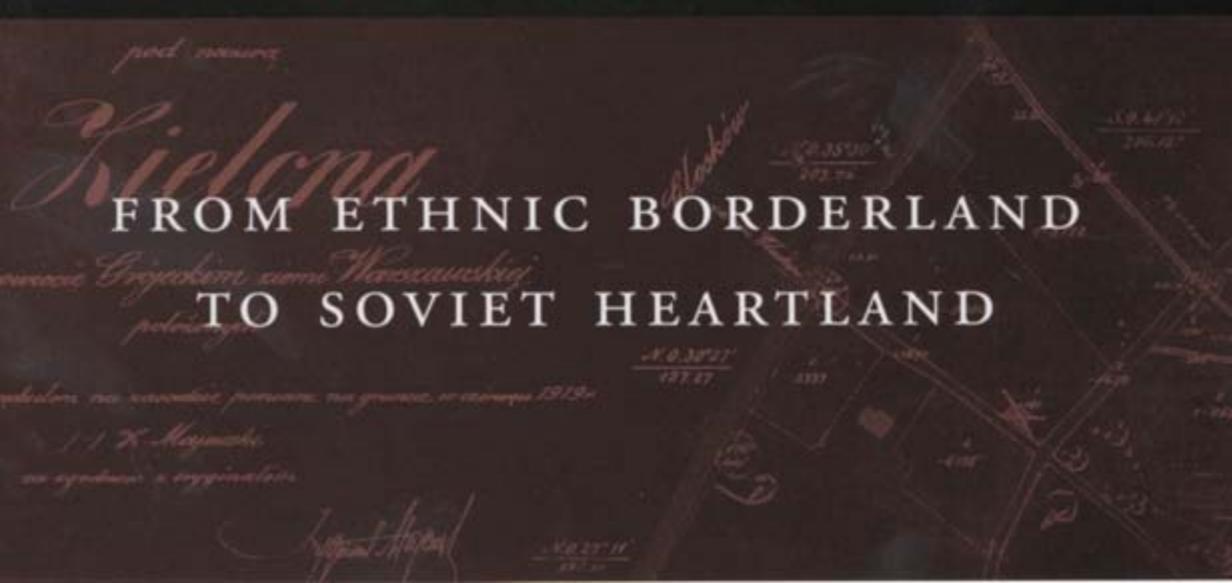KATE BROWN

A BIOGRAPHY OF NO PLACE

FROM ETHNIC BORDERLAND
TO SOVIET HEARTLAND

A BIOGRAPHY OF NO PLACE

A Biography of
No Place

From Ethnic Borderland to
Soviet Heartland

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Kate Brown

For Dave and Sasha,
my favorite traveling companions

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0   100   200 miles

The Polish–Ukranian Borderland Region

Showing the Marchlevsk Polish Autonomous Region,
the Pulin German Autonomous Region

Chelm

POLAND

Lutsk

Rivno

Brody

L'viv

Ternopil

Soviet-Polish border from 1945

Soviet-Polish Brdy from 1921–1939

Korosten

U. S. S. R.

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Uman

Dnistr

Dnistr

Bug

Tul'chin

International Boundaries, 1921–39
International Boundaries after 1945
Boundaries of Soviet Republics
Boundaries of Oblasts within Soviet
Ukraine 1920–1939

0   20   40   60 miles

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Glossary

Other than names commonly spelled in English, I use the Library of Congress Ukrainian transliteration for people and places in Ukraine, and the LOC Russian transliteration for Soviet government agencies and people and places in or from Russia.

Bezirk. Administrative district (German)

Desiatina. Old measure of size (equals 1 hectare or 2.7 acres)

DVL. Deutsche Volk List (German Folk List)

Einsatzgruppe. Special task force

GPU UkSSR. Gossudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie Ukrainy (State political police of Ukraine), subordinate to the OGPU, 1923–1934

Kolkhoz. Collective farm

Kolkhoznik. Collective farm member

Kresy. Polish term for former eastern Polish territory lost to the Tsarist and Soviet states

Kulak. Rich peasant

MTS. Mashinno-traktornaia stantsiia (Machine tractor station)

NEP. Novaia ekonomicheskaia politika (New Economic Policy)

NKVD UkSSR. Narodnyi kommissariat vnutrennikh del UkSSR (National Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, 1923–1930)

NKVD USSR. Narodnyi kommissariat vnutrennikh del USSR (National Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR). Founded in 1934, it absorbed the OGPU and republic branches of the GPU

NSV. Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (National Socialist Welfare Bureau)

Oblast. Administrative district (Russian)

OGPU. Obedinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie (All-union state

political police) under the jurisdiction of the Council of People's Commisars of the USSR, 1923–1934

Okrug. Administrative district (Russian)

Otkhod. Seasonal or temporary departure for off-farm wage work

OUN. Organizatsiia Ukrains'kykh Natsionalistiv (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists)

POV. Polska Organizacja Wojskowa (Polish Military Organization)

Pud. Old measure of weight (equals 16.38 kilograms)

Raikom. District Communist Party committee

Raion. Administrative district, subordinate to oblast or *krai*

RmfdbO. Reichskommissariat fuer die Ostgebieten (Reich Ministry for the Eastern Territory)

Rural Soviet. *(sel'sovet)* lowest administrative unit

Sonderkommando. Special unit

Soviet. Elected body with administrative functions

Spetzpereselenets/trudposelenets. Special/labor settlers, terms interchangeable

UPA. Ukrains'ka Povstans'ka Armiia (Ukrainian Insurrectionary Army)

UVO. Ukrains'ka Viis'kova Organizatsiia (Ukrainian Military Organization)

VoMi. Volksdeutsch Mittelstelle (Ethnic German Liaison Office)

A BIOGRAPHY OF NO PLACE

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Introduction

This is a biography of a place and the people who inhabit it, or rather, a biography of no place and the people who no longer live there. Between historic Poland and Russia runs an amorphous corridor once called *kresy* (borderlands, in Polish), now more generally known as the Chernobyl zone. As histories are often tied to nation-states, I feel the need to justify writing a history of no place, meaning a place that has never been a political polity nor possessed any historic notoriety until 1986, when a nuclear reactor radiated it into twentieth-century infamy. Seventy years ago, Walter Benjamin rooted around a shopping arcade in Paris that had seen better days, sifting through obsolete objects for a sense of the lives that had been lived there and gone unnoticed, sure in his obsessive belief that "to live is to leave traces." He hoped he could use the discarded objects, the "trash" of history, to undermine the common parable of Progress by exhibiting the wreckage left in its wake.[1]

Today we do not have to look far to see the wreckage the progress of the twentieth century has left behind. In mountains of garbage and cities of fear, the modern landscape vividly exposes the disappointments of science, political experimentation, and technological innovation. But the *kresy* seems to have been earmarked for special consideration, as if it were the epicenter of destruction, the bastard child of progress. In the first half of the twentieth century this European borderland became a theater for war and destruction. During World War I soldiers drifted back and forth across the *kresy* in years of battle, and the tsarist regime deported many of its German and Jewish subjects from the territory. The Red Army conquered and lost and reconquered the *kresy* many times during three years of civil war and later the Polish-Soviet War. In the interwar period, Soviet leaders tele-

scoped their fear of war on to the *kresy* and the people living there who were identified as German and Polish, about half of whom were deported from the region in 1935–36. During World War II, Hitler's armies dug into the region for years of stalemate, an unforgiving occupation and a vengeful peace that swept away most of what was left of the region's Jewish, Polish, and German communities. After the war, the Polish and Soviet governments forcibly exchanged Polish and Ukrainian populations. Today the once multiethnic borderland is a largely Ukrainian heartland. In the historic *kresy* people live in the shadow of Chernobyl and the rubble of the Soviet economy.

Historical bankruptcy, however, does not in itself explain why I should write about the ruins of a remote place of no central historic importance on the periphery of an empire which no longer exists. My justification, rather, is that the erasure of this Ukrainian-Polish-Jewish-German borderland tells a particular story about the modernizing, standardizing aims of the twentieth century. The centralizing wars against smaller polities which occurred in most of Western Europe in the nineteenth century advanced in the Soviet Union in express and violent form in the Stalinist period. Yet it was not the sheer desire for annihilation alone, but visions of progress and a better future, that dictated the shape of destruction of the borderlands. The *kresy* was considered backward, in dire need of cultural and economic elevation. Improvements conceived for the borderlands led to the death or exile of large segments of the population and the isolation and regression of the region.[2]

Specifically, this study examines how the multiethnic border zone of the *kresy* became a largely homogenous Ukrainian heartland in the course of three decades, 1923–1953. It is a puzzling case because the ethnic purification of the borderland was not carried out by one state, nor was it the fruit of one political ideology. Rather, imperial Russia, socialist Soviet Union, fascist Nazi Germany, parliamentary Poland, and nationalist Ukrainian parties all took part in dismantling the confusing mosaic of cultures in the contested borderland. In fact, I argue that in part it was this quixotic, hard-to-pin-down quality of the borderland which inspired state officials to try to alter it radically by making it comprehensible as ethnically pure nation-space.

Because of the region's ambiguous and marginal characteristics, describing the *kresy* in terms traditionally used by the geographer and historian presents problems. For example, it is difficult to give the exact location of

the region because it has no definite boundaries, as margins are rarely de-
fined by latitude and longitude. No landmarks set the region off—no
mountains or vast seas. Rather, wandering streams and bogs, forests and
intermittent plains shaped the land into an enigma—untidy, formless,
eluding definition.[3] The region is best described as a fringe which threaded
in and out of what today is central Ukraine.[4] In general terms, it lies be-
tween the Dniestr and Dnepr rivers, west of Kiev, south of the Pripiat
Marshes, and east of Novograd-Volynsk in the former tsarist provinces of
Volynia, Podillia, and Kiev in what is today portions of the Kiev, Zhytomyr,
Khmel'nitskii, and Vinnytsia provinces.

Historically, the *kresy* has no definite polity because it was never the seat
of power but always the periphery, whether rulers arrived from the north,
west, or east. In the sixteenth century Poles dubbed it the border because it
stood at the eastern limit of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As the
Commonwealth fell apart in the late eighteenth century, the tsarist empire
claimed it as its frontier for several decades until the empire moved west-
ward, swallowing up larger portions of Poland. Within Russia, the *kresy*
also became the border of the Pale of Settlement, beyond which Jews were
forbidden to live. The Hasidic movement originated in the borderlands.
The *kresy* likewise constituted the boundary between Catholic and Ortho-
dox Christians and gave birth to the hybrid Uniate Church, which recog-
nized the Catholic pope but used Orthodox rituals.[5] The *kresy* was also the
terrain where Eastern Orthodoxy fused with the Protestant Reformation
to create a tangle of evangelical-millenarian sectarian groups.[6] Russian
Orthodoxy also met Ukrainian nationalism in this territory to form the
Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox church. And finally, for nearly two
decades in the twentieth century (1921–1939) the *kresy* served as a border
between two competing world views, communism and capitalism. Never
the center of things, the *kresy* has played the role in east-central Europe of
an arena in which warring parties have time and again fallen into the ex-
hausted embrace of worn-out prize fighters. It is a place of synthesis and
fusion where unlikely partners have come together in explosive creativity.

Few great intellects and cultural figures have emerged in the border-
lands. They usually went to other places—Moscow, Warsaw, Berlin, Lon-
don—and from those places claimed their fame.[7] The *kresy* is not known
for the individuals it has produced but rather for the great masses of
unwashed immigrants, chattering in foreign languages and crowding the
outer edges of cities in the New World, just as they packed the peripheries

of Western European countries. Yet it is these "masses" and the rarely noted backwater they came from which, in their very disappearance, illustrate an important corrective to the ongoing narrative of nationalized space and modernizing progress. We have trouble seeing beyond the paradigms of nation-state and standardized concepts of literacy and knowledge because the histories of places like the *kresy* have been made (willfully, I would argue) invisible. Evoking this history, disconnecting individuals, families, and communities from the populations they became, is the subject of this study.

The borderland "populations" were officially registered in 1897 with the first Russian Imperial Census. At that time, census takers counted in the territory eight million people.[8] Of these there were 6.3 million Russian Orthodox, one million Jews, 517,000 Catholics, 96,000 Lutherans, 52,000 Old Believers, and 10,000 Baptists. In terms of native language, tsarist officials recorded six million Malorussians or Ukrainian speakers, 988,000 Yiddish speakers, 460,000 people speaking Polish, 353,000 Russian-language speakers, and 106,000 people using German as their native language.[9] Nearly six decades later, in 1959, the population had only grown by half a million (8.5 million), and there were 7.7 million Ukrainians, and 404,000 Russians, only half as many Poles (202,000), and one-third as many Jews (277,000) as in 1897, and no Germans.[10] The fact that these numbers were generated, why they changed so radically, and how, forms the skeleton upon which the stories of this book are told.

Census numbers are naturally misleading. At the turn of the century, Poles constituted a small numerical minority (6 percent), yet they dominated the *kresy* economically, politically, and culturally. The influence of the Ukrainian diaspora in writing histories of this region, and the veracity of ethnic purification have led to an underestimation of the force of Polish culture in Right Bank Ukraine (right bank of the Dnepr River). Despite fifty years of official tsarist efforts to de-Polonize (and concomitantly de-Judaize) the region, at the onset of the Revolution, the Polish elite owned or managed most of the agricultural land and factories and controlled local courts and administration, while Polish lawyers, entrepreneurs, and doctors ran regional institutions, banks, schools, and hospitals. Moreover, the Russian Orthodox Church never managed to make inroads into the western borderlands, which the Polish Catholic Church dominated.[11] The Polish influence was hard to shake. As late as 1929, after most of the Polish elite had fled, a Polish diplomat reported that he rarely heard Ukrainian on the streets of the *kresy* city Vinnytsia, whereas Polish was spoken "quite fre-

quently."[12] In short, despite the Russian imperial footprint, by the time of
the Revolution Russian culture hardly registered in Right Bank Ukraine.[13]
Real contact between Russians and the indigenous populations occurred
only with the great, violent incursions of the state in the 1930s, with the
collectivization drives, the Great Famine, purges, and mass deportations.

Unable to dislodge the economic and cultural hegemony of the Polish
elite in Right Bank Ukraine, the tsarist media fought with words. The Pole
in the Russian empire loomed large as the chief enemy. Poles were depicted
as a threat to the Ukrainian and Belorussian peasantry (both of which were
seen by tsarist-era intellectuals as Russian) and to the existence of the Rus-
sian state itself. Overlooking the radical implications of their words, aristo-
cratic Russian writers called Poles bloodthirsty exploiters, who "treated
their peasants like colonists treat their Negroes."[14] Poles were also depicted
as the ultimate subversives of the monarchy; they worked in the shadowy
underground to "inculcate all levels of society, priests to women, mothers
to children, nobles to gentry, officers to soldiers . . . to fight against the tsar-
ist government."[15] Poles were especially dangerous because they had links
abroad with the Roman Catholic Church and with fellow Poles in the Ger-
man and Austro-Hungarian empires.

It is this legacy of Polish hegemony and the rhetoric of the Polish enemy
which places Poles as a discursive category at the center of this book. As the
"Polish question" loomed large for Tsarist officials, so it did for Soviet of-
ficials.[16] This Polish question of the western borderlands was a primary
factor in the formation of Soviet nationality policy in the 1920s, and a ma-
jor element in its demise and the persecution of "national minorities"
throughout the Soviet Union in the mid to late 1930s.

The Trope of Backwardness

Tsarist repression of the borderlands as a suspect territory served to mar-
ginalize the region economically and socially. In the nineteenth century,
the tsarist government pursued a policy of forced assimilation for Poles
and Ukrainians, while Jews were both compelled to assimilate yet were also
segregated. They were confined to residence within the Pale of Settlement,
publishing in Hebrew was restricted, so too were economic and educa-
tional opportunities.[17] To promote assimilation, the monarchy set up Rus-
sian-language schools for Jewish children and conscripted young boys into
the army for twenty-five years of service.

After the Polish Uprising of 1863, the tsarist regime exiled Polish land-