

ANNE APPLEBAUM is the deputy editor of the *Spectator*. Born in Washington, D.C., she attended Yale University, and was a Marshall Scholar at the London School of Economics and St Antony's College, Oxford. She was the Warsaw correspondent for *The Economist*, and has also written for the *Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Affairs* and the *Literary Review*. She was recently awarded the *Times* Charles Douglas-Home Award for reporting in the former Soviet Union. She lives in England and in Dwor Chobielin, Poland, with her husband, Radek Sikorski.

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST



Across the
Borderlands of Europe

ANNE APPLEBAUM

PAPERMAC

96.

2185



194 by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York,
seously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto

First published in Great Britain 1995 by Papermac
an imprint of Macmillan General Books
Cavaye Place, London SW10 9PG
and Basingstoke

Associated companies throughout the world

ISBN 0 333 64169 8

Copyright © Anne Applebaum 1994

Map on pages vi and vii © Anita Karl & James Kemp
Chapter-opening maps © John Flower

The right of Anne Applebaum to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following for permission to reprint
previously published material:

CCP/Belwin, Inc.: Excerpts from "Theme from New York, New York", words by Fred Ebb,
music by John Kander, copyright © 1977 by United Artists Corporation c/o EMI Unart
Catalog Inc. International copyright secured. Made in USA. All rights reserved.

Worldwide print rights controlled by CCP/Belwin, Inc., Miami, FL. Used by permission.

Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, Inc.: Excerpts from *Prussian Nights* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn,
translated by Robert Conquest, reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, Inc.

Vera Rich: Excerpts from *Song Out of Darkness* by Taras Shevchenko, translated by Vera Rich,
copyright © 1961 by Vera Rich. Reprinted by permission of Vera Rich.

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission
of this publication may be made without written permission.
No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied
or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance
with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended).

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to
this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution
and civil claims for damages.

3 5 7 9 8 6 4

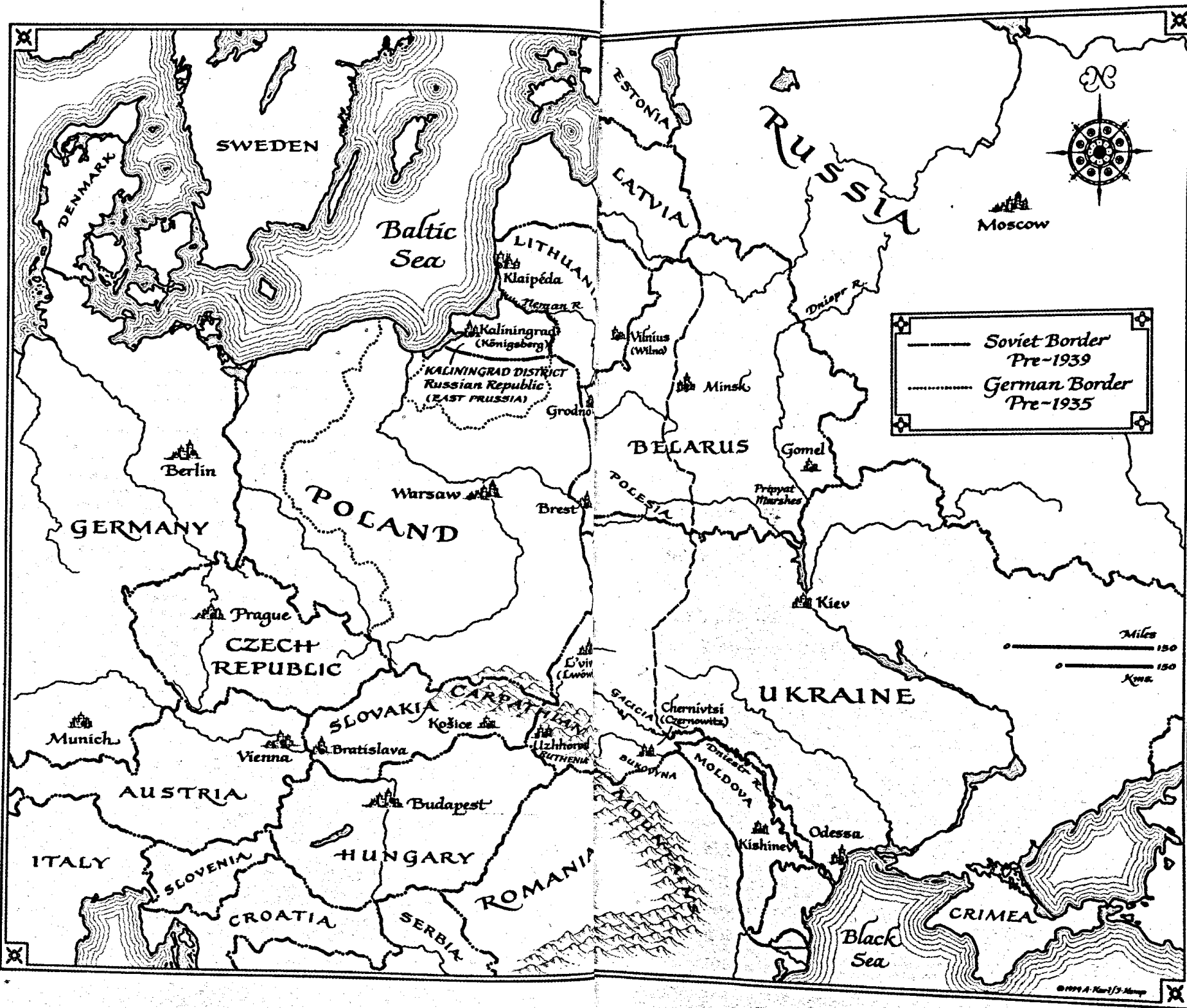
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Kent

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out,
or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

For Radek

Bayerische
Staatsbibliothek
München



CONTENTS



<i>Introduction</i>	xi
<i>Prelude</i>	3
Part I: GERMANS	11
Kaliningrad/Königsberg	21
Part II: POLES AND LITHUANIANS	43
Vilnius/Wilno	57
Paberžė	71
Perloja	81
Eišiškės	90
Radun	96
Hermaniszki	100
Bieniakonie	107
Nowogródek	128

Part III: RUSSIANS, BELARUSIANS, AND UKRAINIANS	141
Minsk	164
Brest	176
Kobrin	188
A Memory	194
L'viv/Lvov/Lwów	199
Woroniaki	219
Drohobych	225
Across the Carpathians	232
Part IV: ISLAND CITIES	247
Chernivtsi/Czernowitz/Cernăuți	249
Kamenets Podolsky	258
Kishinev/Chișinău	268
Odessa	282
Epilogue	295
A Note About Spelling	307
A Note About Sources	309
Acknowledgments	313

INTRODUCTION



FOR A THOUSAND years, the geography of the borderlands dictated their fate.

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

The borderlands' featurelessness attracted invaders, and the most celebrated—the most threatening—always came from the East. Long after the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century, the name of the Golden Horde was still uttered in whispers, and the fame of the Turks, who attacked again and again from the

sixteenth century to the eighteenth, has persisted as well. From the North came the most destructive invaders—the rapacious Swedes, who destroyed the region utterly in the Great Deluge of 1655, and the Muscovites, who began their incursions into the borderlands at about the same time. The least expected invaders came from the South, where Moldovan princes rose up to claim more territory in the sixteenth century, and Cossacks rebelled, setting fire to villages, in the seventeenth. Those who ruled the longest always came from the West. From the twelfth century onward, Poles and Lithuanians administered vast regions of the borderlands, while the Teutonic Knights controlled the northern Baltic corner, reigning for so long that their descendants, the Germans, came to believe that East Prussia would belong to them in perpetuity.

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

But most of the time, the Polonizations and Prussifications and Russifications, the drives to win Catholic converts, the crusades to build Orthodox churches, the plans to change churches into mosques, all failed to unify the region. The borderlands were simply too wide and too empty, it was too difficult for any invading nation to maintain permanent rule. Instead of uniformity, the waves of invasion created odd hybrids: the cathedral with a minaret in Kamenets Podolsky, or the town of Trakai, where five religions (Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, Moslem, Karaim) once set up their houses of worship around a single lake. Throughout most of the borderlands' history, the borderland peoples—the peasants and the woodsmen and even the nobility—remained various. From

town to town the local legends changed; from village to village the people sang different folk tunes with different melodies.

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

With the nineteenth century came the first intimations of change. New ideas about nations and nationhood began filtering east, first from Napoleonic France, then from newly unified Germany, eroding older traditions, causing even those who were not noble to place themselves in national categories. In the eighteenth century, if a borderland peasant were asked about his nationality, he would probably have replied "Catholic" or "Orthodox" or perhaps simply used the Polish word *tutejszy*—it means "one of the people from here." But in the nineteenth century, the children of the *tutejszy*, whatever dialect they spoke, began moving to cities,

where they became Polish, Russian, German, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, or Belarusian. The numbers of *tutejszy*, people without a nation, began slowly to diminish.

This process might have gone on for quite some time but for the unexpected collapse of three borderland empires—czarist Russia, Austro-Hungary, and Prussia—at the end of the First World War. In the subsequent vacuum, a handful of brand-new states, together with a clutch of ancient states that had long been ruled by others, issued proclamations of independence: Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, Hungary and Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Soviet Russia. None of these states had set borders, all had claims on their neighbors' territory. "The war of the giants has ended," wrote Churchill, "the war of the pygmies begins."

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

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

The borders that emerged from the battles and the negotiations hardly satisfied anyone. The Germans disliked the strip of Poland that lay between East Prussia and Germany proper; the Lithuanians were furious that the Poles had claimed Wilno, their Vilnius. The Ukrainians still wanted their own state, and a handful of Belarusians felt the same way. Some of these grievances helped fuel

the Second World War: territorial ambitions led Germany to invade first Czechoslovakia, then Poland. Rather than banding together to fight Germany, Poles, Lithuanians, and Czechs quarreled and argued throughout the 1930s, and failed to come to one another's assistance during the war itself.

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

Quietly, Churchill agreed. As for Stalin, he had already tried the same methods on Russia's ethnic Germans, on the Tartars, and on the Karelian Finns, among others, and he came up with the plan: he simply proposed to keep those territories he had acquired in 1939 and 1940—the Baltic states and eastern Poland, as well as the Ruthenian province of Czechoslovakia and the Bukovyna and Bessarabian provinces of Romania—and to deport anyone who no longer belonged. Although those were lands acquired by invasion and collusion—according to the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany—America and Britain agreed to let Stalin have what he wanted.

At Potsdam, in 1945, Stalin claimed Königsberg and the northern half of East Prussia, too: no Germans, he lied, were left in East Prussia anyway. All had fled. Russia needed a warm-water port on the Baltic, and, after the long war, the Soviet people

deserved to own a little bit of Germany, as it would make them feel like they had won a true victory. The other Allied leaders agreed. So the Baltic coast became his, too—although millions of Germans were still there, although Königsberg Bay does, in fact, freeze in winter—and the Soviet Union had pushed itself as far west as possible.

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

During the years that followed, Russian became the language of administration in those territories, and Russian Orthodoxy became the only, barely tolerated, religion. Russian settlers were moved in, wherever population levels had dropped, to take the place of those who had been deported. Soviet historians wrote Poles and Germans out of history books, as if they had never been there at all. Königsberg became Kaliningrad, streets changed their names, and so did people. Romanians in Moldova became Moldovans and learned to write in Cyrillic. The Latin alphabet was banned.

The idea was simple, beautifully clear. Gradually, all of the subtle dialects that had been spoken in the borderlands, all of the national variations and differences in costume and taste, all would be submerged in an onslaught of Russification. Difference would be destroyed: Stalin planned for the borderlands to disappear into Soviet Russia. Call it ethnic cleansing, to use a phrase coined later

in another context, or call it cultural genocide. Either way, it was very successful. The West turned its face away and did not notice while the crescent of land stretching from Königsberg on the Baltic to Moldova and Odessa on the Black Sea was altered beyond recognition.

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

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

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

A few hours later, I was standing in a cemetery. The rain threatened by the summer heat had started to fall, and it was growing dark. All around me, laid haphazardly one beside the other, were a thousand monuments to L'viv's confused history. I pushed the weeds away from the face of one ponderous tombstone and saw the symbol *K & K*—it meant *Kaiserlich und Königlich*, imperial and royal, the symbol of Austro-Hungary—carved beneath the epitaph. Nearby, white marble graves inscribed in a lovely Polish script leaned against one another, as if in penance for some forgotten crime. Some of the tombs were Ukrainian, marked by the Greek Catholic cross; these often featured a small portrait of the deceased as well. There were also newer, Soviet graves, topped by a red star, and old stones too worn to be read. So many nations, one buried on top of the other, so many different people jostling one another for space—the cemetery, it seemed to me then, contained the secret history that the dull Soviet landscape and boring regulations had concealed. I returned to the train, and woke up the next morning in Hungary, gazing out the window at a field of yellow sunflowers, still holding the passport that the border police had demanded, scrutinized, and wordlessly returned the night before.

Although I left Europe a few days later, L'viv continued to bother me. L'viv, or Lvov, or Lwów: it was Soviet but it was also Ukrainian, or Polish, or sometimes Jewish, depending upon whom one asked. I knew of no other places like that—except possibly Kobrin, where my father's grandfather was born. As a child, I was sometimes told that he came from Poland, sometimes that he came from Russia. When I looked at his town on a map, however, it

sat inside a country called Belarus. Only in between, and earlier, was the town in Poland, and only in the nineteenth century was it called Russia. That was a surprise: I would not have expected my stable, settled family to be linked to a place with a shifty, uncertain identity. Much later, in 1989, I moved to Warsaw, where I lived through hyperinflation, the first democratic elections, and four changes of government in as many years: I watched almost as many prime ministers come to power as I could remember American presidents. Warsaw gave me a taste for instability, and as soon as I could, I went back to L'viv.

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

In the West, what was happening in L'viv was already described as a "nationalist wave" that was said to be "sweeping" Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. A clutch of columnists were already editorializing about the dangers of national revival in places like Ukraine and Lithuania, whose last semi-independent leaders had been puppets of Nazi Germany and whose borders would be disputed. Politicians were already claiming that independence for the non-Russian Soviet republics would lead to a destabilizing collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of an angry, revanchist Russia. George Bush, visiting Kiev in the summer of 1991, sang the praises of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and told the Ukrain-

ians to abandon these dangerous nationalist tendencies: "Long live the Soviet Union," he said. Still, against his wishes, and against the wishes of the American State Department, the British Foreign Office, and almost everyone else in Western Europe, Ukraine became independent anyway a few weeks later, along with the Baltic republics, Belarus, the Caucasian republics, and Central Asia.

Post-Soviet nationalism certainly would prove to be dangerous, destabilizing, and uncomfortable for diplomats. But there were other things to say about it as well. After all, what some called nationalism others called patriotism, and still others called freedom: the stability so beloved of international statesmen had also been a prison. In the nineteenth century, nationalism had been considered a part of liberalism, intimately and inextricably connected to democracy. Nationalists were considered democratic heroes, the embodiment of all that was progressive and just. In the former Soviet Union in the years following 1989, nationalism was still popularly believed to be progressive; nationalist leaders were still believed, at least in the beginning, to speak for the many people whose voices had been suppressed in the past. After all, each period of "thaw" in the Soviet Union—the 1920s and the 1960s—had been accompanied by national revivals. Nationalism in the era following the Soviet collapse also included cultural revival: freedom to speak native languages, to read native literature, to discover the truth about national history.

Anyone who believed in democracy and economic reform also knew that post-Soviet nationalism was a practical necessity. Alexis De Tocqueville wrote that rational patriotism emerges when "a man understands the influence which his country's well-being has on his own; he knows the law allows him to contribute to the production of this well-being, and he takes an interest in his country's prosperity, first as a thing useful to him and then as something he has created." In order for democracy to take hold in the post-Soviet world after many decades (or centuries) of tyranny, people had to identify with their governments, they had to believe that their country's well-being would bring about their own well-being. Citizens of the post-Soviet republics had to vote for local and

national leaders who they believed would represent them, not distant Russians in Moscow; in order for new parliaments and new legal systems to win credibility, they could not merely be Soviet institutions with new names.

Anyone who wanted to see peace in the nations of the post-Soviet Union also knew that nationalism, in its more benign forms, was necessary. While it was true that the republics of the Soviet Union had ostensibly been at peace with one another, that peace also had been a fiction, enforced by terror, lies, and the traditional Russian belief in "divide and rule." Make little nations hate one another, the Russian argument went, and they will have less energy to rebel against a large one; make minorities resent the majority and they will be unable to join together to rebel against Russian rule. Undoing the terror, setting straight the lies, re-integrating the minorities into the mainstream required precisely the sort of re-examination of history that the nationalists were calling for. Leaving the Russians to run things as they had before would not have solved any national conflicts, but merely allowed them to fester.

It was equally true, of course, that the Soviet era could not be erased: however artificial, hatreds implanted in both the Russian colonizers and the non-Russian colonies during the seventy years of Soviet power remained. Russians who have been moved, sometimes by force and sometimes by choice, to Estonia or Latvia cannot be wished away or deported. In most cases, a man who has lived in a given town for forty years feels he has as much right to it as a man whose family lived in the same town for a thousand years, but has lived elsewhere for forty.

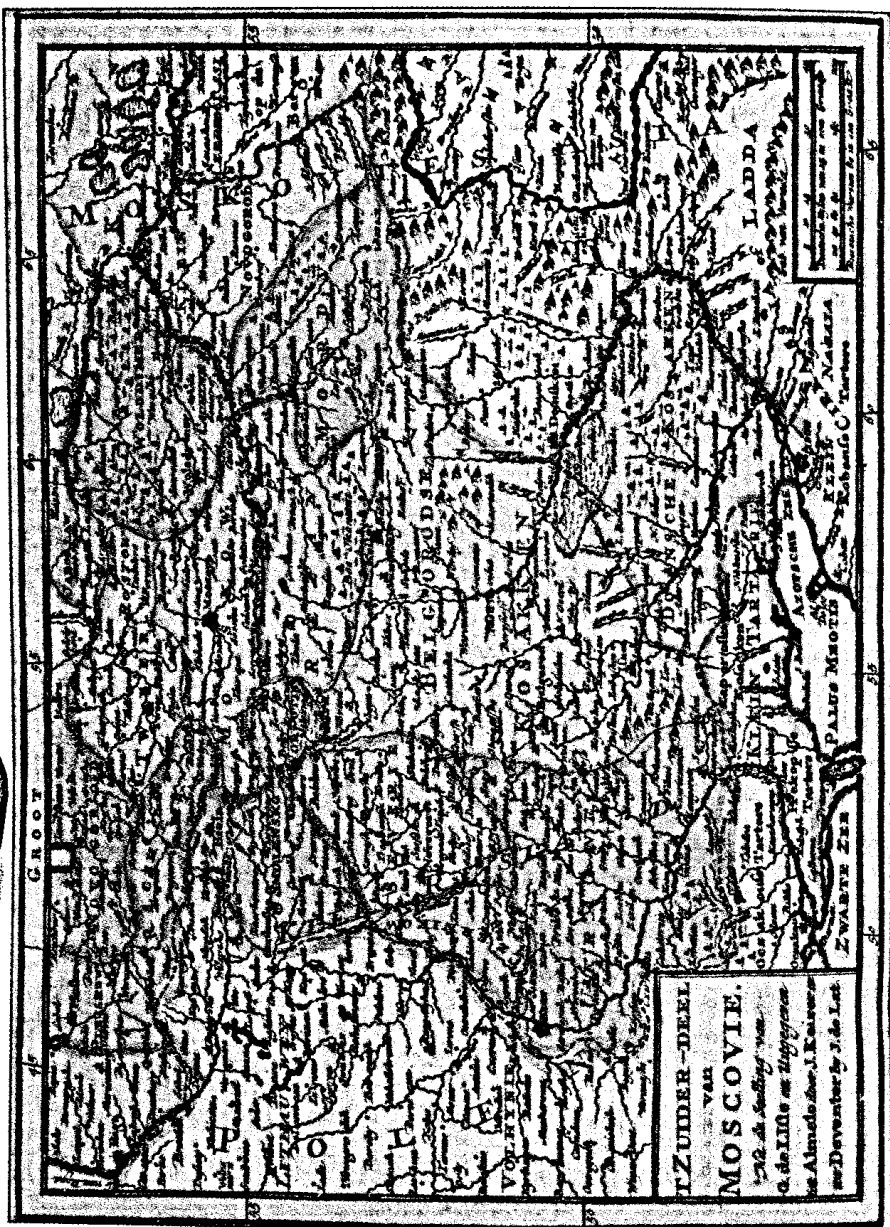
DANGEROUS, liberating, or perhaps both: the nationalist leaders who brought down the Soviet Union wore double-faced masks in more senses than one. They looked back to the past, sometimes the very ancient past, to justify their actions and legitimize their claims; they also looked toward the future, hoping that by means of education or repression, democracy or war, they would be able to create new states out of old nations. They could work good or

evil, create havoc or peace; but finally, it was to see how their new ideas affected the people whom they claimed to represent—the people who had once called themselves *tutejszy*—that I went back. In the days of waning Soviet power, not long after such trips first became possible. I traveled from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from Kaliningrad to Odessa, along the western border of what had been the Soviet Union, across East Prussia, western Belarus, and western Ukraine, through sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, the Bukovina, Bessarabia.

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

By the time I got there, the region had lain for more than forty years under the ice of Soviet rule, and it still seemed, at times, as if the past were crushing the present. There were days when it seemed as if no one could talk of anything that was not tragic, as if no one could remember anything without bitterness. But then there were other days, days when I would, quite unexpectedly, meet someone who saw the past not as a burden but as a forgotten

story, now due to be retold; there were days when I would find an old house, an old church, or something unexpected like the cemetery in L'viv, which suddenly revealed the secret history of a place or a nation. That was part of what I was looking for: evidence that things of beauty had survived war, communism, and Russification; proof that difference and variety can outlast an imposed homogeneity; testimony, in fact, that people can survive any attempt to uproot them.



Part Three



RUSSIANS, BELARUSIANS, AND UKRAINIANS

Patriotic Russian historians notwithstanding, when the Lord created mankind He did not place the Russians where they happen to be today.

—Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*



He cherished this map as the darling of his heart. It represented to him a great and living ideal to the service of which his life was devoted. He could talk for hours about it, elaborating this point and that point, recalling historical events and folklore, and place-names and heroes of the past. Here he was born. Here his wife was born. Here a battle was fought. And so on. . . . He reveled in frontiers, and, taking a pen, he proceeded to draw a great many more. . . ."

—A. MacCullum Scott, describing a Belarusian nationalist, 1925



Where is the Cossack host, and where
Are the red jerkins scattered?

• Where the freedom-destiny?
The Hetmans and their banners?
Where is it scattered? Burned to ashes?
Or has the blue sea drowned
And covered over your high hills . . .

—Taras Shevchenko, *Ukrainian poet*, 1839

WHEN DISCUSSING RUSSIANS or when thinking of Ukrainians, when examining Belarusians or when pondering the Eastern Slavs all together, it is best to begin at the beginning, and the beginning is Kievan Rus. According to the eleventh-century *Chronicle of Bygone Years*, the oldest existing East Slav history, Kievan Rus came into existence in the year 862. This was, the chroniclers tell us, a time of great discord among the perpetually warring pagan tribes who lived along the Dniepr River in what is now Ukraine, Belarus, and western Russia. We don't know why; perhaps there was a particularly severe set of quarrels, perhaps an especially bloody invasion. In any case, the unrest finally forced the leaders of the region to seek a solution:

They said to themselves, "Let us seek a prince who may rule over us, and judge us according to the law." They accordingly went overseas . . . and said to the people of Rus: "Our whole land is great and rich, and there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us." They thus selected three brothers,

with their kinsfolk, who took with them all the Russes and migrated. . . ."

The people whom the chroniclers called Russes were Scandinavians, elsewhere known as Normans or Vikings, and the land the chroniclers called Rus was probably Sweden. The Rus dynasty, later known as the Riurikids, apparently agreed to "rule and reign" over the Slav lands for financial reasons. They had just discovered a new waterway—from the Baltic, through the White Sea, down the Dniepr River, and into the Black Sea—and immediately spotted the commercial possibilities. With control over the waterway, the Russes would also control the lucrative trade between Scandinavia and Constantinople, providing slaves, furs, and wax to Byzantium in exchange for gold and jewels.

That seems to have been the limit of their ambitions. Rather than impose an alien, Scandinavian culture onto the East Slavs (as the Teutonic Knights might have), and rather than use subtler methods of cultural persuasion (as the Poles did), the Riurikids over time absorbed the language and habits of those they ruled. Within a few generations they had taken Slavic names (Helga became Olga, Waldemar became Vladimir) and married into local families. Kiev grew, thanks to its position halfway along the trade routes between the Baltic and the Black Sea, but relations with the more distant cities of Rus remained loose and ill defined. Rus was hardly even an empire at all in the modern sense: the historian Richard Pipes has compared Rus to the great British trading companies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the Hudson Bay Company, say, or the East India Company.

Thus established, Kievan Rus developed very quickly. Trade between Byzantium and Scandinavia made it rich; contacts with Western Europe grew. In 988, the character of Rus developed further when Prince Volodymyr, the Riurikid leader, decided to convert. As the early chroniclers would have it, he rejected Islam because it prohibited alcohol, and chose Byzantine Christianity over the Roman version because the Byzantine Mass was so splendid. Whether or not that is true, the citizens of Kiev were baptized en

masse in the Dniepr, and onion-domed churches, encrusted with gold mosaics in the Byzantine style, grew up in the city and surrounding countryside.

By 1037, Rus was at its zenith. In that year, Prince Iaroslav the Wise began building St. Sophia, the cathedral that would become the Orthodox equivalent to St. Peter's in Rome. Modeled on the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, St. Sophia had thirteen cupolas and pillars made of marble; Greek and Byzantine artists filled the apses above the altar with stiff saints draped in togas, Virgin Marys with almond-shaped eyes, angels speaking in Greek letters. At about the same time, Prince Iaroslav also received Bishop Saveriaux, who had come to ask him, on behalf of King Henry I of France, for his daughter Anna's hand in marriage. "This land," wrote Bishop Saveriaux upon returning from Rus, "is more unified, happier, stronger, and more civilized than France itself." Disputes between Catholic and Orthodox were still in the future, and the bishop's suit was successful. Anna became the first, and the last, Kievan princess to become queen of France. Daughters of Prince Iaroslav also married kings of Hungary and Norway; one of his sisters married a Polish king and another married a Byzantine prince. For this reason the prince is sometimes remembered as the "father-in-law of Europe."

But just as it quickly rose, so did Kievan Rus rapidly decline. As time went on, Italian merchants established more direct routes between Constantinople and Western Europe, bypassing Kiev; the Rus princes began to feud among themselves, and separate principalities began making their own laws and setting their own tariffs. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, a Mongol king who called himself Genghis Khan—the Khan of Khans—mobilized his people for an assault on Europe and Central Asia. By 1240, Genghis Khan's grandson had reached Kiev. With its capital burned to the ground, its commanders dead, its churches plundered, and its people fleeing across the countryside, the Riurikid dynasty disappeared; Kievan Rus had lasted for a mere four hundred years.

Almost immediately, the controversies began. For despite its short life, Rus spawned an unusually large number of historical

disputes: why the Riurikids were called "Russes," for example, is a point of great contention. Some say the word comes from *Ruotsi*, the Finnish word for Swedes. Others say it comes from the Rus and Rusna rivers in central Ukraine. Still others speak of Roslagen, the Swedish coast north of Stockholm, or of *rhos*, the Persian word for "light." In the twentieth century, those in the *Ruotsi* camp—these included Hitler—argued that Kievan Rus came into being only thanks to the Germanic genius of the Scandinavians, who took a motley group of tribes and made them into a trading empire. Those in the Rus and Rusna camp—and these included Soviet as well as Russian and Ukrainian nationalist historians—argued that although the Russes may have cooperated a bit with the Scandinavians, the Eastern Slavs had been far more important than the Scandinavians in the creation of Kievan Rus. To suggest otherwise, wrote one Soviet scholar, "denies the ability of the Slavic nations to form an independent state."

Rus and Rusna, *Ruotsi* and Ros: it is all very well for outsiders to laugh. For Kievan Rus—however brief its history, however much it borrowed from others—was the outstanding achievement of the medieval eastern Slavs. All three nations that evolved from Kievan Rus—Russia, Ukraine, Belarus—can legitimately claim to be its spiritual, or geographical, or cultural heirs. Yet so little is known of Kievan Rus, so much has been lost; it is so hard, when considering the distant past, to know what is true and what is false. Records are scarce, guesses have to be made on the basis of fragments and icons and golden-domed churches; so many mistakes can be made; so few people can know what actually happened.

THEY ARE MORE precise than any official document, more interesting than analysis, more eloquent than prose: the best way to read the history of Russia is to look at maps. Not the new maps, but the old, yellowed maps with the place-names still showing, or the maps of many shades that portray, inch by inch, the progress of Russian rule. And all of these historical maps start with the tiny statelet of Muscovy, one of the many successors to Kievan Rus. In the year 1300, the Grand Duchy of Muscovy measured about

twenty thousand square kilometers, an area that would have fit easily within one of the smaller modern European states—Portugal, say, or Belgium. In that same year, Muscovy was not even independent. While the southern states around Kiev fell beneath the milder rule of Lithuania and later Poland, Muscovy—from the time of the Mongol conquest until the end of the fifteenth century—was ruled so harshly by Mongols and Tartars of the Golden Horde that traces of their tyranny remain in the Russian language. The Russian words for knout and for chains, for example, have a Mongol origin.

Nevertheless, from its tiny base (and from its state of abject submission), the maps show Muscovy expanding outward from the end of the fourteenth century, almost indiscriminately, in the wake of the Mongol retreat. Inspired perhaps by the need for farmland, or perhaps by a love of power inherited from the Golden Horde, Muscovy first sacked and destroyed the trading state of Novgorod, with its links to the German-speaking Baltic, digging out even the foundations of buildings so that they should not rise again. Later the Muscovites dealt a similar blow to the Khanate of Kazan, and then to Livonia on the Baltic. From century to century, in fact, the maps show Muscovy growing in concentric circles, taking first a bit of Asia, then a slice of Europe, here and there some land in the Caucasus. As its sheer size gave it confidence, Muscovy moved with more vigor. One by one, the simpler, weaker peoples on its borders, east and west, north and south, disappeared into the Muscovite state. Whereas West European empires grew after the West European nations had already been established, the Russian empire grew along with Russia—so much so that it became impossible, as Richard Pipes has written, for Russians themselves to distinguish between their own country and lands belonging to people they conquered. So much so that Russians after the collapse of the Soviet Union found themselves living in an "unnatural" situation. The borders of their country, post-Soviet Russia, did not correspond to any previous "Russia" in history.

In the seventeenth century, the Russians—for that was the name they now used for themselves—began their assault on the region

they called *okrainy*, the borderlands, the eastern edges of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—lands that had once belonged to Kievan Rus but had escaped Mongol rule. The Russian czars began slicing territory from eastern Ukraine in the seventeenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, they had begun to focus their efforts on the heart of the Commonwealth itself: first the lands to the west of Smolensk, then Minsk, then the rest of Ukraine, then Brest and Wilno, and finally Warsaw itself. It was a special kind of invasion: far more than any of its other conquests, the conquest of the *okrainy* was destined to change Russia itself, just as the conquest of the *kresy* had changed Poland.

Part of the change was geographic: because Russia now shared frontiers with Prussia and Austro-Hungary, Russia was, for the first time, a serious player in European politics. But the transformation was also intellectual. For the first time, Russia had occupied a large region that was technologically more advanced than itself. Poor by the standards of Western Europe, the lands of the Commonwealth were highly developed compared to those of Russia. In acquiring them, Russia acquired innumerable artistic treasures, baroque churches, and Italianate estates, as well as a clutch of universities, libraries, and scholars. The Russians also acquired educated people, which mattered particularly in the cases of Estonia and Latvia, nations whose confident elites would eventually give the Russian empire one third of her officials. The Polish aristocracy, while less influential in St. Petersburg than the German-speaking Balts, would also dominate the *okrainy* bureaucracy until the end of the empire. Polish remained the language of higher education in much of western Russia until the mid-nineteenth century.

Perhaps most importantly, Russia had also acquired a relatively highly educated, mainly Catholic populace. Although Russia also ruled Muslims, Protestants, and nomadic pagans, Catholicism was close enough to Orthodoxy to present a challenge. Catholics did not convert to Orthodoxy as other peoples might; Catholics did not acknowledge Orthodoxy as superior. Not only that, many Catholics insisted that their religion was more advanced, more

intellectual; many mocked the elaborate rituals of Orthodoxy, the secrecy of Orthodox priests, the ignorance of Orthodox peasants.

These challenges to their ideas and status presented themselves to Russia precisely at a time when the Russians, having suddenly expanded to a great and unwieldy size, first began to examine their own nature. Confronted with more advanced, more confident nations in the West—not only Poles and Lithuanians but also Germans and Frenchmen—they began to ask, “Who are we?” “What sort of nation are we?” “What right have we to compare ourselves with Western nations?” They came up with a historical answer: We are the inheritors of Kievan Rus. Our czars are descendants of the princes of Kievan Rus; we have a historical right to conquer the peoples to the south and west of Muscovy, because their land is the ancient patrimony of Kievan Rus. Even if the Slavs of those regions are different from us, even if they are better educated, we have the right to rule them because we are the inheritors of their historical ancestors.

Officially the conquered *okrainy* were called the “recovered territories.” Officially Russia was retrieving traditionally Orthodox land from pernicious Polish-Catholic influence, saving historically Orthodox people from the domination of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Officially there had been no conquest, merely a “putting right” of a traditional wrong. When Catherine the Great struck a medal in 1793 to commemorate the second partition of Poland—the one that gave her a large swath of Ukraine—it read, “I have recovered what was torn away.”

Official doctrine happened to coincide very well with the intellectual trends of the nineteenth century. By the 1830s, the emerging Russian intelligentsia had thrown up a group of philosophers known loosely as the Slavophiles, thinkers who claimed, among other things, that the Russian language was the father of the other Slavic languages; that Russian culture surpassed all other Slavic cultures; that Russia, which had contributed so little to world art and culture in the past, was destined to play the leading role in the future; that Moscow, the descendant of Byzantium, was to become the new Rome. Slavic nations that challenged Russia’s

claim to historical superiority, the ideological basis of Russian expansion, deserved to be crushed. Ivan Aksakov, one of the best-known nineteenth-century Russian philosophers, spoke of the Poles as "this miserable, haughty, arrogant, and thoughtless tribe, which in addition has been burned through and through with Catholic Jesuit morality." Men like Aksakov thought, and spoke, even less of the Ukrainians—who also claimed to be descended from Kievan Rus—dismissing Ukraine and renaming it Malorossiya, or Little Russia.

But even writers and artists who would not have called themselves Slavophiles, even those who fought against the despotic nature of the Russian state, even they joined the chorus of scorn for borderland cultures. Dostoevsky, who went to prison for conspiring against czarist rule, despised Polish pretensions to nationhood and put dozens of unattractive Poles in his novels, including the silly aristocrats who cheat at cards and toast to Poland "within the borders of 1772" in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as well as the charlatan count whom Aglaya marries at the end of *The Idiot*. Even Pushkin—like Dostoevsky, a liberal critic of the czars—wrote of "all Slav^{*}rivers flowing into a Russian sea" and was angered by Western sympathy for the Polish and Lithuanian rebellion of 1830. After it ended, he wrote a poem titled "Reply to the Defamers of Russia":

What is it that you fuss about, orator of the people?

Why do you threaten Russia with anathema?

What has so upset you? An uprising in Lithuania?

Well, leave us alone: it is a quarrel between Slavs,

An old, old, fight, a domestic row.

Fate decided it long ago. You won't change anything. . . .

Eventually the hatred fostered by government propaganda and encouraged by the poets translated itself into suppression of any Pole or Ukrainian who showed literary talent and anyone who spoke with a distinctive voice—as well as anyone who spoke of independence or sovereignty. In two separate edicts, czarist Russia banned the use of the Ukrainian language.

Yet although the Russians destroyed as much of the other Slavic cultures as they could, the insecurity created by Russia's domination of the nations around her borders remained. Occasionally it appears in Russian literature. Toward the end of *Anna Karenina*, Karenin, Pestsov, and Koznyshev argue about the Russification of the borderlands. While Karenin, a high state official, supports the process, the others are bothered by it:

"I did not mean," he [Pestsov] began over the soup, addressing Karenin, "that we should set about absorbing other nations on principle, but that it would come about naturally if our population were larger."

"It seems to me," said Karenin languidly, and with no haste, "that amounts to the same thing. In my opinion, only a nation with a superior culture can hope to influence another. A culture that—"

"But that is precisely the question," interrupted Pestsov in his deep voice—he was always in a hurry to speak and always seemed to be staking his whole soul on what he was saying. "How is one to recognize a superior culture?"

The conversation ends inconclusively; but the question of "superior culture"—did Russia have one or not?—goes unanswered.

Every so often there was a dissenting voice. In 1836, Piotr Chadayev, one Russia's great intellectuals, looked at the maps and the history of Russian expansion and came to a conclusion different from Pushkin's fury, different from Dostoevsky's scorn:

"Contrary to all the laws of the human community, Russia moves only in the direction of her own enslavement and the enslavement of all neighboring peoples. For this reason it would be in the interest not only of other peoples but also in that of her own that she be compelled to take a new path."

By order of the czar, the Russian state declared Chadayev insane.

THE POLES BELIEVE that the Germans used trickery—forging the Kruszwica Act, fooling even the Pope—to win control of East Prussia. The Lithuanians also believed that the Poles used trickery to win control over Lithuania, preventing their Grand Duke from

becoming a king by stealing his crown. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the Ukrainians too believe that the Russians had won control over Ukraine through a trick.

The story begins in 1648, the year that the Ukrainian Cossacks rebelled against Polish rule. Their leader was Bohdan Khmelnytsky. In his fictional *Trilogy*, Henryk Sienkiewicz describes him as he appeared in Polish folk memory:

"There was a strange and rare quality in the man's stormy face, a poorly hidden sense of power pulsing like a flame, along with all the tell-tale signs of an iron will and an inner strength beyond anything that an ordinary man might find in himself. . . ."

Born a Polish nobleman, Khmelnytsky had the strength and charisma to lead the Cossacks against their Polish rulers, but not the political gifts to unite them into an independent force afterward. The glorious year 1648 was followed by many months of chaos, remembered in Ukrainian history as "The Ruin." The Cossack leaders quarreled among themselves; a Tartar invasion was feared; Ukraine, it was decided, needed a strong protector. Khmelnytsky met the czar's envoy in Pereiaslav in 1653, and determined to ally the Cossacks with the Russians. By January of the following year, a treaty was drawn up; a ceremony was planned. Khmelnytsky swore an oath of fealty to the czar, and expected the czar's envoy to swear an oath of fealty to the Cossacks.

At the last moment, the czar's envoy refused. The czar, he said, swore oaths to no one.

Khmelnytsky stalked out of the church, then stalked back in. He swore the oath.

Within a decade, most of Ukraine was firmly under Russian rule. There would be no second chance for Ukraine to establish its independence for three centuries.

UKRAINE: THE VERY word means "borderland" in most Slavic languages. In Russian, the word is close to *okrainy*. In Polish, *u* means "beside," while *kraina* is an old, slightly archaic way to say "land" or "region," as in *kraina baśni*, "fairyland."

Until the twentieth century, Ukrainians were, like Belarusians,

often called Ruthenians, *Ruśini*, *Ruskyi*, or *Rusyns*—words derived, of course, from "Rus," but distinct from Russia or *Rossiia*. Red Ruthenia is an old name for western Ukraine, the region around L'viv; White Ruthenia, or *Belo-Rus*, is the name that stuck to Belarus. The old eastern tail of Czechoslovakia, which now lies in Ukraine, still calls itself Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia (to distinguish itself from the rest of Ukraine), but otherwise the name, as applied to Ukrainians, survives only in old books and old expressions. Polonized Ukrainian noblemen, for example, used to refer to themselves in Latin as Ruthenians of the Polish nation, *gente Rutheni natione Poloni*.

Ruthenians but not Russians: from the very earliest days of Russian overlordship, most of the Ukrainian elite thought of themselves as distinctly different from their northern neighbors. After the destruction of Kiev, the Golden Horde ruled Muscovy, but Ukraine fell beneath the milder rule of Poles and Lithuanians. Perhaps thanks to that trick of fate, perhaps because it lay closer to the West, Ukraine developed a different aesthetic sensibility and different customs from Muscovy, a different language and a different historical memory. For many centuries, travelers visiting Ukraine were impressed by the region's strong sense of itself. Maximilian Emmanuel, duke of Württemberg, who traveled through Ukraine in the eighteenth century, could already write of the Ukrainians that "they want to be a free people, and not subjected either to Poland or Moscow; therefore, they always fight for their privileges and rights."

Even Russians visiting the region at about that time or even later were struck by the dissimilarities. In 1803, a Russian judge visited Ukraine and left a memoir:

"Here are different faces, different customs, different dress, and a different system; and I hear a different language. Is the frontier of empire here? Are we entering another state?"

Still, while it was clear that Ukraine was different from Russia, it was not, from the point of view of nineteenth-century Russians (and of some Ukrainians), nearly as different as England or France. Both Russia and Ukraine had the same roots, East Slavic and Or-

thodox; both nations spoke a language the other could usually understand. Nor did Ukrainians seem, in Russian eyes, to have a culture as strong as their own. Because Russians had been conquerors, Russian became a literary language much earlier; in the mid-nineteenth century Ukrainians used Polish as a literary language, and Ukrainian itself still had the status of a peasant tongue. In the nineteenth century, the first works of literature to appear in Ukrainian were often satires, designed to mock the language as much as to celebrate it; until the era of the national poets, Ukrainians who wanted greater recognition often wrote in Russian—Nikolai Gogol is perhaps the best example. There were, of course, Ukrainian folk songs, stories, and legends, much admired and much recorded in the nineteenth century, but these, in Russian eyes, were hardly enough to sustain a national identity: none seemed quite worthy enough, or quite clearly Ukrainian enough, to establish Ukraine as an independent country in the eyes of nineteenth-century Russians, and sometimes in the eyes of Ukrainians themselves.

It was true that the western Ukrainians had a religion of their own: the Greek Catholic Church, the hybrid created by the Union of Brest in 1596. Greek Catholics, sometimes called Uniates, were a perfect borderland mix, loyal to the pope but celebrating the Orthodox rites. It was also true that the western Ukrainians, under milder Austrian rule in the nineteenth century, and under Polish rule in the twentieth century, developed a more advanced civil society and a more acute national consciousness. But however singular it might have been, the Greek Catholic Church did not represent all of Ukrainian culture, nor did the national awareness of western Ukraine spread quickly east. Most Ukrainians, for better or for worse, were Orthodox in the nineteenth century, and most remained under Russian rule.

But even if the Ukrainians lacked a literary language and religious unity, even if the Ukrainians seemed a peasant nation to outsiders, even if the Ukrainians had been conquered by others—still, by far the greatest obstacle for those who wanted to establish a national identity for Ukraine was the lack of historic certainty.

If the Russians were the cultural inheritors of Kievan Rus, the “second stage” in a line of civilization begun by Rus, who were the Ukrainians? If the Russians were—as the nationalist historian Mikhail Pogodin claimed—the ethnic descendants of Kievans who had migrated north, who were the Ukrainians? The Russian czars had conquered the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the name of re-creating the unity of Kievan Rus. If, then, Rus was now unified under Russian rule, then what need had the Ukrainians to rebel against it?

There was much argument and disagreement on these points. Some Ukrainians subscribed to the Russian view that the two nations were really one; some disagreed. But toward the end of the nineteenth century, a new generation of Ukrainian nationalist historians and poets came up with a theory that answered all of these questions: the Russians, they claimed, had stolen Ukraine’s history.

“Peaceful land, beloved country, O my dear Ukraine,” wrote Taras Shevchenko in 1842. “Why, my mother, have they robbed you? Why do you thus wane?”

The theft was the theft of the past: Russia had lied, Russia had tried to deprive Ukraine of the legacy of Kiev, Russia had renamed Ukraine “little Russia” and taken the glory of Kiev, the beauty of St. Sophia, the mosaics, and the icons for itself. But the theft could still be reversed. In 1906 the Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky set out to prove that the population of Kievan Rus had not migrated north but rather had remained exactly as it was: that meant that the inhabitants of Kievan Rus were the ethnic forebears of modern Ukrainians. The Russians, he claimed, were quite a different tribe, only distantly related to the rulers of Rus. Muscovy had imported culture from Rus just as Gaul had imported culture from Rome; Ukraine, on the other hand, was the direct descendant of Rus. Ukrainians were the “elder brothers” of Russians, and not vice versa.

Uncertainty remained. Just as the Russians were never quite sure if they were justified in ruling over peoples more sophisticated than themselves, so, too, were the Ukrainians never quite sure

whether they were really different enough from Russians to justify their desire for a separate state. Too often they were willing to let outsiders tell them what they were, as Shevchenko writes again:

*The German would say: "You are Mongols."
Mongols, that is plain!
Yes, the naked grandchildren
Of the golden Tamerlane!
The German would say: "You are Slavs."
Slavs, yes, Slavs indeed!
Of great and glorious ancestors
The unworthy seed!*

And yet,

*all tongues of the Slavonic race
You know full well, but of your own
Nothing. . . .*

KIEV'AN RUS HAD a third set of descendants, but to say who they are is not easy. For if the Ukrainians wrestled with national ambiguity, the Belarusians have been defined by it.

In the year 1636, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church returned from a trip to the lands near Minsk. He was shocked: "In the houses of the Belarus, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, and even lords and servants are often divided between three, or even four faiths. At least one of these is usually Christian. The others recognise either the faith of the Pope, the faith of the Lutherans, the Arians, or the Jews. And jointly they sit at table, eat and drink, and marry one another. And some even jointly pray."

Belarus—or, as it was known in the past, Belorussia—means White Ruthenia, White Rus. Why the people west of Ukraine and south of Moscow were ever called "white" is unclear. Some accounts, noting that the Belarusians had not been forced to pay tribute to the Golden Horde, guess that "white" was associated

with freedom, as it is in many Central Asian languages; others say "white" implied "West" in some older tongue. Still others speak of Belarusian peasants wearing white clothing. In 1826, scholars claimed to have traced the name not to "white" but to Bel-bog, a Slavonic deity. Like Ukrainians, Belarusians were once called Ruthenes, but just as czarist Russia invented the name "Little Russians" for Ukrainians, so, too, did czarist Russia alter the name "White Ruthenes" (Belarus) to "White Russians" (Belorossiia) to make the two peoples sound more closely related. "Belorussia" has troubled Belarusian nationalists ever since. During the nationalist revival of the 1920s, Belarusian scholars tried to replace "Belorussian" with "Kryvičan," after an early Slavonic tribe that inhabited the region; in the early 1990s, their spiritual descendants came up with Belarus—a return to "White Ruthenia"—because they thought "Belorussia" sounded too similar to "Russia" and proved too confusing abroad.

They were right to fear such confusion, since the very existence of Belarus has often come as a surprise to outsiders. In 1826 E. Henderson, who published a very stuffy travel book—*Biblical Researches and Travels Across Russia*—came across an example of the White Ruthenian language but could not fathom its origins. He decided that White Ruthenian was a dialect of Russian, and formed his own explanation:

About the beginning of the sixteenth century, considerable changes were introduced into the Russian language, in consequence of the relations subsisting between Russia and Poland, the progress of the Poles in grammar and lexicography, and other powerfully operative causes, whereby a peculiar Polish Russian dialect was formed, which continues to be spoken to this day by the common people inhabiting the provinces, comprehended under the name of White Russian. . . .

W. R. Morfill, whose tract on early Slavonic literature appeared in 1883, complained that White Russian, as he called it, was hard to study:

It is often very difficult for the philologist when examining the few religious books and others published in early times in the White Russian territory to say exactly what the dialect is. As is always the case where a language is but little cultivated, we get a great many forms. Thus the foundation of the languages of most of these books is Paleoslavonic, but Polonisms abound. . . .

For anyone discovering Belarus, it was always easy to say what the Belarusians were not: they were not Poles, they were not Russians, they were not Ukrainians. It was much more difficult to define what they were. Lacking a state, they had no kings. Lacking a nobility, they had never even had rebel leaders, as had the Ukrainian Cossacks. Lacking kings and rebel leaders, they had a history of occupation. They had never been independent, but what was worse, they had never tried to be independent, as the Ukrainians had, before the twentieth century.

Looking back on their history from the nineteenth century, just when so many other East European nations were discovering their origins, a tiny handful of Belarus nationalists faced up to this problem. Backing out of the Russian-Ukrainian battle over who deserved to claim the legacy of Kievan Rus, the Belarusians instead decided to enter the Polish-Lithuanian battle over the heritage of the Commonwealth. They pointed out that the Ruthenian language, which had begun as a diplomatic tongue by the leaders of the Commonwealth, was a form of proto-Belarusian. They claimed that the symbols of the Commonwealth—the Lithuanian rider, for example—ought to be their symbols, too. They noted that they had contributed to the Commonwealth's glory, that Belarusian troops had contributed to the great victory over the Teutonic Knights at Grunwald. It was all true enough, but neither of the Commonwealth's other partners, the Poles or the Lithuanians, was ever much interested in acknowledging Belarus's role. "I must admit," wrote Czesław Miłosz later,

The Belorussians are still a puzzle to me—a mass of people, spread over a large expanse of land, who have been constantly

oppressed, who speak a language that could be described as a cross between Polish and Russian with a grammar systematized only in the twentieth century, and whose feeling of national identity was the latest product of Europe's nationalist movements. But their case brings us up against the fluidity of all definitions; such a mass can easily be transformed from subject to object in foreign hands. . . .

Whatever the nationalists said, "Belarusian" has always been a flexible term. To be Belarusian is to be able to choose one's identity, even to allow that identity to change over time. In a land that was often invaded, at times there were good reasons to be one nationality, at other times good reasons to be another. To speak Polish brought one closer to Europe, but Russian, for many centuries, was the language of power. Polish priests could bring gifts from the West—they had Polish books, Polish Bibles, Polish newspapers—but Russian officials could dispense jobs and privileges. Only from time to time, usually in the gaps between rulers or in the odd moments of anarchy, has being Belarusian proved advantageous to anyone at all.

It may not always be that way. "From people, even from those who are not our enemies, one may often hear that the ideal of Belorussian independence is a dream that can never materialize," wrote A. Stankevic, one of Belarus's most distinguished nationalists. He continued, "Never mind. National ideals of many other peoples were deemed utopian. With time, even utopias have become historical facts. . . ."

BOTH UKRAINE AND Belarus have made stabs at independence in the twentieth century.

Their first chance came at the end of the First World War. It was 1917; the Russian state had collapsed; a group of socialist and liberal Ukrainians established a Central Council, which dedicated itself to working for a "federation of free and equal peoples" among the nations of the former Russian empire. The Council sought the help of the anti-Bolshevik White Russians and the support of the Western powers. No help was forthcoming. The Cen-

tral Council was disbanded by the German Army a few months later. A further attempt to set up a West Ukrainian Republic lasted only as long as it took for Polish troops to arrive; the sovereign Belarusian Soviet Republic, brought into being on December 14, was crushed on December 18 when the Red Army appeared in the hall where the constitutional convention was taking place and simply shut it down. A handful of other attempts, led by various armies (no less than eleven were operating in Ukraine in 1918), came to nothing; attempts to interest the Paris peace conference came to even less. By 1920 both eastern Ukraine and eastern Belarus had been absorbed by the Soviet Union, while both western Ukraine and western Belarus had become part of Poland.

The second chance for Ukraine and Belarus came, oddly enough, in the 1920s. The White Russians, the Poles, and the Western powers at Versailles had not supported either Ukraine or Belarus, although the Bolsheviks did—temporarily—through *korenizatsiia* (“rootedness”), a policy designed to make Bolshevism seem less foreign. In the years of *korenizatsiia*, Ukrainian and Belarusian commissars replaced Russian and Jewish commissars, national universities were established, national literature was encouraged, and books in Ukrainian and Belarusian were printed on a mass scale for the first time. Great Russian chauvinism was vigorously denounced by Lenin himself. In later years, the memory of the *korenizatsiia* era helped the Ukrainians to keep their national struggle going; *korenizatsiia* in Belarus probably saved the Belarusians from dissolving into Russia forever. Inevitably, periods of Soviet liberalization brought new periods of Belarusian, and especially Ukrainian, nationalism along with them.

But Lenin gave way to Stalin, cultural flowering to extermination. By the end of the 1920s, Stalin had decreed that the consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat required national self-government to be abandoned in favor of direct rule from Moscow. The Russian language was reinstated as the “official” language of Ukraine and Belarus; Russian literature was hailed as “superior” to other national literatures; Russian historiography was brought back to prove the benefits of Russian rule. Ukrainian

and Belarusian intellectuals began to disappear in the night; after a time, schoolteachers, priests, anyone who might be considered part of the national elite disappeared as well. In the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Ukrainian *kulaks*—wealthy, and sometimes not so wealthy, landowning peasants (or anybody opposed to collectivization, in the end)—also found themselves forced onto collective farms. The collective farms were then allowed to starve to death slowly, while grain was confiscated for distribution in the cities. The peasants had been thought to be the heart, even the soul of the Ukrainian nation. By destroying them, Stalin hoped to destroy any hope of Ukrainian sovereignty.

For Belarus and for Ukraine most of all, the purges, famine, and collectivization of the 1930s were the equivalent of the Holocaust, although they have never been recognized as such in the outside world. Stalin had the census-takers shot, but Walter Duranty, a *New York Times* reporter who never reported the famine (he wanted to curry favor with Stalin and keep his visa; in the end he won a Pulitzer Prize), estimated privately that 10 million had died. The historian Robert Conquest guesses that 11 million died in the Ukrainian famine, and 3.5 million died in the purges and terror that followed, bringing the total to about 14.5 million.

The White Russians, the Poles, and the Western powers at Versailles had not supported Belarus and Ukraine; the Bolsheviks had tried to destroy them. Perhaps that helps explain what happened when Hitler's armies entered western Ukraine in 1941, accompanied by a group called the League of Ukrainian nationalists; perhaps that explains the photographs—the fat-cheeked Ukrainian women welcoming German soldiers with round loaves of bread and salt—and the young Ukrainian men who rushed to enlist. Faced with a choice between two dictators, one of whom had already murdered thousands, the other still unknown, quite a few Ukrainians, and some Belarusians, chose Hitler. This was to be the borderland peoples' third stab at independence in this century, and it ended, like all the others, in chaos and disaster. Afterward, the partisans were chased into the woods or into camps for displaced persons in Germany. Some Ukrainians fought until

the early 1950s, but to no avail. Once again the most energetic, most intelligent, and most ambitious Ukrainians went abroad.

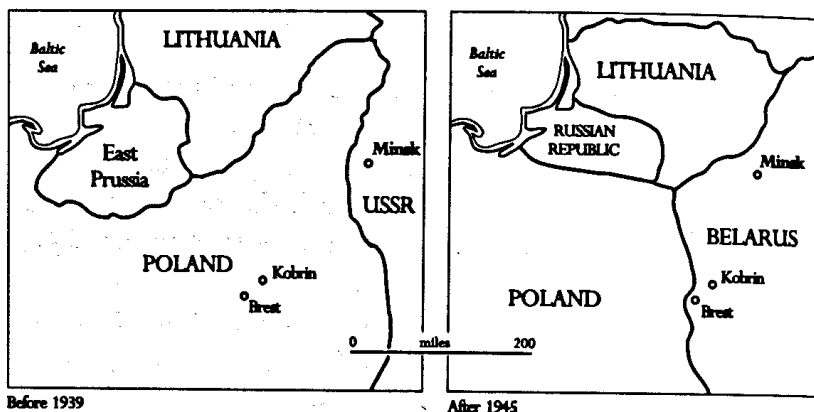
After that, it almost seemed as if there would never be another chance. After the war, the Soviet leaders embarked on a new policy toward Ukraine, one that would make the country "second among equals," ranked above all other Soviet republics except Russia. Ukrainian prestige was to depend on Ukraine's relationship with Russia; the big brother–little brother relationship, familiar from the czarist era, was revived. The opening of this new relationship was marked in 1954, the anniversary of czarist Russia's acquisition of Ukraine, with speeches, publications, outdoor fairs, and parades. From Khrushchev, Ukraine received the "gift" of Crimea, "a token of friendship from the Russian people": as it had in czarist days, Russia was trying once again to hijack Ukrainian history. Taras Shevchenko was enshrined as a national poet—his anti-Russian works were reinterpreted as anti-czarist and therefore pro-Marxist—although his most subversive poetry was banned. His house was made into a monument, where his bust appeared beside those of Pushkin and Lermontov, to prove that he fit well into the Russian tradition. Ukrainian national symbols were subverted, perverted, put to the use of the Soviet state: the Shevchenko Prize, one of the Soviet Union's most prestigious literary awards, was granted year after year to writers who penned "social realist" portraits extolling the happiness of life under Soviet rule.

But the fate of Belarusian national aspirations was even harsher. If Ukraine was encouraged to establish its identity within the Soviet Union, in Minsk, all forms of "nihilistic nationalism" were discouraged altogether. Belarusian literature was not taught. Belarusian writers were dismissed, because "Their works are non-political, undated, indeed, they might have been written at any time, even before the revolution. . . ."

City dwellers became ashamed to use the Belarusian language, which was thought to be a rural dialect; Russian became the language of the cities, of the press, of literature. Ambitious people sent their children to Russian schools, spoke Russian at work, read Russian newspapers. Despite its seat at the United Nations, Belarus

had almost no independent life of its own. By 1989 there was not a single Belarusian-speaking school left in Minsk.

Only in the late 1980s, when the tectonic plates shifted once again, did Ukraine and Belarus get a fourth chance. This time it would be—at least to start out—without the help of anyone else.



MINSK



AFTER THE BAROQUE extravagance of Vilnius, the remote silence of the countryside, and the slow pace of the pastel-colored villages, the suburbs of Minsk came as a shock: dirty concrete apartment blocks lining the highway, muddy courtyards, ancient trams, people scurrying through the long shadows cast by the tall buildings.

The city center wasn't much better. On the morning I arrived, Minsk seemed to be suffocating in its own dirt. Visible grains of black pollution floated through the air, and a thin film of black grease lay over the buildings and sidewalks. Plumes of purple smoke puffed out of the cars, the factories, the chimneys of the apartment blocks, the cigarettes in the mouths of pedestrians. Everywhere there were crowds: crowds lining up for bread, crowds waiting for the broken-down buses, crowds pushing and shoving one another across the wide streets.

I had arranged a meeting. But to get there I had to take a crowded subway train and then a slow bus, picking my way through the puddles and the broken sidewalks in between, passing shops with empty shelves, posters for last year's folk music festival,

kiosks where one could buy smudgy newspapers, key chains made of cheap plastic, Soviet candy (grayish-pink sweets, dusty chocolate bars), and an odd assortment of "folk" knickknacks: wooden spoons, machine-embroidered handkerchiefs, matryoshka dolls. Outside, the breeze brought the bitter scent of cheap coal; underground, the odors of unwashed bodies and old cigarette smoke were almost overwhelming.

The city was disorienting, and its gray surfaces began to bother me. As I walked, the first line of an old joke kept repeating itself in my head: "Two rabbis are on a train from Minsk to Pinsk, and one of them says to the other . . ." Somewhere, I had once seen a black-and-white print of Old Minsk: wooden houses crowded along a river, horse-drawn carriages, Jews with long side curls; perhaps the print had been in a book about the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which Minsk had been part of, or in a book about the East European Jews. But it was impossible to reconcile the joke and the print with the city around me, nor could I see what Minsk had to do with Pan Michał and Nowogródek and the many ghosts of Adam Mickiewicz. Except for one or two churches, none of the buildings in Minsk looked at all like buildings in the villages I had just left behind. It was as if a collection of concrete blocks had been plucked out of Soviet Russia and thrust, arbitrarily, into the provincial fastness of Belarus.

Yet Minsk once had been just as I imagined it: a wooden village populated by Jews, a few Poles, a few Belarusian peasants. That was how it was until 1919, when Belarus joined the Soviet Union and the city was chosen to become the republican capital. The purges followed, and the old Polish-speaking ruling class was murdered. Then the Second World War destroyed most of the city's old buildings and old streets, along with most of the city's inhabitants.

Afterward, Minsk had to be rebuilt to a scale suitable to the capital of a republic that was quite a bit larger, thanks to the addition of the Polish territories, and was in possession of its own seat at the United Nations. But as in other Soviet and postwar East European cities, the development of Minsk was planned

according to ideological criteria: not only would Minsk become a new kind of city, but Minsk would also harbor a whole new Soviet way of life.

This was the era of steel factories, machinery plants, and power stations, and Minsk got them all: the big, black buildings belching black smoke, the endless assembly lines, the factory floors strewn with bits of steel cable and rubber wire, the busloads of workers coming in for the two-o'clock shift. Peasants poured in from the countryside to join them, filling up the new concrete apartment blocks with their cousins, and their neighbors' friends, and their nieces and nephews, just like the peasants in Kraków or Kiev. Within a decade, Minsk had experienced the Industrial Revolution, the Socialist Revolution, the proletarianization of the peasantry, the enlightenment of the proletariat, the enlightenment of the vanguard of the proletariat, the Russification of both the proletariat and its vanguard, and the Communist Revolution: the creation of *Homo sovieticus*, the Soviet Man who knows no history and has no culture.

The inhabitants of Minsk were even cut off from the language of their grandparents' villages: by 1989 there were no Belarusian-language schools in the city. As for the prehistory of Minsk—the jokes about rabbis on the train from Minsk to Pinsk, the polite squabbles of Catholic and Orthodox priests, the competition between the Polish bourgeoisie and Armenian traders—all of that was forgotten, and no one missed it. Hardly any of the city's inhabitants had actually lived in Minsk before the war anyway.

The new Minsk had workers, factories, and a bright future. But because Minsk had no history, Minsk had no soul. Instead of a baroque quarter, Minsk had a reconstructed Old Town, with all the churches turned into restaurants. Instead of small shops, Minsk had ugly department stores where all the products were packaged in the same shades of beige and mauve. Instead of an old market square, Minsk had an imitation of Moscow's Red Square, a wide open space perfectly measured to fit the requisite number of dignitaries and tanks on May Day and the anniversary of the October Revolution. Large, bland, impersonal structures served as public buildings; bronze Lenin statues stood outside every one of them. Everything was too big, as if the architects wanted to remind

Minsk's citizens of their own insignificance beside the enormous forces of history which the buildings represented. Everything was ugly, as if no one much cared about the city, as if no one felt connected to it.

In Minsk, Soviet culture had triumphed—but not completely. If the sound of Vilnius had been the loud noise of competing voices, the sound of Minsk was a quieter one: the low murmur of a people discovering, or rediscovering—or perhaps inventing—who they were.

"WE ARE POSTMODERNISTS," said Igor softly. His black hair was pulled back from his face. His eyes watered from too much reading. His skin was pale from too much time spent inside. "Do you know Heidegger?"

I said that I did.

"Do you know Foucault?"

I said that I did.

"Then you must see how Belarus is the perfect postmodern country." Igor kept a straight face as he spoke, blinking only occasionally.

"I'm not sure. . . ."

"Look, postmodernism is about the reappropriation of the past, the making real of false consciousness, the revaluation of values. Until now we have been living here in a false culture, surrounded by mass-produced"—he struggled to translate the right word—"kitsch. And now it is time to discard the kitsch and replace it with something real."

Igor was a poet, and a student of English. Most of his vocabulary seemed to come from three sources: English translations of German philosophy, American Beat poetry, and Beatles' lyrics.

"Kitsch," he repeated. "They gave us fake peasant culture: mass-produced dolls for tourists, cheap wooden spoons. And all the time they were destroying the real peasant culture, shutting down workshops, telling people to give up carving and join the Communist Party."

When he wasn't reading, Igor and his friends spent their time in the countryside, trying to find real craftsmen, real Belarusians

making real folk art. Occasionally they succeeded: Igor had photographs of artisans, all old men now, who made wooden furniture and cloth. Most laughed at Igor and didn't believe that what they did had any value. Most would give away what they made for nothing.

Igor said that it was now up to the city dwellers to revive Belarusian culture: "We must sing folk music at intellectual gatherings. We must read folk poetry. We must invent tradition afresh, if necessary, where we have forgotten it."

Igor's friends' wives also participated in the revaluation of values. They wore homemade aprons and cooked traditional meals, dressed their children in folk costume and studied Belarusian. Igor approved of such efforts. He disapproved, on the other hand, of Belarusians who emigrated.

"Why should I emigrate—why should I go to New York and become a taxi driver? My life can be interesting here. We young Belarusians can be like gods—we can create the world by inventing new words for things. Where else in the world can I do the first translations of Derrida, or write the definitive work on Hegel? Here I can help create a literary tradition, and influence the thinking of the many generations of people who will follow me."

There were others who felt the same way, he said. One of his friends had translated *Ulysses* into Belarusian, just to see if it could be done; another was working on "The Waste Land." Once, it had been the fashion to learn foreign languages. Now everybody—everybody—was studying Belarusian.

The apartment where Igor and I were talking was very small—one tiny sitting room, half a bedroom, half a kitchen—and everything in it was cheap in the Soviet way: the linoleum on the floor, the upholstery on the sofa, the thin porcelain coffee cups, the aluminum spoons. But the apartment of a Belarusian nationalist is also a shrine to the Belarusian nation. There was a red-and-white Belarusian flag, a shelf of Belarusian books—histories of Belarus, Belarusian literature—and photographs of significant works of Belarusian architecture. When I looked closer, however, I saw that the emblem in the center of the flag was the man on horseback who is also the emblem of Lithuania; the books were histories of Poland, histories of Russia, histories of Lithuanian

Jews; the photographs showed the palaces of Radziwiłłs and Czartoryskis, families better known for the roles they played in Polish history. Everything—the Lithuanian coat of arms, the writers, even the Turkish carpet on the wall—was borrowed from someone else.

Igor didn't deny it. "That's what I mean: postmodern," he said cheerfully. "We borrow from the past of others. We were a part of Lithuania, a part of Poland, a part of Russia. Our history is theirs. Their symbols are ours." He shrugged. "How was England created? How was France created? Just the same."

"Anyway," said Igor, "old nations have invented new states before. Look at Israel. Look how successfully the Jews turned their old culture into a new country. The world has already forgotten that they were once stateless, like us."

I pointed out that the Jews had a bit more written literature and somewhat more written history than the Belarusians.

"True," Igor admitted. It didn't bother him.

"We must simply write our history, where it doesn't exist."

At that point he began to question me, very seriously, about modern English poetry. He wanted to keep up, he wanted to know what was new.

"Ted Hughes?"

"No, no," said Igor, "everyone knows about him."

"Philip Larkin?"

"That's old, too." He looked at me, surprised. "Don't you know more than that? What about music?" He reeled off a list of unfamiliar jazz bands.

I shrugged. Igor sighed. But we were even on modern novelists: the expression "magical realism" was new to him.

"Magical realism," he mused, translating it literally: "imaginary truth. That is exactly what I would call Belarus: imaginary—but true."

"LOOK," SAID THE scholar, and he opened a book.

It was a reprint of the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, translated and illustrated by one Francis Skaryna. The scholar showed me the date of printing: 1519.

Francis Skaryna, he explained, had been born in Polotsk, in the eastern half of what is now called Belarus—and what was then called the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—in 1490. Skaryna was educated in Wilno, Kraków, Prague, and Padua. He was acquainted with the Polish king Sigismund, and was present at the Congress of Vienna in 1515, when the Habsburgs, kings of central Europe, married their children off to the Jagiellonian kings of Poland and Lithuania. It was an efficient way to keep the peace: “Make marriage, not war” might have been the Habsburg motto.

Skaryna was a doctor of medicine, an accomplished printer, a theologian, a linguist, and an expert in the occult sciences, including the Jewish Kabbalah, which was then fashionable among the rabbis of Prague. He was a man of both East and West. His language, called Ruthenian at the time, was a borderland tongue: neither Polish nor Russian, but something closer to the Slavonic language used by the Lithuanian kings, with words of Latin, Czech, and German thrown in. His imagery was mixed as well, the scholar explained: “Skaryna took the Byzantine order of saints and the Slayic script of the Greek Catholic Uniate Church, and placed them into Gothic and Kabbalistic traditions of allegory.”

The scholar kept pushing his glasses down his nose as he spoke, and kept stroking his beardless chin: these were the gestures of a man who had spent the better part of a lifetime surrounded by yellowed manuscripts and old sheets of music. But Skaryna was the love of his life. “Nothing in this Bible is what it appears to be at first,” he told me. “Skaryna had his own ways of conveying God’s word, but nothing is what it appears to be at first.”

In one of Skaryna’s engravings, Jehovah seemed to be crowning the Virgin. “Ah,” asked the scholar, “but why did Skaryna call this print *The Wedding of the Bride and Groom*?” He sat back, satisfied that I would never guess. After a moment, he continued.

“After careful thought, I have uncovered this mystery. In the Kabbalah, God has both male and female traits. Now, you can see in this picture that the Virgin is making the Jewish sign of blessing, holding her third and fourth fingers apart, drawing our attention to Kabbalistic allegory. So in fact this print depicts both the crown-

ing of the Virgin and, allegorically, a marriage: the marriage of God’s male and female elements.”

Another engraving showed the Ark of the Covenant being carried by the Twelve Tribes of Israel. “But look at the flags. These are not the flags of the Twelve Tribes, but rather the flags of three dynasties—the Habsburgs, the Jagiellons, and the kings of Denmark—together with the coats of arms of the Commonwealth’s leading nobles. Allegorically it is the Twelve Tribes, literally it is the Habsburgs and the Jagiellons and the Northern Union of Scandinavians who, having agreed not to fight one another, are marching back to reclaim the land stolen by the Turks.” Everywhere, the scholar said, there were multiple references to Christian theology and Jewish magic. Skaryna’s figures included a *golem*, the man-robot which a certain rabbi in Prague was once said to have brought to life from clay; a variety of devils; and a parade of symbolic animals.

But it was more than the mixture of images, the quirky combination of Western, Greek Catholic, and Jewish allegory, that the scholar wanted me to understand.

“This,” he stated, “is a style instantly recognizable to any Belarusian. Show any Belarusian this book and he will understand it. Let any Belarusian see these drawings and he will feel they belong to him. Skaryna is their poet, their artist, and they will recognize him immediately. The Belarusians are like fish who have been swimming beneath the ice. Armies have passed above them, marching back and forth. Poles and Russians have occupied them, colonized them, taught them to speak other languages and forget their history. But beneath the ice, they have preserved a memory of older things. Skaryna is one of them.”

In the special mix of Gothic and Byzantine, Christian and Jewish, Catholic and Orthodox, in the ancient borderland language of Skaryna, the scholar thought he had discovered the thing about Belarus that made it unique—the special, mystical quality, in other words, that made Belarus a nation.

I must have looked doubtful. Belarus lacked so many things—written history books and national traditions, dictionaries and lan-

guage teachers, even sovereignty: whenever Russia wanted Belarus to sign a treaty, Belarus signed. How could it be called a nation?

"God creates nations," the scholar told me, "not men."

He opened another edition of Skaryna's Bible—this time printed in Russian—to the same engraving of the Ark of the Covenant. "Compare these two prints. Here, you see that flag up here in the corner? It is empty. Just a flag. Now here"—he pointed to the Belarusian edition—"you see that the flag is not blank. What is on it? A Star of David, *Mogen David*. So Skaryna included the Jews in his procession of nations; Soviet historians didn't like this idea, so they left them out. But it is nothing new." Just like the czars before them, the Soviet rulers had tampered with Belarus's heritage, even censoring reprints of a Renaissance Bible to suit the ideology of the moment. Just like the czars before them, the Soviets had changed Belarus's history so that no one knew the truth.

Outsiders like myself were always fooled by these changes, he said. He pointed his finger at me. "I can see from your questions that you believe their lies. You believe that Belarus is not a nation. You have fallen for their tampering and their burning of books. You do not understand that the past has been altered, that the truth about Belarus has never been told."

Indignant, he rustled his yellowed manuscripts and bade me farewell.

IN ONE OF the farthest-flung suburbs of Minsk lived a man who loved Jews.

"But not you modern Jews," Vitaly said, pointing at me. "You do not interest me. Really, you are no different from anyone else."

Vitaly was not Jewish. Nevertheless, he spoke both Hebrew and Yiddish better than almost anyone else in Minsk. He even taught Hebrew to the few Jews who remained in the city, almost all of whom were now preparing to go to Israel. Still, he admitted, they did not really interest him either. What Vitaly loved were the Jews of the past: the Jews with caps and ringlets around their ears, the Jews in long black coats, the Jewish women in wigs, the Jewish

children who studied Talmud and Torah by candlelight, the Jews whose culture once dominated Minsk. He could list the names of their great rabbis, always putting the accents in the right places: "It was important to them that the names be right, so it should be important to us," he told me. He knew where they had lived, and pointed to their now nonexistent houses with the respect of a connoisseur. He showed me the overgrown field in the center of Minsk where they had been buried, read to me the faded Hebrew from the handful of stones that remained. He even owned some of their books, as the Jews leaving for Israel were selling their grandparents' Bibles, prayer books, and scholarly works.

Vitaly had known about Jews for as long as he could remember, although he had not always loved them. As a child, his grandmother had told him how the Jews had sacrificed Christian children, using the blood for their Passover matzohs. Then, when he met his first Jew—a little blond girl in his primary school class—he had pulled her hair and called her a "yid." She had cried. Later, he felt sorry. But the incident remained lodged in his memory. Why had he done it? What did the word "yid" mean? Why did people not like "yids"?

As a young man, Vitaly began to read about Jews. The only books he could find were Soviet, anti-Zionist tracts, histories of the perfidious capitalist imperialist state of Israel. At first he believed these accounts. Books were books; what was inside them must be true. But he also discovered that many of the capitalist imperialist founders of Israel had come from Belarus—some, even, had come from Minsk. From the context, he understood that there had once been many Jews in Minsk. What had happened to them? Where had they all gone?

To learn more, he had to read more. But there was nothing much written about Jews in Russian, at least nothing he could find. Vitaly began to study English and Hebrew—both were, at that time, looked down upon by the authorities. Through studying Hebrew, he began to meet Jews and dissidents. Through studying English, Vitaly met people who laughed at the books he had believed were true, people who knew different versions of history,

people who had access to Western books and Western magazines that told different stories about the past. At first he found these people confusing; later he understood that they were right and that the authorities—including his parents and grandparents—were wrong.

The Jews of Minsk: when they had been alive, there had been no lying. When they had been alive, Minsk had been a different kind of city, a better city, a city of prayer and study, not a city of factories and smog. The ancient Jews, they had been better people, more moral people. That was how Vitaly understood it, and that was why he had taught himself the names of their rabbis and the melodies of their prayers.

One afternoon, Vitaly took me to the newly opened synagogue, a small brick building with boarded-up windows and what appeared to be a makeshift extension. The extension turned out to be a sukkah, an outdoor structure that religious Jews build in their backyards during the harvest season. The sukkah was not yet finished, and a handful of small boys were quietly hammering nails into its walls. An enormous man decked out in a skullcap, side curls, and black suit looked on, supervising. "I have never seen him before," whispered Vitaly, eyes round.

The man was a Lubavitcher from Brooklyn. He had arrived just a few days earlier.

I introduced myself. He wasn't particularly pleased to meet me.

"American? What are you doing here? You Jewish?"

Yes, I said.

"But not really, huh? When did your family stop being Jewish?"

I stared at him. "Who said that we've stopped?"

"Haven't you?" the Lubavitcher asked, looking at me critically.

"Jewish girls don't dress like you."

He turned to Vitaly, who was still staring at him. The Lubavitcher's eyes narrowed. "You Jewish?" he asked Vitaly in English.

Vitaly shook his head, but said something in Yiddish.

"Where'd you learn to talk like that?" the Lubavitcher demanded, again in English.

Vitaly explained that he had studied Yiddish and that he taught Hebrew as well. He began to recite a prayer: "Hear, O Israel . . ." The Lubavitcher listened for a minute and then interrupted.

"You a spy?"

Vitaly looked shocked: "No."

"They told us there would be spies here in Russia, spies reading our mail, spies listening to our telephone conversations. You might be one of them. How come you know Yiddish if you aren't a spy?"

Vitaly looked at the floor. "This isn't Russia," he said, "this is Belarus."

"Russia, Belarus, all the same thing. They had pogroms in Minsk, that's all I know." The Lubavitcher turned back to me. "You know what I miss here? Kosher hot dogs, that's what I miss." He shook his head. "We have to bring all of our food in big crates. Can't eat anything local."

In English this time, Vitaly asked the Lubavitcher a complicated question about the age of the world: how was it calculated?

"No problem. Read what it says in the Bible; that's what's true. You don't need to read any other books to know it. Science"—he waved his hand in the air—"all nonsense."

I wanted to leave, and tugged Vitaly's arm. But he was still interested in talking.

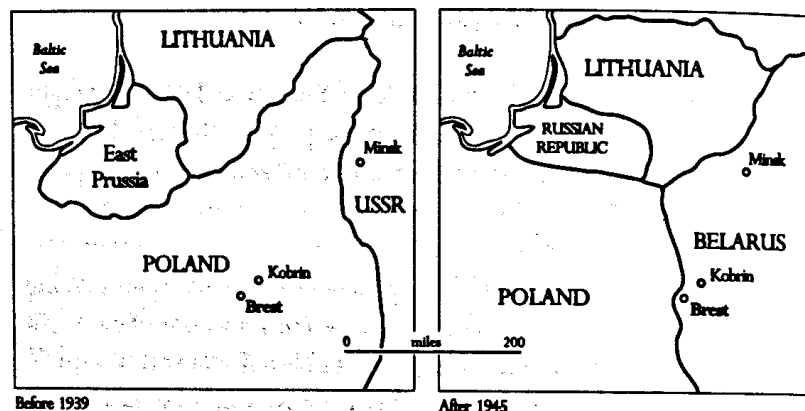
"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Just trying to bring a little learning to the locals. Teach them a few things before they go to Israel. We're not missionaries here"—he waved his arm, to indicate the synagogue—"we don't want to convert anybody. We're only interested in our own people."

"Did you know that some famous rabbis"—Vitaly mentioned a few names, proud of his pronunciation—"lived around here? I've been to their tombs."

"That so?" The Lubavitcher shrugged. He turned his back to us and began shouting instructions to the troupe of boys.

We walked away. "It is living archaeology," Vitaly told me happily. "That man—he is a living relic of my past."



BREST



FROM MINSK, A Russian couple drove me the three hundred kilometers to Brest. He wore gold rings on most of his fingers, she wobbled dangerously on pencil-thin heels. Both of them were very fat, and their dog was fat, too. It sat in the front seat, sniffing at the Christmas tree-shaped air freshener that hung from the rearview mirror.

"I am afraid to leave him at home," she said, nuzzling the dog's black nose. "The thieves these days, they will steal anything."

South of Minsk, the land seemed flat and dry. Long tails made of dust followed the cars on the highway, and there were no trees.

Driving into Brest, we watched the billboards flash by:

LENINGRAD—HERO CITY

VOLGOGRAD—HERO CITY

SEVASTOPOL—HERO CITY

MURMANSK—HERO CITY

and finally:

BREST—HERO CITY

"The Great Patriotic War is still very close to us," said the woman, putting her hand to her heart. "It lives with us every day."

THE PEOPLE'S VICTORY NEVER DIES!

LONG LIVE THE PEOPLE'S VICTORY!

"You cannot imagine what it still means," and she covered her eyes. As it happened, the Second World War had not touched her. Her father, a factory manager, had kept the family safely east of the Urals.

"We learned of it in school," she said proudly. "We had more casualties than all of the other Allies put together: more than England, more than France."

Twenty million Russian dead is the number quoted again and again. But whether there were twenty and not ten, whether they died from Hitler's aggression or Stalin's stupidity, whether they died at the front or in Siberian concentration camps, it is hard to say. In any case, the number certainly includes Poles, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians from occupied territories who fought against the Red Army in the final days of the battle; indeed, it was mainly the border peoples, not the Russians, who had died to save the Soviet Union.

"The world has not yet repaid us for what we suffered," she said.

I nodded politely.

They dropped me off at the fortress. "You must go inside before you do anything else in Brest," she made me promise. "It is our scene of martyrdom."

It would have been hard to avoid: the fortress dominated the town. Its entrance was marked by a vast, five-pointed star-of-Lenin blasted into a slab of rock. Somber military music poured out of hidden loudspeakers. People walked past the fortress entrance on tiptoe, and spoke in whispers inside; it was as if they were visiting a sacred shrine, which, in a way, they were. Past the entrance, a long, imposing walkway led to an enormous sculpture of a man's anguished head and an eternal flame.

The outside walls were red brick and covered with moss. Once, the Brest fortress was linked to a chain of czarist fortresses, all built in Russia's newly acquired western territories in the early nineteenth century. They were used, however, to Russify the natives, not to guard against enemies. The Brest fortress once served

as a garrison for Russian occupation troops and doubled as a prison for local nationalists, not unlike Caernarvon, an English castle built to help Anglicize the Welsh.

But the Brest fortress had also played another role in the conflict between Russia and the borderland nations: in the winter of 1917, Trotsky lectured the kaiser's generals on the principles of socialism in the fortress of Brest, and then negotiated his "separate peace" with them, ending Russia's participation in the First World War. The resulting Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, a great blow to the Bolsheviks, separated the Baltic states, Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine from Russia. Like many border treaties signed in the years after the First World War, it failed to hold. But partially thanks to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Brest remained in Poland until another war and another treaty shifted the city and the fortress back into the Soviet Union. Now both lay just along the Polish-Belarusian border.

Two soldiers walked past me, their metal heels clicking on the stone walkway. I followed them into the exhibition hall. A portrait of Lenin ruled over the entrance, and his spirit was still in evidence: tickets cost only ten kopecks. Thanks to hyperinflation, ten kopecks were now worth a fraction of a fraction of a cent, but no one had bothered to raise the price.

The hallway was filled with czarist military memorabilia, swords, and uniforms. There was no mention of Poland, or of Trotsky, or of Brest-Litovsk. There was no mention of the 1930s, when Brest lay on the other side of the border. Instead, the exhibition of the history of the Brest fortress shifted quickly from the czarist era to the Great Patriotic War—and to the great Belarusian patriots who had given their lives to save Brest for the Soviet Union.

It was an exhibition of staggering proportions. There were portraits of the heroes, and portraits of their wives; a diorama showing where and how they hid in the fortress cellars; quotations allegedly discovered on the walls afterward ("I die for Stalin" and "I die for the Bolsheviks"); authentic earth from the cellars, scooped up after the war; a day-by-day account of the battle; the remains of the Soviet flag that flew over the fortress. There were models of

the battlefield, complete with toy soldiers and toy tanks, knives and forks used by Soviet soldiers, and war posters that featured a big-breasted woman towering over the battlefield. She was *Rodina-Mat*: the motherland personified.

There was even a film, complete with German battle footage. At the end, after the defenses had finally fallen and the last defenders had starved to death, Nazi troops marched into the fortress, their swastika-bedecked flags waving in the air behind them, while the commentary intoned, "They did not die in vain." I sat in the back of the hall, just behind a group of French tourists who complained all the way through: their tour leader had forced them to leave Moscow early to see Brest, and they didn't like it. "*C'était un peu—de trop*," one remarked about the film, twisting the lens of his camera.

But it was in the last room that the exhibit reached its ideological climax. This room had little to do with Brest, or the Brest fortress. Instead, it was dedicated, in the most straightforward manner possible, to the glories of the Soviet Union and to the many advantages that membership in the Soviet Union had showered on western Belarus. One glass case contained samples of food brought by Soviet cosmonauts into space. Another displayed medals and certificates of bravery granted to the citizens of Brest, the Hero City. Others held tributes brought to the fortress by impressed outsiders: a crystal jar from Poland, a medal from Yugoslavia, a model windmill from Holland, nuclear disarmament buttons from America, a glass bull from Spain. In the last cases stood bits of unrelated Soviet kitsch: seashells inscribed with Lenin's sayings, a red glass vase inscribed with the date of Belarus's entrance into the Soviet Union, and plastic models of Belarus marked by red stars.

On the final wall hung a large map of the world. In the dim light of the exhibition hall it seemed to shimmer and shine, and when I drew closer, I saw that dozens of cities—in Europe, America, Africa, the Far East—were lit up by tiny light bulbs. These, a caption proudly explained, were friendly cities, cities whose citizens had sent gifts to the Brest fortress. From Tokyo and Sydney,

London and New York, tributes had flowed to Brest, it continued: in Alma-Ata and Mexico City and Paris, people recognized the heroism of the citizens of Brest.

Nowhere did the exhibit indicate that the Soviet Army had originally captured Brest from the Poles. Nowhere did any sign point out that the Red Army had held the fortress for only a few months before they had been forced to defend it from the Germans. Nowhere did any of the displays indicate that the siege of the Brest fortress had, in the end, no military importance whatsoever: by the time Soviet soldiers had starved to death in the fortress's cellars, the Germans had long moved east. But the truth was not important to those who planned the exhibit. The Brest fortress provided a useful focus for Soviet propaganda in western Belarus, encouraging the myth of the Great Patriotic War, of which the annexation of western Belarus was meant to be a logical, legitimate outcome.

I left the exhibit. At the exit, a woman was on her knees, scrubbing the floor with a dirty rag. In the courtyard, the sun was setting over the red brick walls, turning them deep orange. The music had turned from martial to choral. A wedding party—the bride frail and pimpled, the groom stout and mustachioed—was making its way up the steps to the eternal flame. It was a Soviet tradition, this custom of visiting war memorials on one's wedding day; in Leningrad I had once seen a line of newly married couples waiting to have their picture taken in front of a mass grave. But the custom made sense. The state service that had replaced church weddings was bland, and the new couples were simply trying to feel that something immortal, something greater than state bureaucrats, bound them together, even if it was the eternal death of war corpses rather than the eternal life of God.

"Tanya," one of the men called out, "come pose for another picture over here," and he pointed to the plaque inscribed with the names of those who had died defending Brest.

The bride held her bouquet closer to her chest as she moved sideways. The train of her white wedding dress dragged through the mud. The groom stumbled a little, still nervous, as he turned

to face the camera. They leaned their heads together, and he gingerly put his arm around his new wife's shoulders.

"Cheese," said the man with the camera, in English.

No one smiled.

VASILY PTASHITZ—THE name meant "little bird"—was clearly a hunting man. The walls of his apartment were bedecked with the carcasses of dead animals. An owl, its glass eyes staring crazily out of its moth-eaten head, hung from one corner; a fox, its jaws snapped shut, stood atop the dining table.

Vasily had caught the post-Soviet nationalist fever, and he believed deeply in every nation's right to have its own state. More specifically, he believed that the Polesians had the right to have their own state. Polesia, he explained, fell between Ukraine and Belarus; Brest and Pinsk were its capital cities.

"The inhabitants of Brest are Polesians," he told me, "but they just don't know it yet." He said that the Polesian dialect sounded something like Ukrainianized Belarusian, or Belarusified Ukrainian, but with a slightly Germanic ring to it. Polesians, after all, were descended from the Iatvians, the ancient Celtic/Germanic tribe who had ruled the region until the ninth century.

Proudly, he pronounced a few words for me in Polesian: "Can you hear it?"

I shook my head. It just sounded like Belarusian to me. Distress clouded Vasily's broad face.

"Try again," he said, and repeated a few more words. To please him, I told him that I could hear the Germanic sound, ever so slightly.

He smiled. This proved, said Vasily, that Polesians were not Slavs. This proved that Polesians still possessed many Germanic virtues: thrift, love of hard work, efficiency, and did not have the faults of Slavs: laziness, drunkenness, slovenliness. "We are better organized than those Ukrainians and those Belarusians. If they would give us our independence, our economic reforms would leap ahead of theirs."

I told him he talked the same way as a Lithuanian. The Lithu-

anians, I said, were fond of stressing their differences from Slavs.

"Yes, of course," he agreed. "We have much in common with Lithuanians. The Lithuanians were closely related to the Latvians." Vasily had tried to get some Lithuanian scholars to come and give a lecture in Brest about Latvians, but they had refused, he said, sighing deeply.

For Vasily had a problem. People had enough trouble believing in the validity of Belarus; it was almost impossible to get them to believe in Polesia. Vasily had only one fellow freedom fighter in Pinsk, a man who also believed, and he wanted me to speak to him. While I waited, he dialed Pinsk.

"Hello," said a faraway voice down the other end of the line. "Hello. If you want to know about Polesian, I can tell you the exact composition of our language. It is 40 percent Ukrainian, 5 percent Belarusian, 5 percent Polish, and 50 percent Polesian. And I can tell you that Polesian culture is 30 percent Ukrainian, 3 percent Belarusian, 2 percent Polish, and 65 percent uniquely Polesian. And I can tell you that the propagation of Polesian language and culture is a healthy phenomenon: the Bolsheviks made everybody speak Russian, and look what happened. Now the Ukrainians and Belarusians will make everybody speak Ukrainian and Belarusian. The result will be worse."

I said that sounded very reasonable, and asked how independent Polesia's economic policies would be differ from those of Belarus and Ukraine.

The voice grew excited, and began talking about joint ventures. "We want to have a Western Polesian bank, and we also want cultural links with the West. We want free markets, and capitalism. Polesia is richer than eastern Belarus and eastern Ukraine—we have only been under communism for forty years—and we can develop much faster."

With a click, the voice was disconnected. The Polesian telephone lines from Brest to Pinsk were still weak.

"He is a genius," Vasily breathed. "He is our national genius. If only more people knew of him."

Vasily was not depressed by the great and difficult task ahead

of him. "I think that there is a biological program, written by God, that makes us do certain things. God wants me to be here; God wants me to struggle to create independent Polesia."

And there would be a reward at the end of his struggles: Vasily showed me a photograph of his cousins in America. They stood, pasty-faced, in front of a white picket fence, grinning at the camera. The cousins had also sent him photographs of a supermarket, a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, and the Statue of Liberty. He kept them all in an album.

"But I think Polesia will never be as great as America." He shook his head sadly. "You have beat us to it. You have had a head start."

EARLY IN THE morning, someone pounded on the door of my hotel room.

"*Polski? Polski?*"

I had been asleep.

"Polish? Are you Polish? Do you have something to sell?"

Heavy feet stomped away. I opened the door and saw a man going door to door, carrying a thick wad of dollar bills. From a group in one room he bought a leather jacket; from another, a small radio.

The day before I arrived, the Brest authorities had banished the street market, calling it a "center of crime." Brest's traders had therefore been forced to move their livelihood elsewhere. Trade, legal or not, was impossible to stop: Brest, a city of several hundred thousand straddling the border, was the perfect entry point for hard currency, liquor, Western clothes, and perfume. Cheap electrical goods, cheap children's toys, cheese, and butter flowed the other way. The trade interrupted the traffic flow throughout the city. One of the few Polish-Belarusian road border crossings lay just to the south, and cars packed with smuggled goods waited for weeks to go through it, jamming the roads around Brest. Because most trains heading east to Moscow or west to Warsaw had to go through Brest, the train station was also mobbed with traders carrying rucksacks and cardboard boxes. Business had even flowed

onto Brest's main street, blocking traffic in the center of town. Walking down it, past the Orthodox church, past the statue of Lenin, touts arrived in waves, some buying dollars, some selling amber necklaces, some just wanting a chat, all speaking some form of passable Polish.

Brest had always been a trading city, but it was not always Poles who did the trading. On the contrary: before the war, the population of Brest had been not just heavily Jewish but predominantly Jewish. Brest, the birthplace of Menachem Begin, had been the largest Jewish city in Europe; Catholic Poles had been in a minority.

Now Poles, and people pretending to be Poles, were everywhere. In the villages south of Vilnius, I had met people for whom Poland and Polishness had a cultural draw, almost a mystical appeal. Here in Brest, Poland was a source of wealth, Polishness was an opportunity. A few weeks of black market work in Poland, where the economy was much stronger, was enough to purchase a house in Brest. Polish cousins and Polish friends—who could help Belarusians obtain visas—were therefore in heavy demand. Poles had replaced Jews as the region's traders, and the number of Belarusians who might claim to be Poles was growing.

There was a Polish network operating in Brest, through which Dobrynin found me. Dobrynin was the official leader of the local Polish community, and someone had told him that a Polish-speaking American journalist had arrived in town. Once he had discovered my hotel, my hotel room, and my telephone number, there was no avoiding him.

"Let's have lunch," he said over the telephone.

I tried to get out of it, mumbling something about other plans.

"Yes, yes, lunch at your hotel. Best restaurant in town. But before that, tell me: What do you need? What can I do for you here in Brest? What can I arrange for you?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Oh, but we'll do anything. Just name it."

I told him it was quite all right, I would manage.

"Perhaps if you let me know exactly what it is that you are doing here, I can give you advice?"

I said something about looking at historical houses and he gave up, clearly dissatisfied.

"Just let me know, just let me know and consider it done. We have cars at our disposal—I can arrange a Mercedes—and we have drivers. We have access. Just let me know." He hung up, reluctantly.

In the morning he appeared in Porsche sunglasses, a gray suit, a black shirt, and a green tie. His wavy hair had been set into a kind of pompadour. He kissed the receptionist's hand, slapped the restaurant manager on the back, winked at the waitress, and got the best table, even though they were all "reserved." He ordered the most expensive dishes on the menu—smoked salmon, steak, wine—even though they were all marked "unavailable."

"The good life, no?" He winked, and laughed a bit too loudly. He bit into his salmon with zest and began to speak. On many subjects—on the proud history of the Polish Ethnic Community Organization in Brest, on the great friendship between Poles, Russians, and Belarusians—he was eloquent. But he was far more interested in my opinions.

"Who do you know in Brest?" he inquired casually. No one in particular, I said. And a few minutes later: "What made you come here?" Oh, I said, chance, luck.

I asked him about his family, and watched him go suddenly vague.

"Mother was brought up in the Orthodox Church, you know, but Grandfather was a Polish nobleman. . . ." He changed the subject. Jealously, he complained about the Poles born in Brest who went to study in Poland and never came back. The Polish Ethnic Community Organization helped arrange it.

"They get a monthly stipend, one hundred dollars," he said. "So much for a student!"

I told him it wouldn't be easy to live on a hundred dollars in Warsaw.

"More than a factory manager gets here," he grumbled.

Finally Dobrynin gave up asking questions, and got to the point. He had an excellent business idea, he said, and he wanted me to be part of it. After months of thinking about it, he had dreamed

up a way to make a profit out of being Polish, a real profit, more than what these so-called students got. He had decided to start a business researching the ancestry of Poles whose families had come from the Brest area. Across a plateful of caviar he handed me a stack of leaflets advertising the idea.

"Now, my dear, if you could just see fit to publish this in your newspaper, you would do me a great favor. There must be lots and lots of Poles in America who would pay a bundle to have the head of the Polish community here carry out a little research for them here." He grabbed the waitress by her chubby elbow. She squealed. "How about some coffee?"

Later, back at his unfinished, unfurnished rectory, I told the local Polish priest about meeting Dobrynin. He rolled his eyes.

"Ah, so you have been visiting our friend."

In the last days of the Soviet empire, he said, Russian operatives, trained in Moscow, had mysteriously appeared in various parts of the Soviet Union, fluently speaking the local languages and attempting to form ethnic organizations. It had certainly been true in Lithuania, where local Poles had opposed Lithuanian independence; it was probably true in Ukraine and in Uzbekistan, too, for all the priest knew. Moscow was not trying to halt the various national revivals, but the Russians did prefer to know what was going on, to have their man as local leader, to use the new ethnic groups to the Soviet Union's own advantage.

"It's not what Dobrynin does that bothers me, it's what he doesn't do. We had a Polish conference here and he 'forgot' to tell people about a commemorative event at the Polish cemetery. We celebrate Polish anniversaries and he 'forgets' to put up the posters. Now it's money, money, money. Maybe whoever paid him in the past doesn't pay him anymore."

The priest sipped his cognac. He was a short man with black hair and black eyes. His face had an odd sensuality about it; his lip curled slightly when he smiled. He knew that he lived on the edge of civilization, and he liked to tell battle stories. Out here on the frontier, he was waging his own personal war against shy-sters, crooks, stooges, and most of all, against the ill-mannered and the ill-bred.

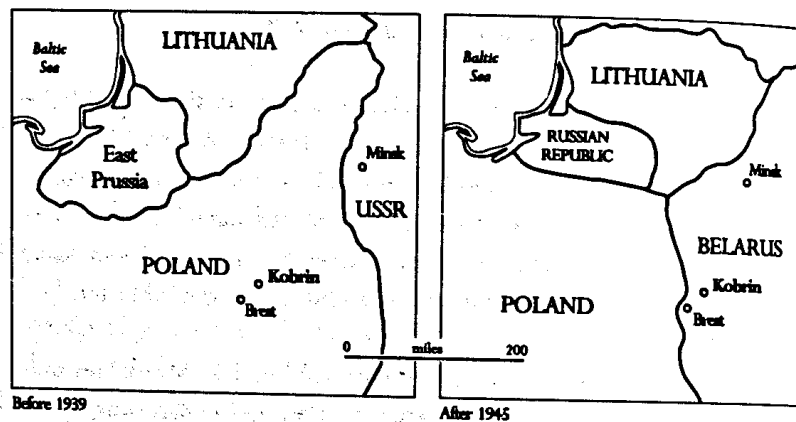
"So I saw a group of teenage boys standing on the steps of the church, smoking cigarettes. And I said to them, 'What will people think? Don't you know it's bad manners to stand here and smoke?' And they said, 'We don't care, we are Russians.' And I said, 'Aren't Russians human, too?' And they just shrugged and said, 'We are Russians.' And that was the end of the conversation."

He shook his head.

"All I can say is that whatever they told you in Minsk, no one around here knows if he is Belarusian, Polish, Russian, *tutejszy*—it means local—or what. They just have no real identity at all, like those teenagers, or they choose an identity for personal gain, like Dobrynin. Slowly, some people are coming to me because I give them a language with poetry and grammar, and I give them a faith with real values."

He sipped his cheap cognac with the relish of a connoisseur.

"But slowly. Very, very, very slowly."



KOBRIN



IT WAS A Saturday morning, and still dark when the bus left Brest for Kobrin. I had to stand: all of the seats were filled with traders heading for rural markets, their boxes filled with stale chewing gum and Brand X soda, fake blue jeans, and car parts. Through the window I saw pinpricks of light coming from small farmhouses, and the outline of trees.

Like everyone else in the Polish-speaking provinces of western Russia, the nineteenth-century inhabitants of Kobrin had been forced to serve in the czar's army. The life of a conscript was terrible—long marches, no food, no sleep, beatings and jail for those who disobeyed. People would do anything to get out of it: shoot holes in their feet, swallow poison to become ill, break their arms and legs.

Instead of mutilating himself, my father's father's father, born in Kobrin during the late-nineteenth-century reign of Czar Alexander III, ran away to America. He smuggled himself across the border to Prussia and made his way onto a ship sailing for New York, arriving at Ellis Island sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century. From New York, advised perhaps by one of

the Jewish charities, or driven perhaps by some desire of his own, he made his way to Ensleigh, Alabama, and later to Bessemer, where he opened a shoe store. In Bessemer, he married my great-grandmother, who was also (it is said) from Kobrin.

After that, my great-grandfather rarely spoke of his birthplace. Occasionally he mentioned "Poland"—that was what most of western Russia's inhabitants still called their country—but never Kobrin. My father doesn't remember hearing the name at all, and it took my grandmother some months to recall it. Perhaps my great-grandfather had no fond memories of Kobrin. Or perhaps Kobrin was just the past, and therefore best forgotten. That was the way most of his generation felt about immigration. Once arrived in America, they wanted to become American, and lost interest in whatever had happened before. If one knew what was best, one was careful not to tell the children anything about it, lest they somehow grow up foreign.

It was still early when I arrived in Kobrin, and a mist had descended, wrapping the houses in a thick bandage of fog. The bus stopped first near the new town, where low, concrete houses huddled together for warmth. Most of the traders got off: the market, it seemed, took place in the bus station parking lot. The bus then bumped its way down the pockmarked streets toward the older part of Kobrin. I got off in what would have been the old market square and was immediately hit by a wave of strong odors: mildew seeping from the houses, bread from the bakery, stale beer, and diesel fuel.

A middle-aged woman emerged from one of the shops. I stopped her and asked for the synagogue. She looked at me, surprised.

"Synagogue?" She shook her head and walked on.

I stopped a man in a cloth cap and put the same question to him. He thought for a few seconds. "That way," he said, and pointed down a street lined with low wooden houses. I followed it, but saw nothing that looked like a synagogue. The Catholic church stood at the end of the road—perhaps that was what he had meant.

An elderly woman was scrubbing the steps. "Synagogue?" She, too, had to think before answering. "I was not born here. You must ask the priest."

"And where is the priest?"

"He comes back tomorrow."

She returned to her scrubbing but then looked up.

"You might try Boris Nikolaevich. Boris Nikolaevich knows about Kobrin."

I wandered down another street. At the movie theater, a poster showed a Technicolor cowboy in an ill-fitting hat. I found the house of Boris Nikolaevich among a clutch of other wooden houses; a man with distinguished white hair and glasses opened the door.

Boris Nikolaevich was a descendant of Russian officials who had come to Kobrin to do the bidding of the czar. He knew how to read French, and in Kobrin he had the reputation of a man who knows about the world. Proudly, he told me of his collection of French stamps. "No one else has anything like it," he said.

I asked him about town records, births, deaths, and so on. "Of course we have them," he said. "All the way back to 1945." Before that it might get tricky, he said. Everything had been burned during the war.

While he spoke, he cleaned his fingernails with a penknife and complained about the price of potatoes: "Last year they cost fifteen kopecks for a bushel, now they are one and a half rubles." Potatoes, he said, had become a form of money. People traded potatoes—bags of potatoes, boxes of potatoes—for things like sugar and paper, which were scarce.

Life hadn't been much easier in Polish times. Before the war there had been unemployment, and the best jobs went to the Poles, not to the Russians. That was why his brother had emigrated to France, in 1932.

"I almost left, too, but I was on a starvation diet then; I was not in good enough health." He mentioned a famous doctor; had I read his book about the benefits of fasting?

"Even now I fast for one day every week, and last month I

fasted for two days every week. In my life I have fasted for more than a thousand days. That is why I am so healthy. Would you believe that I am eighty-seven years old?"

It was true, he looked much younger. I calculated backward. He had been born in 1904. As a child he might, just possibly, have run into my great-grandfather on the street.

I asked him about the Jews in Kobrin.

"Yes, I remember them." Boris Nikolaevich sat back in his chair. More than half of Kobrin's eleven thousand inhabitants had been Jewish in 1939, he said. The Jews ran all the shops. Practically all of the doctors were Jewish. In the center of town, all of the buildings were owned by Jews. The houses on this street were owned by Jews."

"They were good neighbors," he said, sighing.

Go on, I told him.

"On June 23, 1941," he said, the Germans came to Kobrin. On June 24, the Germans had rounded up 150 Jews, taken them outside of town, and shot them. Once in July and once again in August they did it again: each time 150 Jews, just people picked up off the streets. But then the Polish partisans began to fight in the woods around Kobrin, and the Germans had to find other methods. In October and November they began to organize ghettos. There were two: Ghetto A for richer Jews, Ghetto B for the poor.

"I worked in the town library," said Boris Nikolaevich, shaking his head. "Before the war, most of my colleagues were Jews. I told them to run away, to go to the forests with the partisans, but they wouldn't believe me. They wouldn't believe me, and they all went to Ghetto A. When the Germans sent the Jews of Ghetto B to Babi Yar, one of them—he had sat right beside me for years—poured benzine all over himself, lit himself with a match."

His family had also known a man called Goldberg. Goldberg and his friends had hidden in his mother's barn. Everything was fine for a few weeks, but Goldberg and his friends forgot to talk in whispers: "One night, our neighbors heard them arguing, and

they knew they had to go, it was too dangerous. Goldberg had six gold coins. He told me that if a German caught him, he would but his way out. Until now, we don't know what happened to him."

Boris Nikolaevich shrugged. But he didn't want me to think that no one in Kobrin had fought back. During the war, the Nazis had knocked down the Jewish cemetery and put a stable on top.

"One of the peasants who worked for the Nazis as a stableboy asked me to help him get poison: he wanted to poison the horses. I was friendly with the pharmacist at that time, so we did it. The Germans were perplexed. Why were their horses dying? They brought in veterinarians to say what the problem was. The veterinarians did some examining, and after a whole day, they announced to the Germans that the horses had not been poisoned. But the Germans were still suspicious, and they brought in another set of veterinarians. These said that the horses had indeed been poisoned—it came out that the first doctors had been Czechs, and therefore were not trustworthy. Afterward this peasant, my friend, ran to the woods and joined the partisans. Nobody suspected me."

One or two of Kobrin's Jews had come back after the war, but nowadays a mixed lot of people lived in the town. A few Poles, a few Russians. The local people spoke a dialect that was really Ukrainian, not Belarusian. Kobrin, he said, was Belarusian by accident. But what was the difference? Ukraine, Belarus—what did it matter anyway?

I asked him about Applebaums, or Apfelbaums, as they might have been then.

He shook his head. He remembered no one of that name. Maybe, *maybe* a Rosa Applebaum in his primary school, but no one after that. My eye drifted up to the print on the wall behind him. He followed my gaze.

"It is Goya—you know it? I like Goya a lot."

The print was *Reason Asleep, Dreaming of Monsters*.

I bade him good-bye. "You'll find the synagogue on this street—you must have passed it on your way here." He pointed the way.

I traced my steps backward, this time walking more slowly, stopping and looking at each of the wooden houses, one by one. I passed a garden where a young woman knelt, digging something in the ground, and a house painted a surprising shade of pink. They gave nothing away, they told no stories. They provided no more access to the real past than the Lubavitcher in Minsk or the fortress in Brest.

Finally, I found the synagogue. It was a large yellow building surrounded by overgrown shrubs and set back from the road. A long cable reached up to the round window where the Star of David used to be; metal beer barrels, crates, and the entrails of trucks had been strewn about the courtyard. The entrance was locked and barred with barbed wire. A sign hung from the gate: BREWERY.

I started to climb the fence but thought better of it.