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SOVIETIZATION OF THE JEWISH POPULATION

IN WESTERN BELORUSSIA, 1939-1941

Summary of the PhD thesis

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GENERAL CHARECTERISTICS OF THE THESIS

Background information

On 17th September 1939, according The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the Red Army annexed Eastern Poland. Since then, the life of local population has changed dramatically. Nowadays, there are still on-going debates on the position of Eastern Polish Jews in the period between 1939 and 1941. Not only, Jewry suffered from the Soviet repressions, but they were also widely represented in the local Soviet administration. The events on the eve of the Second World War, the Soviet annexation of the Eastern Polish territories, the policy implemented on these lands and the interethnic relations - particularly between Jews and Poles - are the subject matter of the discussions. Therefore, the keen academic and socio-political interests in the events of 1939-1941 in Eastern Poland - which was “divided” between Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics in 1939 - and also to the position of local Jewish population determine the rationale of my research.

Literature review

Whereas the Soviet policy adopted in relation to the Jewish population of Western Belorussia was a part of process of *Sovietization*¹ of the whole region, one cannot help but turning to the existing works on the history of Western Belorussia from 1939 to 1941. There is a vast - but controversial - historiography on this issue mostly produced by Belorussian and Polish researchers.

¹ In this work, the term *Sovietization* defines the Soviet policy establishing state and administrative structures and implementing a new way of life for the citizens of the annexed region according to the patterns entrenched in the USSR.

However, their approaches differ significantly: the former consider the events of 17 September 1939 primarily² as a *liberation and reunification*,³ meanwhile the latter exclusively as *occupation*.⁴

In September 1939, Poland was partitioned between Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine; and in both regions similar processes were taking place. Thus, the study of the history of Western Belorussia in 1939-1941 is impossible without considering the events occurred in the same period in Western Ukraine. Despite these similarities, the situation in Western Ukraine drew more attention of the historians⁵ and has been more extensively studied than the Sovietization of Belorussia.

² There are some notable exceptions among the works that made the first attempts to rethink the history of Western Belorussia and the breakaway from the Soviet paradigm. Ref.: *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne*, No. 13, 2000; I. E. Elenskaia. "Evrei Zapadnoi Belorussii glazami ikh sosedei (po materialam ustnoi istorii)" (*Diaspory*, No. 3, 2006: 150-179); V. Bulgakov (editor). *Arche: Pachatak. 17 sentyabria 1939 goda: Antropologiia vossoedineniia*, No. 8, 2009; I. Romanova, I. Makhovskaia. *Mir: historyjia mjastechka, shto raskazali jae zhychary* (Vilno: Evropeiskii gumanitarnii universitet, 2009), 247; A. Smalianchuk (editor). *Vosen 1939 goda u histarychnaj tradycyi i u vusnaj historyi*. (Minsk: Zmitser Kolas, 2015), 288.

³ M. P. Kasciuk, I. Ya. Navumenka (editors). *Nazausiedy razam: da 60-goddzia uzjadnannia Zahodniaj Belarusi z BSSR*. (Minsk: Belaruskaia encyklopedia, 1999); N. N. Kovalevoi (editor). *Istoricheskie, sotsiokulturnie i ekonomicheskie aspekty vossoedineniia belorusskogo naroda*. (Brest: Brest Pedagogy Institute, 2000); A. A. Kavalenia. "Tsiarnovy shliach uz'iadnannia Belarusi" In *Vosen 1939 goda u histarychnym lesie Belarusi* (Minsk, 2009); U. F. Ladysieiu, P. I. Bryhadzin. *Pamiz Uschodam i Zachadam: Stanaulennie dziazaunasti i terataryialnai tselasnasti Belarusi (1917-1939 zz.)* (Minsk: Belarussian State University (BHU), 2003); A. A. Kavalenia, I. A. Sarakavik. *Belarus napiaredadni i u hady Druhoj susvietnaj i Vialikaj Ajchynnaj vojn* (Minsk: Belarus, 2008); N. N. Kovaleva, L. Yu. Mal'khina (editors). *Osen 1939 goda: Korennoi perelom v sudbe belorusskogo naroda* (Brest: Brest State University (BrGTU), 2009).

⁴ Ref.: T. Szrembozs (editor). *Studia z dziejów okupacji sowieckiej (1939-1941): obywatele Polscy na kresach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej pod okupacją sowiecką w latach 1939-1941* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Ziemi Wschodnich, 1997); W. Sleszyński. *Okupacja sowiecka na Białostocczyźnie: Propaganda i indoktrynacja*. (Białystok: Białostockie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 2001); K. Jasiewicz. *Pierwsi po diable. Elity sowieckie w okupowanej Polsce 1939-1941 (Białostocczyzna, Nowogródzczyzna, Poliesie, Wileńszczyzna)* (Warszawa: PAN, 2001); A. Kuner. *Polska była pierwsza* (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2009); B. Musiał. *Wojna Stalina, 1939-1945: terror, grabież, demontaże* (Poznań: Zysk i S-ka, 2012); T. Szrembosz, R. Wnuk. *Czerwone bagno: konspiracja i partyzantka antysowiecka w Augustowskiem, wrzesień 1939 - czerwiec 1941* (Warszawa: Scholar, 2009); K. Jasiewicz. *Oni: Okypacyjny aparat sowiecki na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich w latach 1939-1941* (Warszawa: PAN, 2015).

⁵ Ref.: A. Weiss. "Jewish-Ukrainian relations in Western Ukraine during the Holocaust" In *Ukrainian-Jewish relations in historical perspective* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1990); I. Luchakivska. *Ukrajinska intelihentsiia zachidnich oblastej URSR v piershi roky radianskoj vlady (1939-1941)* (Lviv: Livivski universitet, 1999); B. Gogol. *Czerwony sztandar: Rzecz o sowietyzacji ziem Maloposki wshodniej: Wrzesień 1939 – czerwiec 1941* (Gdańsk: Wyd-wo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2000); E. Yu. Borisenok. "Zolotoy sentyabr" tridsat devyatogo. Krasnaya armiya i mestnoe naselenie na Zapadnoi Ukraine" In *Rodina*, No. 8, 2009: 34-38.; N. Litvin, K. Naumenko. *Stalin i Zachidna Ukrajina 1939-1941 rr.* (Kyiv: NAN Ukrainy, 2010); V. Grinievich. *Nieprybornane riznoolossia: Druga svitova vijna I suspilno-politychni natroji v Ukraini, 1939 – chervien 1941 rr.* (Kyiv (Dnipropetrovsk): Lira, 2012).

The groundbreaking work by Jan Tomasz Gross *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*⁶ gave rise to important questions concerning differences in the Soviet policies towards diverse ethnic groups living in Eastern Poland - primarily, Poles, Belarussians, Ukrainians and Jews. In this monograph, Gross also proposed the conceptualization of Soviet reforms as a *Revolution from abroad* emphasizing the violent character of this policy. This concept also considers the tendencies occurring on the annexed territories during the period between 1939 and 1941 in comparison with those emerged in the first decades after the October Revolution. In my opinion, the suggested concept is valuable. Nevertheless, it does not take into consideration that a certain part of the population of Eastern Poland took part enthusiastically into this *Revolution*. Probably, the reason for this inaccuracy was the sources on which the research is based – the memoirs of the former soldiers of Anders' Army (mainly Poles). Thus, the data on the position of the Jews in 1939-1941 which Gross operates in his work is primarily the recollections of Polish population.

Scholars who studied the history of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia in the period from 1939 to 1941 usually focus their attention on some peculiar aspect of Sovietization.⁷ In this regard, the largest attention was drawn by the Soviet repression policy.⁸ More and more works are

⁶ J. T. Gross. *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). First edition – 1988.

⁷ Ref.: T. Szembozs (editor) *Studia z dziejow okupacji sowieckiej (1939-1941): obywatele Polscy na kresach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej pod okupacją sowiecką w latach 1939-1941* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Ziemi Wschodnich, 1997); M. Gnatowski, D. Bockowski (editors). *Sowietyzacja i rusyfikacja północno-wschodnich ziem II Rzeczypospolitej, 1939-1941* (Białystok: Wyd-wo Uniw. w Białymstoku, 2003); O. V. Petrovskaya, E. Yu. Borisenok (editors). *Zapadnaya Belorussia i Zapadnaya Ukraina v 1939-1941: lyudi, sobytiya, dokumety* (Saint-Petersburg: Aleteiya, 2011).

⁸ W. Wrzesinski. *Deportacje Polaków do Związku Radzieckiego w latach 1939-1941* (Wrocław: Wyd-wo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1996); K. Sword. *Deportation and exile: Poles in the Soviet Union, 1939-1948* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996); A. E. Guryanov. *Repressii protiv polyakov i polskikh grazhdan* (Moscow: Zven'ya, 1997); I. Kuzniatsova. „Palitychnyja represii u Belarusi u 1939-1941 hadach” In *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne*, No. 13, 2000: 45-70; E. Dzwonkiewicz. *Aresztowani na „Zachodniej Białorusi”: alfabeczny wykaz 4669 Polaków i obywateli polskich innych narodowości aresztowanych na „Zachodniej Białorusi” w latach 1939-1941* (Warszawa: Osrodek Karta, 2003); N. S. Lebedeva. *Deportations from Poland and the Baltic states to the USSR in 1939-1941: common features and specific traits* (Vilnius: LII (Lietuvos istorijos institutas), 2003); Yu. Hrybouski. “Savetskija represii u Zachodniaj Belarusi (kastychnik 1939 – cherven 1941 hh.” In *Repressivnaya politika sovetskoy vlasti v Belarusi* (Minsk: Memorial, 2007); V. Baran. “Zachystka”: *politychni represiji v zachidnykh oblactiach Ukrainy, 1939-1941* (Lviv: Instytut ukrajinoznawstva, 2014).

appearing on particular regions or cities of Western Belorussia and Ukraine;⁹ while the historiographic problems of interethnic relations in this region have become particularly urgent and relevant.¹⁰

The pioneering works of Dov Levin¹¹ and Ben-Cion Pinchuk¹² attempt to analyze the history of Eastern Polish Jews in 1939-1941 particularly from the Jewish perspective. Being the first publications on this topic, these monographs defined the basic approaches in this field of research. Especially Levin submitted the concept of *the lesser of two evils* according to which in September 1939 the Jewish population of Eastern Poland welcomed the Soviet troops as *the lesser evil* in comparison with *the worst* Nazist antisemitism. This concept as a whole is significant; however, it does not take into consideration the specific circumstances: indeed, among Polish Jews the socialist ideas and sympathy to the USSR were quite widespread. Moreover, the clear understanding of what was *the lesser evil* and what was *the worst* came only after September 1939.

⁹ W. Sleszyński. *Okupacja sowiecka na Białostocczyźnie: Propaganda i indoktrynacja* (Białystok: Białostockie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 2001); A. Zapalec. *Ziemia tarnopolska w okresie pierwszej okupacji sowieckiej, 1939-1941* (Kraków: Księg. Akademicka, 2006); M. Kucherepa. *Istoria Volyni: 1939-1941 rr.* (Lutsk: Volynska oblasna drukarnia, 2006); T. Bereza (editor). *Lwowskie pod okupacją sowiecką (1939-1941)* (Rzeszów: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2006); F. Akerman. „Harodnia pad savietskaj akupatsyiaj (verasen 1939 – cherven 1941 hh.)” In *Arche: Pachatak*, No. 1, 2016: 6-26; R. J. Czarnowski. *Lwów: okupacją sowiecką* (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Rytm", 2016).

¹⁰ Ref. M. Wierzbicki. *Polacy i Białorusini w zaborze sowieckim: Stosunki polsko-białoruskie na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej pod okupacją sowiecką, 1939-1941* (Warszawa: Volumen, 2000); S. V. Strunets, E. S. Rosenblat. „Polyaki i evrei v Zapadnoi Belorussii: dinamika sblizheniy i konfliktov (1939-1941)” In *Diaspory*, No. 1, 2003: 202-227; M. Gnatowski. *Polacy-Sowiecy-Żydzi w regionie Łomżyńskim w latach 1939-1941. Tom 1. Studia.* (Łomża: Łomżyńskie Towarzystwo Naukowe im. Wagów, 2005); J. J. Milewski, A. Pyżewska (editors). *Stosunki polsko-białoruskie w województwie Białostockim w latach 1939-1956* (Warszawa: Instytut studiów politycznych PAN, 2005); W. Bartoszewski. „Polacy-Żydzi-wojna-okupacja” In *Polacy-Żydzi, 1939-1945* (Warszawa: Rytm, 2006), 6-15; M. Wierzbicki. *Polacy i żydy w zaborze sowieckim: stosunki polsko-żydowskie na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II RP pod okupacją sowiecką (1939-1941)* (Warszawa: Fronda, 2007); E. Barkan, E. A. Cole, K. Struve (editors). *Shared History – Divided Memory – Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939-1941* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007).

¹¹ D. Levin. *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry Under Soviet Rule, 1939-1941* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995). The first edition was published in Hebrew in 1989.

¹² B.-C. Pinchuk. *Shtetl Jews under Soviet Rule: Eastern Poland on the Eve of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

Both monographs by Pinchuk and Levin were published at the beginning of the 1990s when Soviet archival documents were still unavailable. Therefore, the basic sources of their works are written memoirs and oral testimonies of the Jews survived the World War II. However, regarding the fact that Soviet archives were made available for research in the 1990s, nowadays these works are somewhat outdated.

The history of the Jewish population of the former Eastern Poland in 1939-1941 is not a very popular issue among historians of the post-Soviet countries. A list of articles on the interethnic relations, antisemitism, Jews-refugees belongs to E.S. Rosenblat.¹³ Furthermore, the quite well-known monograph of I. Elenskaya and E.S. Rosenblat entitled *Pinskie evrei: 1939-1941*¹⁴ has been mainly focused on the history of the Holocaust while the pre-war period has been superficially mentioned.

The article of O.V. Budnitskii *Sliskom polyaki dlya Sovetov, sliskom evrei dlya polyakov*¹⁵ observes the specifics of ethnic and social situation of the Eastern Polish Jews: on the one hand, they were aliens for the Polish fellow citizens while on the other hand they were foreigners for the Soviet authority. These circumstances became crucial in the Eastern Polish Jews' fate in 1939-1945. Thus, this article is important for my research methodology.

¹³ Ref.: E. S. Rosemblat. "Antisemitism i politika sovetsoi vlasti v zapadnykh oblastiakh Belarusi v 1939-1941 godakh (na primere Pinski oblasti)" In *Vestnik evreiskogo universiteta*, No. 16, 1997: 61-72; E. S. Rosenblat. "Evrei v sisteme mezhnatsionalnykh otnoshenii v zapadnykh oblastiakh Belarusi. 1939-1941 r." In *Bialoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne*, No. 13, 2000: http://www.gsom.spbu.ru/files/upload/library/list_of_literature.pdf. Accessed September 5, 2014; E. S. Rosenblat. "Sovetizatsiya i antisemitizm v zapadnobeloruskikh zemlyakh. 1939-1941" In *Sovetyzatsja i rusyfikacja pólnocno-wschodnih ziem II Rzeczypospolitej, 1939-1941* (Białystok: Wyd-wo Uniw. w Białymstoku, 2003), 105-118.; E. S. Rosenblat. "Chuzhdiy element": evreiskie bezhentsy v Zapadnoi Belorussii (1939-1941)" In *Istoriya i kultura rossiiskogo i vostochnoevropeiskogo evreistva* (Moscow: Dom evrejiskoi knigi, 2004), 333-361.

¹⁴ I. E. Elenskaya, E. S. Rosemblat. *Pinskie evrei: 1939-1944* (Brest: Brestskii gosudarstvenniy universitet im. Pushkina, 1997).

¹⁵ O. V. Budnitskiy. "Sliskom polyaki dlya Sovetov, sliskom evrei dlya polyakov: polskie evrei v SSSR v 1939-1945" In *Ab Imperio*, No. 4, 2015: 213-236.

The monograph by S. Bender *The Jews of Bialystok during World War II and the Holocaust*¹⁶ and Y. Bauer's *Death of the Shtetl*¹⁷ observe the Holocaust and its background on the Eastern Polish region. Both authors treat the period of the Soviet power as a "mental annihilation" - which was followed by the physical extermination during the Nazi occupation - of the local Jews.

Since the experience of transformations of 1920-1930-s in the Soviet "old" regions were incorporated during the Sovietization of Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine, I also observed the scientific publications on the Soviet policy and society of the 1920-1930s. In particular, the monographs on the history of the Jewish population in the BSSR was highly enchainning for my research.¹⁸

The problem statement

My dissertation seeks to reveal the aims, the process and the consequences of the Sovietization of the Jewish population in Western Belorussia in the period from 1939 to 1941. I conduct my research from two perspectives evaluating:

- a) the entire Sovietization policy in the annexed region;
- b) the impact of that policy on the Jewish lifestyle.

Thus, in my study I focus on the broader social and political context of the local Jewish history of the borderland region during the period between 1939 and 1941.

¹⁶ S. Bender. *The Jews of Bialystok during World War II and the Holocaust* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Y. Bauer. *Death of the Shtetl* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ A. Shternshis. *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); A. Zeltser. *Evrei sovetskoi provincii: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917-1941* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006); A. S. Zamoiskiy. *Transformatsiya mestecek Sovetskoi Belorussii 1918-1939* (Minsk: I.P. Logvinov, 2013); E. Bemporad. *Prevrashchenie v sovetskikh evreev: Bolshevistskiy eksperiment v Minske* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2016); A. Sloin. *The Jewish Revolution in Belorussia. Economy, Race, and Bolshevik Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

Professional significance

In the current historiography, works are mainly focused on the reaction of the Jewish population to the policy of the Sovietization. Not only the Jewish reaction to Sovietization is considered in my research, but also the aims and mechanisms of this policy. My approach is to examine what the Soviet authorities needed, which methods were used to achieve their goals and what was done. Therefore, I incorporate the combination of various kinds of sources, both Soviet Government materials and ego-documents such as memoirs and oral history.

Theoretical framework and research methodology

The history of the Jewish population of the annexed territories between 1939 and 1941 is often examined from the perspective of their future extermination – i.e. the events happened *on eve of the Holocaust*. In my study I argue that this perspective of vision is rather incorrect insofar as it provides an incorrect insight of the Sovietization policy and of the local Jews' strategies and behavior under the Soviet rule. Moreover, at that time nobody could certainly predict with the destiny of Polish Jews in the closest future. Thus, my approach is to analyze these events not as a destruction process of Jewish lifestyle, but rather as its transformation. In my opinion, such approach allows for a more detailed and an accurate picture of the Jewish everyday life in the period from 1939 to 1941.

From the methodological point of view, my research proceeds through the tools of *new social history*;¹⁹ while from the thematical and chronological perspective, this dissertation contributes to

¹⁹ L. P. Repina. “*Novaya istoricheskaya nauka*” i sotsialnaya istoriya (Moscow: Institut vseobschei istorii RAN, 1998); E. J. Khobsbaum. “Ot sotsialnoi istorii k istorii obschestva” In *Filosofiya i metodologiya istorii* (Moscow: 2000), 289-320.

the scholarship of the *social history of Stalinism*.²⁰ Since the sufficient attention in the research has been paid to the life conditions under the Soviet rule in 1939-1941, this work has been partially written in line with the *Alltagsgeschichte* (Everyday history).²¹

Conducting the cumulative analysis of the Soviet transformations in Western Belorussia, I referred to the concept of *Revolution from abroad* proposed by Gross.²² This concept suggests studying the Sovietization history of the Eastern Polish population in 1939-1941 as a social revolution imposed by the external forces.

Since this thesis also refers to the scholars of the Soviet national policy – especially in the paragraphs on Soviet school reforms (chapter 2 paragraph 2) and on the reforms in culture (chapter 4 paragraph 5) – I also refer to the theory of *Affirmative Action Empire* by T. Martin.²³

Moreover, this work refers to the field of regional history.²⁴ By *region* I mean not a merely administrative territory but also a historical and cultural area. Overall, in my analysis I am engaging with the Borderland studies,²⁵ as the observed territory has been passing from Poland to Russia (Soviet Union) and vice versa for centuries.

²⁰ Sh. Fitzpatrick. *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); M. Devid-Foks (editor). *Amerikanskaya rusistika: vekhi istoriografii poslednikh let. Sovetskiy period* (Samara: Samarskiy universitet, 2001); M. Edele. *Stalinist Society: 1928-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); *Kritika: Explorations in Russia and Eurasian History*, No. 4, Vol. 18, 2017 etc.

²¹ A. Lyudtke. “Chto takoe istoriya povsednevnosti? Eyo dostizheniya i perspektivy v Germanii” In *Sotsialnaya istoriya. Ezhegodnik, 1998/1999* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999), 71-100.

²² J. T. Gross. *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

²³ T. Martin. *Affirmative action empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

²⁴ C. Applegate. “A Europe of Region: Reflection on the Historiography of Sub-National Places in Modern Times” In *American Historical Review*, No. 4, Vol. 104, 1999: 1157-1183; L. V. Repina. “Teoreticheskie osnovaniya i perspektivy regionalnoi istorii” In *Prepodavatel XXI vek*, No. 3, 2013: 266-273.

²⁵ K. Brown. *A biography of no place: From ethnic borderland to Soviet heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); M. K. Kolesnikova, S. I. Malovichko. „Istoriya pogranichnykh oblastei (borderlands history) kak odno iz napravlenii izucheniya regionalnoi istorii” In *Otechestvennaya i zarubezhnaya istoriya: problemy, mneniya, podkhody* (Pyatigorsk: Izdatelstvo Pyatigorskogo gosudarstvennogo lingvisticheskogo universiteta (PGLU), 2006), 7-19

The source database of current research is presented by materials from the archives of different countries. I process the data that could be divided into two groups: 1) the Soviet government documents on the issue of Western Belorussia which helps me to analyze and reconstruct the “sovietizational” efforts of the authority; 2) memoirs and testimonies of the Poles, Belarussians and - of course mostly - Jews who used to live in Western Belorussia and were witnesses of the events happened between 1939 and 1941.

During the archival research, documents of three levels of state and party bodies had been examined:

1) supreme level - central archives such as the State Archive of Russian Federation (GARF) and the Russian State archive of social and political history (RGASPI). This group of documents contains regulatory acts and proceedings of All-Union level. It is essential to emphasize how these materials are mainly presented in the form of final decisions, while the data on the discussions is mostly absent. This feature to the different extend refers to all Supreme Soviet bodies during Stalinism.

2) republican level – in local state archives such as the National Archive of the Republic of Belarus (NARB). This group of documents is represented by the fond of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia, where all cases of general proceedings of the BSSR concerning the position of Western Belorussia - from the particular reports of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs to the acts of the local administration - are collected.

3) local level – in regional Belarussian archives such as the State Archive of Grodno Region (GAGR) and Regional State Archives in Baranovichi (SGABar); and in RGASPI where all the protocols of regional Party committee meetings in the BSSR are collected. Together with materials from other archives, regional documents are the significant addition to the picture of Sovietization policy in Western Belorussia.

While studying the adoption of the Soviet policy from the perspective of local Jewish population, I also employed some personal data such as published and unpublished written memoirs of the Jews of Western Belorussia and other sources of oral history – such as video- and audio-interviews with them. Most of these sources are collected in the library and archives of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) as well as in the digital collections of the USC Shoah Foundation. The verification of the content of the written memories and oral history was done by comparing the data with each other and with the Soviet documents.

Theses for the defense

- The period between 1939 and 1941 in Western Belorussia was quite similar to the reforms of 1920-1930s in the USSR. For the Western Belorussian population, this period was revolutionary experienced as a social trauma.
- Western Belorussian Jews welcomed the Red Army because this fact meant for them the establishing of more advantageous national policy in comparison with the Polish one nor the Nazi one. Thus, for a significant part of the local Jewish population the Soviet authority was not just the Levin's "*lesser evil*", but the government which had brought them equality against Anti-Semitism.
- During the first months after the Red Army's entry to Western Belorussia, the Jewish population was the most active group cooperating with the new authority.
- The Sovietization policy did not grant Western Belorussian Jews with any privileges. So, the fact that some Jews had ranked high in local Soviet administration was determined by certain other circumstances such as the newly imposed restriction of the opportunities for Polish people to take part in self-administration and the inability of the Belorussian population to compete with the Jews on the literacy level.

- Despite the fact that in the autumn 1939 many local Jews were ready to follow the new authority, further failures of the Soviet administration in the socio-economic reforms led a great part of them to be disappointed by the Soviet rule.
- Among the Eastern Polish Jews there were many persons who had been identified as enemies of the new regime - such as wealthy entrepreneurs, active members of the Jewish national organizations, religious activists and refugees – and became the main subject of the Soviet repressions in terms of arrests and deportations.
- The Sovietization involved a massive attack to the traditional Jewish lifestyle. This process was an imminent circumstance of the Soviet national policy. Nevertheless, we cannot refer to an absolute abolition of the Jewish traditional and religious culture by June 1941.
- The Soviet propaganda of 1939-1941 - especially the ideas of internationalism - actively promoted in the annexed region did not lead to the desirable effect on the local population. On the contrary, the Soviet national policy had escalated a plethora of interethnic problems.

The research approbation

Selected parts of this research have been presented on 13 international conferences and workshops in Moscow, Sant-Petersburg, Minsk, Jerusalem, Washington, and Paris. Moreover, the abstract and analytical frameworks of this work have been discussed on the section meeting “National History” of the School of Historic Sciences of National Research University Higher School of Economics, held in September and December 2017 in Moscow.

Particular sections of this work have been published in journals indexed in citation bases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and the base of the State Commission for Academic Degrees. Some of my conference papers had been published in collections of conferences proceedings as well.²⁶

²⁶ The full list of my publication is on the last page of the current review.

The structure of the dissertation includes the introduction, four chapters, the conclusion, bibliography, the list of illustrations and figures.

THE MAIN BODY OF THE THESIS

The **Introduction** contains the following parts: the background information, the literature survey, methodology and source database, theoretical significance, the problem statement and the main theses.

Chapter 1 «The First reforms on the “Jewish street”» includes three paragraphs:

§ 1. Political integration of the Western Belorussian territories into the BSSR

This paragraph presents the first events and some main historical trends occurred in Western Belorussia straight after the Red Army's entry. In particular, the first reforms are reviewed such as: the demarcation of the German-Soviet border, the establishment of transitional Soviet government (Temporary government and the Soviet police unions or *militsia*), the organization of the referendum on the integration of these territories into the BSSR and the USSR. While emphasizing on the Jewish population, the goal of the first paragraph is to define the socio-political frameworks of the following 22 months.

§ 2. The Jewish population of Western Belorussia: demographic and social aspects

This paragraph analyzes the position of the Jewish population of Western Belorussia. Hence, the conditions of these Jews are presented in the comparative perspective with their previous ethnic and social status in Poland. In my opinion, this approach helps to explain the Jewish political moods and expectations in the autumn of 1939.

The second half of the paragraph reviews the position of the Jewish refugees in Western Belorussia: their size, the conditions of those crossing the German-Soviet border, their life conditions in the BSSR and also their interrelation with local populations, especially with Western Belorussian Jews.

§ 3. Soviet citizens and their interrelation with the Jewish population in Western Belorussia

The main functions of integrating the former citizens of Eastern Poland into the Soviet society were assigned to the Soviet citizens – the so called *vostochniki* - who began to settle in the region from September 1939 and more massively from January 1940: i.e. Red Army servicemen, Soviet party officials and technical specialists. In this paragraph, the analysis of the conditions, arrangement and behavior of the settled Soviet citizens - as well as their interrelations with the locals, mainly with Jews - is presented.

To summarize the first chapter, I noticed that xenophobia in interwar Polish Republic and then Anti-Semitism of the Nazi Germany were the main reasons for the positive reaction to the Red Army invasion of many local Jews. Hence, *the lesser evil* concept by Levin is generally relevant. However, we should pay attention to the fact that among Polish Jewry - first of all, among the poorest families and youngsters - the socialist ideas were quite popular. Besides, many Jews hoped that the Soviet authority would annihilate Anti-Semitism and provide equal rights which the Jews in the USSR already had. Moreover, the understanding that the Nazi Germany was indeed *the worst evil* came later, as emerges by the fact that some Jewish families escaped from Soviet Union to the Polish territory occupied by the Nazis.

In first months after the Red Army invasion, many local Jews took active part in the activity of the Temporary Soviet government. In conditions of war, these organizations obtained an absolute power. Nevertheless, the wide representativeness of the Jewish population in the Temporary Soviet government engendered hatred in the local Polish society.

Indeed, during the campaign on appointing the *vostochniki* to the leadership positions in Western Belorussia there were mass purges in the local administration of the annexed region and many local Jews were losing their positions in the 1940s. They were replaced by “loyal” Soviet official sent from the “old” Soviet regions, mainly from the BSSR. Holding leadership positions, these people became the new political elite. Massive arrival of the *vostochniki* had drastically changed the social climate in the annexed region.

Chapter 2 « “Social engineering” and its influence on Polish Jewry» consists of three paragraphs:

§ 1. Repressions in Western Belorussia and the Jewish population

In this paragraph the repressive measures aimed at the total reconstruction of Eastern Poland society are examined. Already in September 1939, the Soviet authority started identifying and removing “alien social elements” in relation to whom the repressive measures were applied: arrests, property confiscation and deportation. Among the “enemies” of the new regime there were enough several Jews in terms of entrepreneurs, rabbis, refugees, and members of national parties. Here a special attention has been paid to the deportation of the Jews-refugees in June 1940. In the conclusion some approximate data on the amount of arrested and deported citizens in Western Belorussia according to nationalities is provided.

§ 2. Jewish youth in the conditions of the Soviet school reforms

As in 1939-1941 the Jewish education - including the private one - became a part of the Soviet school system, in this paragraph the changes in Jewish schools are viewed through the lens of the general reforms of educational institutions in Western Belorussia. In particular, the paragraph illustrates how the school reform in the annexed region was not fully completed by 1941 because of the difficult economic and political situation. It was revealed in the lack of school premises, facilities, and qualified teachers.

Although in 1939 the Jewish Hebrew schools were banned, the new authority encouraged the establishment of Soviet Yiddish schools. Thus, this chapter underlines how these school reforms were quite similar to the reforms of Jewish educational institutions in the “old” Soviet regions and in the BSSR in 1920-1930s. But in the newly-occupied Eastern Polish regions school reforms were done in forced tempo.

Since in 1930-1940s the whole Soviet school system had been adapted to Western Belorussia, the situation with high schools and universities is also emphasized in the paragraph that pays a special attention to the development of high and secondary special educational institutions on the annexed territories. Moreover, the activity of Jewish youth in their pursuit to continue education in universities of large Soviet cities is illustrated as well.

§ 3. The influence of Soviet agitation and propaganda on Western Belorussian Jews

This paragraph outlines the characteristics of Soviet authority measures in holding different outreach activities. Among these activities were the meetings and lectures, demonstrations of propaganda films, revision of librarian funds, publication and distribution of a special content literature. Hence, a particular attention is paid to the only Yiddish newspaper published in Western Belorussia: *Bialystoker Stern*.

In conclusions to the second chapter the consequences of Soviet measures were described as *social engineering* aimed at unifying the population of the newly-occupied region with the population of the BSSR. It is emphasized that the escalation of repressions in Western Belorussia during the period between 1939 and 1941 had extremely harsh consequences for all local populations.

According to the Soviet ideology, the life style and mentality of the major of Polish Jews was considered as “unreliable”. Indeed, the majority of local Jews used to match the category of *former* tradesmen, manufacturers, Zionists, Bundists and etc. Hence, punishment could be enforced at any

moment. However, particularly the Jews-refugees used to suffer from the Soviet repressive policy the most.

Furthermore, in 1939-1941 the opportunity for equal education at Soviet schools and universities was opened for the local Jewish youth for the first time and this measure promoted fast Sovietization of Jewish youth. Overall, the Soviet education system in Western Belorussia, having a range of salient material and technical disadvantages, in 1939-1941 was pursuing its goal of turning the local youth into real Soviet citizens.

Therefore, in Western Belorussia the Yiddish language was assigned a support role in the process of the Sovietization of Jewry. The content of the only Yiddish newspaper in Western Belorussia *Bialystoker Stern* shows that the main function of this publication was providing the Soviet ideology to - non-speaking Russian - local Jewish civilians.

Nevertheless, the Soviet ambitious plans on agitation and propaganda in the annexed region were not achieved properly. In particular, propaganda in relation to the Jewish population was not always effective because the lecturers usually did not properly know Yiddish and also because of the lack of the propaganda reading materials in this language.

Chapter 3 “Jewish everyday life in Western Belorussia in the frames of the Soviet economic reforms, 1939-1941” is divided into three paragraphs:

§ 1. Soviet economic reforms in Western Belorussia

In the period between 1939 and 1941, Soviet government had been seeking to create in the annexed region an economic system identical to all other regions of the USSR. The paragraph analyzes the activities in this field and in particular the nationalization, the adoption of the Soviet *rouble* and replacing the Polish *zloty*, the tightening of the labor legislation; the introduction of new fiscal system; and the quite unsuccessful reorganization of the Soviet trade network and industrial production.

The paragraph emphasized that since there was a hardship in the setting up the Soviet trade network and industrial production, a significant number of tradesmen and craftsmen were allowed for paying a tax to hold a patent and to continue doing their work legally. Undoubtedly, the government treated this practice as a desperate and temporary measure. Nevertheless, in the context of the observed period, this measure was not temporary.

§ 2. The influence of economic reforms on the lifestyle of Western Belorussian population

The next two paragraphs focus on the aftermath of the Soviet economic policy. Paragraph 2 highlights its general influence on economics and the society of the region emphasizing in particular the fact that the economic activities of the Soviet authority had a number of harmful consequences such as shortages and blooming “black market”, smuggling, inflation, unemployment, extreme impoverishment of the local civilians, widespread incidences of stealing from workplace etc. Moreover, all of these phenomena were accompanied by the tightening of the labor legislation and control over the amount of selling goods.

This paragraph also demonstrates that the economic situation in Eastern Poland was not as critical as in other Soviet regions. For the instance, in 1940 the norms regulating trade of goods per person were by times more permissive in the annexed regions than in the “old” Soviet regions.

§ 3. The change in social and material position of the Jews in Western Belorussia

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, in the period between 1939 and 1941 many local Jewish tradesmen and craftsmen in Western Belorussia continued their business by following these two paths: joining the cooperative production societies (*artels*) or individually by holding the patent. Undoubtedly, the number of Jewish individual tradesmen and craftsmen was decreasing at that time because of a high tax duty. However, it does not mean that all of them have stopped their activity by 1941.

Besides, a lot of Jewish tradesmen and craftsmen coped to get a position in some state institution. Thus, they managed to increase their social status and material benefits in terms of a

regular income. In fact, the Jews did not have any competitors while applying for the positions in the Soviet bureaucratic institutions, especially because the new authority did not trust Poles, while the educational and literacy levels of Belarusians were usually lower.

The Jews-refugees were the most unemployed category of the Western Belorussian population from 1939 to 1941. Although the Soviet government took some measures to resolve this plight, it did not provide any substantial support.

In **conclusion of the third chapter** I underlined that the Soviet reforms in economics of the newly-annexed region led to the economic collapse insofar as the absolute majority of the local population have been driven to poverty. After the annexation, the main feature of the local market became not production, but rather reselling (just like it was in the USSR). Not only the so called “professional dealers” were involved, but even common civilians started speculating and smuggling in Western Belorussia at that period. There were many Jews in both categories. In general, the economic problems caused social tension among Western Belorussian population. It was one of the main factors which used to restrain significantly the Sovietization of the locals.

It is well-known fact that the Soviet economic policy was contradicting the lifestyle of traditional *Jewish shtetl*. Indeed, the Eastern Polish Jewry potentially was the first victim of the Soviet economic reforms. However, in 1939-1941 many of the local Jews were able to continue their craft working at the factory, in *artel* or in private sector. The general level of education and professional skills of the Jewish population allowed many of them to get a promotion for the Soviet positions in the state bureaucracy institution or, at least, begin an illegal trade at the “black market”. Both of that helped Jews to adapt faster to new social and economic conditions.

Chapter 4 “Soviet way of life in western regions of the BSSR” includes five paragraphs:

§ 1. The *Passportization* of Polish Jews

This paragraph observes the governmental measures on issuing passports to all former Polish citizens living in Western Belorussia. The paragraph highlighted that in this particular context the *passportization* did not merely regulate the status of the civilians in the newly-annexed region, but it also used to control the migration and to revise the social contingent of the Borderlands. Thousands of locals received passports restricting their freedom to choose the residence place. So, for many of them the *passportization* caused a crucial change of lifestyle and imposed the place of residence. Among these persons were many Jews who received a passport “with the restrictions” because of their “unreliable” social background or/and a refugee status.

§ 2. “Housing problem” and the Jewish population

This paragraph analyzes how the housing situation in Western Belorussia caused situations of critical over-population in the region. The most careful attention was paid to the “densification” (*uplotnienie*) as a measure of resolving the housing shortage. Moreover, the paragraph also observes how the phenomenon of close neighborhood among locals and *vostochniki* was intensified by the *uplotnienie* policy.

The crucial issue of the “housing problem” (the so called *kvartirnyi vopros* in Russian) triggered the harsh struggle for living space, mainly in cities. In the paragraph, this phenomenon is carefully analyzed on the example of Białystok where this struggle was especially brutal. Since more than 70 percent of all local Jews used to live in cities, I argue that they were in the very core of the “housing problem”.

§ 3. Membership of Jews in the Soviet youth and professional unions

Komsomol and Pioneer organizations used to deal with the Sovietization of youth in Western Belorussia. The paragraph emphasized that membership in the Soviet youth organizations for the first time provided young Jews with the opportunity to participate equally in social and political initiatives.

It was mentioned above that in the winter of 1940-1941 a revision in the local administration resulted in the mass dismissal of local Jews. Similar situations were in the youth unions where a great part of the local Jewish youth having an “unreliable” background was declared as persons enrolled “by mistake”. Nevertheless, during this period, the percentage of Jews in those organizations remained quite significant.

Furthermore, in December 1939 the Soviet authority started to set up trade unions in Western Belorussia; and the Jewish population was active enough in the trade union movements as well as in the Soviet industrial competition.

§ 4. Jewish religious institutions and the campaign against religious remnants

In this paragraph, I argue that Judaism in the period between 1939 and 1941 in Western Belorussia was in the same position as other local confessions. Although the new authority did not forbid religion in the given years, an aggressive antireligious campaign was carried on. This policy included: shuttering of religious schools, massive antireligious propaganda, seizure of religious estates (such as the synagogues), liquidation of religious literature and high taxation of synagogues and rabbis’ activities. Thus, the local administration set up extremely unfavorable conditions for preserving and developing religious institutions. As a result, the observation of religious rites became a part of home life sphere.

The Soviet antireligious policy reached some success: bigger one – among the youth and smaller – among elder generation. Although there was not a total eradication of the religiousness among the Jewish population, the paragraph underlines that in 1939-1941 the influence of the Soviet life style has increased dramatically.

§ 5. Participation of Western Belorussian Jews in Soviet cultural events

One of the main types of propaganda in the newly-annexed region was holding free cultural events which had different forms: artistic and sport competitions, film representations, concerts and parties and different types of amateur performance. In the period under review, there were

many theatre troupes among which several were Jewish. Acting exclusively in Yiddish, these troupes were quite popular among the Jewish population. Besides, the local Yiddish writers were actively involved into the cultural process: i.e. they frequently used to perform at the Soviet holidays, read their works on the radio in Yiddish programs, perform for Jewish youth etc. In general, the cultural life in the annexed region between 1939 and 1941 was quite active and widely available. Due to that, the Jewish youth was especially perceptive to the Soviet propaganda.

The **conclusion of fourth chapter** emphasized that the measures on resolving a range of social problems connected with the over-population (*passportization*, obligatory registration, *uplotnienie*, regulating living quarters etc.) have conversely increased the mass social tension. Overall, the hard situation in the housing sector, as well as the involuntary *passportization* process - where irregularities were registered – ended up disappointing the whole Western Belorussian population, including local Jews.

The Soviet measures in cultural sphere were much more effective. Particularly, the Jewish youth was actively involved into diverse cultural events. And even despite some negative aspects of Komsomol and Pioneer unions' work, propaganda among young population of Western Belorussia (especially among Jews) had a remarkable evolution. Moreover, in the period between 1939 and 1941 in Western Belorussia a gradual destruction of the religious institutes and an increase of influence of the Soviet secular lifestyle was enforced.

Conclusion

There are no specific documents recording principles of the Soviet policy towards Western Belorussian Jewish population in the period between 1939 and 1941. However, the general logic of the real actions of the Soviet authority allows to reconstruct a trend and the peculiarities of the Sovietization of local Jews. Moreover, the authority's logic also shows that in 1939-1941 the

national policy in relation to Jews have been carried out according to the principals that had been “tested” in Eastern Belorussia and in the other “old” Soviet regions in the 1920-1930s.

Among the local Jewry there were diverse subgroups differed in social status, level of secularization, acculturation etc. Therefore, the Jewish reaction to the Red Army invasion varied from enthusiasm to fear and despair. However, the further events in most cases made them disappointed in the Soviet rule.

The main reasons of this disillusionment were the unpopular - and mostly unsuccessful -Soviet economic reforms that had been carried out in the newly-annexed region in the given period. The reforms also trigged the social aggravation in the Borderlands. Concerning this point, we cannot help but agreeing with Gross that the Soviet policy in Eastern Poland brought hard social trauma to local population.²⁷

However, not all reforms of the new authority can be considered as unsuccessful. The Soviet policy in cultural sphere, being quite ideological and not always implemented successfully, had certain popularity among locals. In fact, the Soviet cultural policy has managed its goals, forming intended state of mind while legitimizing the Soviet authority. Especially the school reform was popular among Western Belorussian Jews. Because of it, Jewish children and youth received equal opportunities in obtaining the desired level of education.

Despite certain peculiarities, the Sovietization of the Jewish population did not differ from the same policy towards other groups of the entire annexed region. However, these “Jewish” peculiarities were presented mainly as the consequences of the Sovietization for the local Jews for which this policy opened a “window of opportunities” for the first time. The Jewish population received desirable equality and - at the beginning - even some advantages over another ethnic groups of the Borderland region. As a result, in first months after the annexation Western

²⁷ J. T. Gross. *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Belorussian Jews were significantly presented in the local authority. However, the situation dramatically changed and in January 1940 the campaign of sending “loyal cadres” to govern new regions began. Taking the leading positions, *vostochniki* were replacing the locals, among whom there were a lot of Jews. In my opinion, this purge of the local party apparatus and administrative institutions from Jews was the reaction to the consequences of Jewish activity expansion caused by providing them with equal rights.

Meanwhile, there were categories of the Jewish population which had not been accepted into the new social structure such as devoted Zionists and Bundists, active rabbis and prosperous entrepreneurs. Although the category of the *lishentsy* (“disenfranchised”) had ceased to exist in the USSR by 1939, the above mentioned social groups of the Jewish population, in fact, could be considered as such.

In these years, the events in the Borderlands developed quite fast. Although by June 1941 the majority of local Jews have been clearly disappointed in the Soviet system, nevertheless, they managed to get used to it. Hence, by June 1941 Western Belorussian Jewish population had been keeping loyalty to the Soviet authority, being afraid of the Nazi regime which anti-Semitic policy became more and more aggressive.

The alternative came soon after the end of war. In June 1945, the former Polish Jews according to the Soviet-Polish agreement on repatriation got the possibility to reobtain the Polish citizenship. As a result, in the first post-war years about 180,000 of 230,000 Jews of Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine managed to return to Poland.²⁸ More than 30,000 of them emigrated from the USSR in 1957.²⁹ It was a real “foot voting”. Does this story point the just negative experience of

²⁸ According to the official note of A. N. Kosygin to V. M. Molotov (2.04.1946), by 1 April 1946, i.e. during the first two years after signing the agreement on repatriation, 222 470 former Polish citizens in the USSR were registered, and 186 350 persons of them were approved to return to Poland // RGASPI. F. 82. Op. 2. D. 1296. L. 2.

²⁹ D. Engel. “Poland since 1939” In *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Poland/Poland_since_1939. Access on 11 June 2017.

Polish Jews living in the USSR? The issues connected with the post-war fate of Western Belorussian Jewish population are beyond the scope of my study, and definitely requires much deeper engagement.

A full list of the author's publications

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