when the revolution that you've made turns out not to be global.

Where does it end, then, right? That very mundane question.

Where does it end? And that question is going to be decided largely by the use of force between Poland and the Soviet Union in 1919 and 1920.

So if we think of the stretch of territory between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, that stretch of territory is a kind of power vacuum at the end of the First World War.

17:00 The Entente has won the war, but they won it on the Western Front.

The German Army was exhausted on the Western Front.

The German Army is exhausted fighting in France against the Americans, the British, and the French.

So the Germans lose, but they lose the war having never been defeated in the East, which is an odd situation and very important for everybody.

From a Western point of view, it's easy to forget about.

But from an East European point of view or even a German point of view, it's central.

It's central to the Nazis, by the way, too.

It's central to everything that's going to come next.

From the point of view of German soldiers in the East, there never was a defeat.

They just had to come home at some point.

They were never beaten.

They just had to come home. Okay.

So after 1918, there's a power vacuum because there's been been a revolution.

In 1917, the Russian Revolution destroys the Russian Empire.

In 1918, the German and Austrian armies move in to support their version of Ukraine, and then they're defeated, so they move back out.

18:02 And what's left is a vacuum which, on the Polish side, Jozef Pilsudski, who is the leader of the Polish Socialist Party and also the leader of the Polish state, wishes to fill, and on the other side, Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik party and de facto of the Russian state, also wants to fill.

But the interesting idea here which I want you to notice is that neither of them wants to fill it on behalf of nation-states.

That's not the kind of idea they have in mind.

Lenin is thinking of a global...

Where did I lose you? Know that I'm sensing confusion in the middle of the room.

No? You're okay? You're fine? Okay.

They can't edit that out, by the way.

That's going to be on the video.

It's there forever.

So Pilsudski is thinking about some kind of vague federation.

He's not thinking Poland for the Poles.

19:01 That's not his idea at all.

His idea is somehow the Lithuanians, the Belarusians, and the Ukrainians somehow also in this, right? Whether they would be equal partners or not is less clear, but somehow, some kind of larger state which is not just Poland for the Poles.

He wants more Lithuanians, more Belarusians, more Ukrainians, more Jews in the state.

Lenin's idea is also not...

Obviously it's not a nation-state.

Lenin's idea is global revolution.

And so by the moment we're talking about, 1919, it's already clear that the world isn't going to have a revolution just because Russia did, okay? And this is the key to the, like...

This is like the original sin, if you want, of the Soviet Union, or it's the key to how things work out later, because Lenin and Trotsky, the Bolsheviks, they didn't think they were starting a Russian revolution.

They thought that they were the powder keg for a global revolution.

Then what do you do when the global revolution doesn't come? Well, your next move is to say, "Okay, we're going to help it along," right? "We're going to help it along." So once they have won the Russian Civil War, their next move is to think, "We're going to go into Europe and we'll help out the German comrades, because obviously, Germany's the most important country in Europe.

20:15 If we can get to Berlin, then there can be revolution in Germany, and then there will be world revolution." So stage one is, your theory is there should be global revolution.

Stage two is that your practice is, you've got to get to Europe and help out the German comrades.

But what's in the way? Poland.

And the Poles aren't just in the way.

They're moving east.

So this sets up the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919 to 1920.

As I mentioned last time, the furthest the Poles ever get in this war is Kyiv in May of 1920, the victory in Kyiv with the, you know, the circular march of the Polish cavalry around

Khreshchatyk.

That is followed by the Red Army's march on Warsaw, where what's called the miracle, the Vistula, the Poles' defeat...

21:04 It's called the miracle.

The Vistula is the river that runs through Poland.

The miracle on the Vistula was originally sarcastic, like, in the sense of "after what you did, we needed a miracle" because this war was contested inside Poland itself.

The National Democrats, the right, opposed the war.

They didn't want to expand Polish territory.

They wanted the nation-state, right? And so for them, this was a dangerous adventure.

"Why are we going all the way to Kyiv? Look what you did.

You brought the Red Army to the suburbs of Warsaw.

We need a miracle." But that sarcastic miracle on the Vistula eventually became a non-sarcastic miracle on the Vistula.

It's now just a kind of neutral name of the achievement.

So the Poles hold off the Red Army at the gates of Warsaw, basically, and stage a very successful counterattack, drive the Red Army deep into Ukraine and to Belarus, at which point both sides are exhausted and a peace is signed, and that's the Treaty of Riga of March of 1921.

So the Treaty of Riga creates an effect...

22:06 And you know, and this is something to think about when a war is being fought.

Where the border is in large measure defines what kind of states are then going to exist.

Because on the Polish side, what you end up getting is not a federation.

It's not big enough for that.

There are a lot of Belarusians, a million.

There are a lot of Ukrainians, five million plus.

There are a lot of Jews, three million.

But there aren't enough for a federation, right? This is a state, nevertheless, which has a clear majority of Polish speakers, and so what it becomes is a Polish nation-state with big national minorities.

It's not exactly what the National Democrats wanted and it's also not what Pilsudski wanted, but that's what the borders of Riga create.

They create this Poland with big national minorities, substantial national minorities.

On the Soviet side, what the Treaty of Riga does is that it creates a border.

23:01 It means the revolution has stopped.

For now, at least, the revolution has a border, which is to say the Soviet Union has to become a state, which it does.

And the Bolsheviks are making this up as they go along.

They're making this up as they go along, their response to the defeat.

And they were defeated.

The Poles defeated them.

They're not going to be defeated again until Afghanistan in 1979, but the Red Army is defeated by Poland in 1920.

And so the response to Polish defeat is to create this thing that we take for granted, which is the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union is the state which contains the revolution.

So it's not supposed to be a normal state.

It's not a nation-state.

From the Soviet, from the Bolshevik point of view, it's certainly not an empire.

It's something completely new.

It's a kind of container for revolution, a revolution which at some later date will get spread throughout the world.

In the meantime, it becomes the task of the Soviet comrades to complete the revolution inside their own borders and to model it for everyone else.

Okay, so now that's, so in Poland, what follows from this is a certain fundamental difficulty for democracy.

24:14 In Poland, you have two basic questions which make parliamentary democracy difficult right from the beginning.

One of them and the most important is the land question.

And I realize I keep beating you over the head with this, but in the first half of the 20th century, land was the most important question in politics, not anything else but land, because most people in the part of the world that we're studying, at least, were peasants, and in general, they wanted to have more land than they did.

This was still an economy, and we're, you know, in much the world, it's still true, but in Europe, in our part of Europe, this is still an economy where most people have small plots of land and want to have bigger plots of land or have no land and want to have more land.

And because, you know...

The economy itself is still agrarian, right? This is the center of politics.

25:04 If you want to, you can think of everything that happens in Poland, Soviet Union, and even Nazi Germany as an answer to the land question, where the Poles try to do land reform and kind of fail.

Land reform means you take from people who have more land, give it to people who have less land.

The Soviets at the end of the day take everyone's land and create collective farming.

Even Hitler's ideas that you should invade Eastern Europe and take the land, that's a solution to the land question, right? So the key to a lot of this is land, people wanting more land.

So in Polish politics, as in Eastern Europe, as in democratic Eastern Europe in general, the key question was land, and the difficulty was trying to get the peasants interested in politics, trying to get the peasants to see that democratic politics somehow serves their interests.

And the best way to do that is land reform, right? That's something the state can do for you if you're a peasant.

26:01 It can take some land from your wealthy neighbor, from that person who owned the plantation that your grandfather was a serf in, take some land from that person and give it to you.

That's something the state can do.

The Poles do that to some degree.

But here's where the national question comes in.

In Poland, there was a peasant party, but it was a Polish peasant party, right? It wasn't just a peasant party.

This is really, really, really important.

There was no class party for the peasants of Poland.

And even more than in the Polish areas, in the Belarusian and Ukrainian areas, most people were peasants.

So this means that basically, in democratic elections, the Belarusian and Ukrainian peasants were excluded because there was no party they could vote for which really had a chance of exercising any kind of influence.

Had there been a peasant party representing peasants as such, that party would've won every time, right? But there was no such party, and so therefore, everything switches around, and if you're a Belarusian peasant or a Ukrainian peasant, you can think, "Well, the Polish peasants seem to be getting some land, but I don't seem to be getting any land," right? And so then the land question is magnified by the national question.

27:20 And this is one of the ways that Polish politics turns in the first half of the 1920s where, when Poland is being ruled by coalitions of National Democrats and the Polish Peasant Party, right? So you can see the setup for this.

The setup for this means that you have, if you're the Soviet Union, we'll talk more about this, but if you're the Soviet Union looking at Poland, there is a huge opening for you.

You can speak to Ukrainians and to Belarusians about national liberation, and you can speak to them about land reform.

28:00 Now obviously, at the end of the day, we know that the Soviet Union is not going to be the homeland of national liberation or land reform.

But in the 1920s, this was propaganda.

This was an approach that the Soviets could take.

And in the 1920s, it seemed pretty reasonable, we're going to talk more about this, because in the 1920s,, the Soviets were engaged in something Poland was not engaged in, which was affirmative action for Ukrainians, giving Ukrainians educational opportunities, building schools and universities, pulling Ukrainians up through the ranks of the administration.

They were also engaged in allowing Ukrainian peasants to keep the land they took from Polish landlords.

So this is a very basic way that Poland and the Soviet Union were different, right? In the revolution, 1917, '18, a lot of what happens in Ukraine, especially Right-bank Ukraine, is that Ukrainian peasants take land from historic Polish landlords and then those historic Polish landlords flee west to Poland, which from the point of view of Poland is ethnic cleansing and oppression, right? But from the point of view of the Ukrainian peasants, it's "We finally got the land that we've been working." And so from the point of view of a Ukrainian peasant, that was a good revolution, right? That was a good revolution.

29:11 That was a revolution or a part of the revolution that we want to keep.

And in the 1920s, the Bolsheviks were not able to do anything about that and so they allowed it to maintain itself.

That was called the New Economic Policy.

So in the 1920s, Ukrainian peasants got more land, they got fewer Polish landlords, and Ukrainian educated people were getting affirmative action, none of which existed in Poland, right? So in the 1920s, if you're the Soviet Union, you can make propaganda against Poland because of these basic realities.

Okay, in Poland, there is, if we get more specific now, there is a big difference between the two Ukrainian districts, and now we're getting to the stuff that, like, 30 years down the line, you're going to be making cocktail party conversation with when you explain to people about the difference between Galicia and Volhynia, right? And you guys are already halfway there because you know, (laughing) because you know that Galicia is the part that came from the Habsburg monarchy, right? You know that the name Galicia, Galizien, was invented basically by the Habsburgs to name territory they took in 1772 and that territory, Galicia, ends up being part of Poland.

30:23 The Poles call it something completely different.

They call it Malopolska Wschodnia, Eastern Little Poland.

But it's the eastern part of Galicia.

Volhynia is something very different.

Volhynia has been part of the Russian Empire this entire time.

Volhynia has been part of the Russian Empire for more than a hundred years.

In Volhynia, unlike Galicia, people belong to the Orthodox Church, not the Greek Catholic Church.

In Volhynia, there are far fewer Poles and fewer Jews than there are in Galicia, and also the standard of comparison is very different.

31:02 So one of the main problems for the Poles trying to govern Galicia is that if you're a Galician Ukrainian, after 1918, everything got worse for you in a couple of ways.

So politics is very much about expectations.

If you're a Ukrainian in Galicia, you might have expected "We are going to get our own state" because between November of 1918 and the spring of 1919, there was a West Ukrainian National Republic, and it was defeated by none other than the Polish Army, right? And so if you're a Ukrainian, that's a disappointment, right? And there's nothing the Polish state can do to repair that, because from the point of view of the Polish state, this is Polish territory.

The second frame of reference is the Habsburg monarchy.

So if we're going to be governed by someone else, we're used to having certain things, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, free political parties.

32:00 We're used to having schools.

We're used to being able to serve in the administration.

Under Polish rule, a lot of that will be taken away.

There will be fewer Ukrainian-speaking schools.

Ukrainians in general will be excluded from the state administration in Poland, which they were not in the Habsburg monarchy.

The Greek Catholic Church will not be treated as equal.

So in all these ways, the positions of Ukrainians in Galicia is actually worse than it was in the Habsburg monarchy, and they're very well aware of this, and they're used to talking about this.

And it's not easy for them to situate themselves in the Polish state.

Eventually by the late 1930s when things are very bad, the main position among Ukrainians will be something like "Poland is better than the alternatives." But better than the alternatives is not a rallying cry for everyday politics in general.

So the main force in Ukrainian politics is something called Undo, U-N-D-O, it's on your sheet, which takes a kind of centrist position, not sure about the Polish state in the 1920s.

Many people thinking that maybe the Soviet Union might be better, feeling left out of Polish politics with justification.

33:05 There is a right-wing fraction, a very small group, called the OUN, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, which is a typical, looking at this from the point of view of, you know, political science, a typical reaction to exclusion from democracy.

If, you know, if you go from a more democratic to a less democratic situation, there will probably be some group which decides that the answer to this is violence against the institutions, and that group is the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.

In interwar Poland, they were not very significant.

They were not very numerous.

The Poles did a pretty good job of locking them up.

They did assassinate a few Polish officials after 1926.

In general, they assassinated, as one does, the people who were in favor of some kind of accommodation or compromise, right? You don't assassinate the radicals on the other side.

I mean, I feel like I'm now giving you a training course, so don't take it that way, but you see the logic, right? You assassinate the moderates on the other side because if you're a radical, you prefer the radicals on the other side.

34:06 You prefer conflict.

You don't want the compromisers because the compromisers might make a deal with your compromisers and then you'd be out of business and your radical vision wouldn't seem like it makes a lot of sense.

I mentioned the OUN because it'll become more important during the war, but it's actually not that important during the '20s and '30s.

So the early '20s in Poland are a time of democratic politics in which the land question is only very unsatisfactorily answered and the national question, if you're not Polish, is not answered at all.

This changes a bit in 1926.

In 1926, Poland becomes much less democratic, but the people who come to power are more open on the national question.

In 1926, Jozef Pilsudski, the former head of state, comes back to power by way of a military coup and installs what we, I think, would be very comfortable calling, borrowing some Russian terminology, a managed democracy, right? I mean, it's managed better than the current Russian democracy, non-democracy, is.

35:10 But there are political parties.

There is voting.

There's a certain amount of massaging of the vote.

There's a certain amount of disenfranchisement.

It's kind of a democracy, but you also kind of already know who's going to win before the elections take place.

So he overthrows a democracy, installs a kind of managed democracy with his own political party and then, you know, governs from behind the scenes.

It's not really a dictatorship, but it's an authoritarian regime.

From our point of view, the difference here, the relevant difference, if you remember between, you know, the basic orientations, center left, center right, the center left is more open on the national question, more tolerant of Jews, more open on the national question.

And what Pilsudski then begins to do, with no democratic legitimation, this is never talked about at all, everything I'm about to talk about was kept entirely secret from the Polish population, with no democratic legitimation, he then undertakes a policy of trying to tolerate the Ukrainian national identity in part of Poland, partly with the hope of undoing Soviet influence.

36:21 So the Soviet influence, as I've already tried to suggest, was very real.

The Soviets in the 1920s are in a rather beautiful strategic situation with respect to Poland, as I've already tried to suggest.

In 1923, the Soviets promulgate their doctrine on colonialism and nationalism, which is very clever.

It basically says that nationalism is reactionary inside the Soviet Union but outside the Soviet Union is progressive, right? Which is a very convenient position.

So, you know, it's the Leninist view of national self-determination that, sure, everybody has

a right in principle to a nation-state, it just...

37:03 In practice, it depends on whether this serves us or not, right? So anti-colonial movements in India are great, right? As are anti-colonial movements in Poland. Super.

Anti-colonial movements in Central Asia or the Caucasus or Ukraine, not at all, right? But so what this allows them to do is it allows them to use the national question and the question of land against Poland but also against the British Empire.

I mean, the Soviets were engaged with the British Empire as well.

But for our purposes, Poland is what matters.

So what they do is that they try to present Soviet Ukraine as a sovereign Ukrainian state where peasants have land, where there are national freedoms, and try in this way to draw the millions of Ukrainians in Poland towards the Soviet Union and destabilize the Polish state.

And as I say, this was carried out with a great deal of success.

38:01 What Pilsudski does is that he tries to reverse this.

So in Galicia, he never has a chance.

In Galicia, there is already, when they come to power in '26, the Ukrainian nationalists assassinate the Polish officials and you get a spiral of reprisals and counter-reprisals which discredit the Polish state in Galicia.

In any event, in Galicia, there just wasn't a kind of fresh terrain to work in.

What they do is they take Volhynia and they try to educate a generation of pro-Polish Ukrainians in Volhynia.

They carry out a policy known as the Volhynian Experiment from 1928, led by a man called Henryk Jozewski, who's on your sheet.

And what Jozewski does is a kind of, it's kind of a capitalist or a bourgeois or a liberal version of Soviet affirmative action.

So he places Ukrainians in Volhynia in local government.

39:06 He encourages the use of the Ukrainian language in the Orthodox Church.

He encourages a movement towards autocephaly in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on Polish territory.

And he talks about Ukrainian independence.

He talks about a replay of the Polish-Bolshevik War in which this time, Poland would win and the creation of a Ukrainian state.

Now, Jozewski was a true believer in all of this.

He was from Kyiv.

He was authentically in love with Ukrainian culture and songs, literature.

He spoke Ukrainian like a native.

He deeply believed that Ukrainian and Polish culture were fundamentally very similar and that Russian culture was something different.

40:03 But in general, one of course has to ask, you know, one has to be a little bit critical all the same.

Is this idea of Ukraine, you know, is it for the Ukrainians or is it about creating a buffer state? Because if you're Poland, it's better to have something between you and Russia.

And for the Poles who were involved, it was a mixture of motives.

I mean, there was certainly idealism involved, but there was also this notion that it would be better to have Ukraine for our own strategic interests.

So what the Poles do is under the cover of this toleration project, they're also educating

young Ukrainians, training them for espionage missions inside Soviet Ukraine.

And they also, and this is not widely known, but they also revive a government in exile for Ukraine.

They revive the Ukrainian National Republic on their own territory.

They set up a staff for a Ukrainian army in 1927 with sections for propaganda and for intelligence.

41:07 And in 1928, this Ukrainian army on Polish soil begins to run its agents across the Soviet border.

From the point of view of Poland, this is part of a larger project which is known as Prometheanism.

And this, again, you should, like...

It's a really interesting point of contrast to Poland of today.

A lot of the ideas that I'm talking about now have a faint echo in Polish policy today, but it's a pretty faint echo.

The Poles in the '20s and '30s were a lot more adventurous on these issues than the Polish state is now.

The idea of Prometheanism was national self-determination, national self-determination for the oppressed nations of the Soviet Union.

And so the Poles, in secret, this was not an open-forum policy at all, but in secret, they funded and helped with the publications of and sometimes helped run people across borders for Caucasian nations, for Georgia, for Chechens, and also for Ukrainians.

42:16 And the basic idea of this is that it's trying to flip what the Soviets are saying.

So the Soviets are saying, "We have national self-determination.

Look at our beautiful national liberation.

Look at these republics." And the Poles are saying, "No, actually, the national question is your weakness, and there are all these immigrant politicians who agree with us and we're going to support them." And this larger policy of Prometheanism had connections with the British and the French and even, interestingly, in the Japanese, all of whom, for their various reasons, had reasons to try to weaken the Soviet Union.

Now, so up until 1933, if you read the files, which, one summer, I was able to do...

43:07 There was a summer when the Polish military archives were entirely closed, but for some reason, they let me just sit there and read them all, which was great.

I literally used a shopping cart, which is not normal archival practice.

I had a shopping cart and I filled up the shopping cart with files, and then I read all the files, and then I went and got another shopping cart.

That is the research which is in "Sketches from a Secret War," and that is why there's a lot in "Sketches from a Secret War" which you're not going to find anywhere else.

But the general drift, as you'll see when you do the reading, is that from 1926 to 1931, '32, there's some really interesting Polish intelligence work going on in Ukraine under this overall auspice of the Volhynian Experiment, under this overall auspice of Prometheanism.

We know a lot about the agents and the rings that the Poles were running inside Soviet Ukraine led by this man with the close-to-unpronounceable name of Jerzy Niezbrzycki, who is a very interesting character.

44:04 He, like a lot of these men and women, because a lot of the agents and officers in Polish intelligence, by the way, were women, was a Pole from Ukraine, so someone who knew the territory, knew the languages, was bilingual.

Some of them were trilingual.

So he ran these agents, and one of the stories which stays with me because it reveals an

important difference is...

So a lot of this stuff is about sex.

I don't know how you guys feel about that.

Like, is it okay to talk about sex? (laughing) I wish I could share with the camera, like, the various reactions that that got.

So a lot of the operations involve sex, so Polish male officers having sex with Soviet women and Polish female officers having sex with Soviet men, or they involve relationships in which sex is somehow in the picture, right? And so there's one example which I found really interesting because it gets us to a kind of difference between two systems is when one of Niezbrzycki's female friends, who was a Polish intelligence officer operating inside Ukraine...

45:19 This is not going to be directly about sex. I'm sorry.

It's all in the reading, though.

If you get, like, deep into the reading, you'll find there's a lot of sex with spies.

Okay.

But so he had a friend who I'm going to call X22, and what she did was she exchanged consumer goods, in particular nylon stockings, which was something which was trivially easy to get in Poland but which did not exist in the Soviet Union.

She would trade nylon stockings and other similar things for files and books from, you know, her female friends' mail, like, from their husbands' libraries and their filing cabinets, right? That was one of her methods.

She had other methods of operation, it's in the reading, but that was one of her methods of operation.

46:02 And what this reveals, you'll see where I'm going, is that by 1931, '32, we really have two very different systems.

Poland is a capitalist country.

It's a poor capitalist country.

It's a capitalist country.

In the Soviet Union, by 1931, 1932, we are in the middle of collectivization, which will be our big subject next time.

We're the middle of a transformation of the Soviet Union into a form of industrialized country, which involves taking all of the land away from the peasants and putting them under the control of the state.

And it is in this moment of collectivization, especially '28, '29, '30, that Soviet Ukraine is probably most at risk.

In early 1930, the Soviet secret police records more than one million acts of individual resistance by peasants on the territory of the Ukrainian Republic against collectivization, and it's during this time also that thousands upon thousands of Ukrainian peasants or peasants from Soviet Ukraine flee to Romania and flee to Poland to escape collectivization.

47:14 And when they come to Poland, they plea for war.

So, I mean, we'll talk more about it in the next lecture, but it is a very dramatic situation to suddenly lose your land and to see everyone else losing their land and to realize that you have no recourse.

So just to quote one peasant...

This is from Polish archives.

So it's interesting, right, because thousands and thousands of Ukrainian peasants fled into Poland and the Polish border guards and other officials took notes, right? And we have all of those notes.

So we have, like, this report of what was happening inside collectivization from the

perspective of the peasants themselves.

So one peasant says, "And if a war broke out, the mood of the people is such that if the Polish Army appeared today, they would kiss the soldiers' feet and the entire population would attack the Bolsheviks." Now, why is that interesting, right? That is not the normal Ukrainian peasant attitude towards Poland at all, right? That's from 1930, so it's only a decade or so after the Polish landlords were kicked out the first time, right? So it's a sign of how bad collectivization is that the peasants would be calling for a Polish invasion.

48:23 And this is that moment.

March of 1930 is when the Soviets actually feared war.

On the 17th of March...

It was March of 1930 when Stalin calls a temporary halt to collectivization.

He gives one of his speeches that is most remembered, it's remembered as "Dizzy with Success," in which he basically says it's going so well that it's going badly, right? He says, like, "Some of the comrades are a little bit overenthusiastic.

Collectivization was always supposed to be voluntary.

Let's just have a little pause, right?" And that is because of the resistance, especially in Ukraine.

It's also the same time, 17 March 1930, that the Red Army is put in full battle readiness because they're expecting an attack from Poland.

49:08 This is the moment when they're most vulnerable.

It's also the moment where they're most afraid.

So you have refugees fleeing Ukraine to Poland.

You have the Soviet Army in full battle readiness.

You have fear, but what you don't have is a Polish attack.

The Poles look upon this and they say, "Well, the Soviet state is mobilizing.

It's more powerful than we thought." The Poles were always interested in having more information about Ukraine and about having a Ukrainian alternative, but the most they were ever planning for was to use their Ukrainian agents if the Soviet Union fell apart.

They were never actually planning an offensive war against the Soviet Union.

That was never part of their plan.

So I can say this pretty definitively because I've read the stuff.

So what happens is that collectivization proceeds and the Soviets ask Poland for peace talks, and the Poles say yes.

50:07 And in July of 1932, Poland and the Soviet Union sign a mutual nonaggression treaty, which is all well and good, and it's a nice moment in Polish-Soviet relations, but from the point of view of a class about Ukraine, you see the consequences.

It means that the Ukrainians are left all alone in the middle of collectivization.

There's no one to whom they can appeal.

The kind of statement that I read, there are hundreds upon hundreds, thousands upon thousands of statements like that of Ukrainian peasants going to foreign consulates and saying, you know, "Please let me out or please invade," right? That's what they say to the Germans and the Poles in the early 1930s.

"Invade. Let us out.

Invade. Let us out." Over and over and over again.

But after Poland signs a peace treaty with the Soviet Union in 1932, there's no one to whom they can appeal.

So that scene that I set at the top of the lecture when the Polish border guard is sending the Ukrainian agent across the border into Soviet Ukraine, that is in December of 1933.

51:10 By December of 1933, it's impossible that Poland is going to come to the aid of Ukraine, and by December of 1933, about four million Ukrainians will have starved to death in the collectivization famine, which is our subject next time.

Thanks.