# The Making of Minorities on Europe's Periphery

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Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization's Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World*. 368 pp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. ISBN-13 978-0190067458. $82.00.

Krista A. Goff, *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus*. 336 pp. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021. ISBN-13 978-1501753275. $49.95.

Lenny A. Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840–1920*. 320 pp. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019. ISBN-13 978-0821423738. $72.00.

According to conventional views, minorities became an issue in world politics only after the establishment of nation-states in East-Central Europe in the aftermath of World War I. Nonetheless, most recent scholarship tends to question the extent to which empires can "think" like nation-states—that is, pursue national consolidation via standardization of its diverse populations.[1] Those newly formed governments in the region, meanwhile, are more often conceptualized as, using Roger Brubaker's definition, nationalizing states, essentially "ethnically heterogeneous [states] yet conceived as nation-states."[2] In this theoretical debate, the Soviet

[1] Krista A. Goff and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, eds., *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).
[2] Rogers Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe," *Daedalus* 124, 2 (1995): 109.

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Union occupies a unique role, seen as neither a unitary state nor an empire but a mixture of both.[3]

That said, the books under review offer equally invaluable and methodologically innovative accounts of minority-state relations in each of their three settings. Lenny A. Ureña Valerio looks at Germany's colonial treatment of its Polish-speaking minority, as well as Polish colonial fantasies of the late 19th century; Kathryn Ciancia examines how the state produced and exercised minority categories in interwar Poland; and Krista A. Goff tells the story of how the minorities tried to secure their national future against centralizing tendencies in Soviet Azerbaijan. Although framed in different periods and geographies, read together these studies highlight important similarities in the state's objectives in the treatment of minorities, as well as shared minorities' experiences in nationalizing empires.

All three authors divert their attention away from the center—be it Berlin, Warsaw, or Moscow—to the borderland territories incorporated at some point in time. These are, respectively, Prussian Poland—the territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth acquired by the Kingdom of Prussia during the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century; Volhynia—originally a part of the Russian partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that became part of Poland based on the 1921 Riga Peace Treaty; and Azerbaijan, a former imperial periphery and an independent nation from 1918 to 1920, incorporated into the Soviet Union as one of its union republics. With those territorial acquisitions came the need to organize nontitular populations and to manage national minority identifications and their rights. Although defining policies and their limits were set in the center, a closer look at the peripheries demonstrates how these minority communities came to navigate state policies and develop relations with respective state structures.

Each of these books deals with a particular national experiment. For Ureña Valerio, 19th-century Prussian Poland is a place that, while being an object of German colonizing intentions, became a birthplace of Polish colonial fantasies. Poznanian Poles, driven by a romantic image of unclaimed lands or dire need of survival and national preservation, set off for far-distant places to create colonies of their own, either in East Africa or Brazil. Ciancia examines the role of second-tier actors—the army of experts, teachers, settlers, and border guards—during the so-called Volhynia experiment, when

[3] Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); Adrienne Edgar, "Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: The Soviet 'Emancipation' of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective," *Slavic Review* 65, 2 (2006): 255.

the central authorities, wishing to consolidate this multiethnic region's position within the newly established Polish state, undertook to redraw its ethnic makeup by promoting Polish colonization and creating a Ukrainian identity loyal to the Polish state.[4] Last, Goff provides a much-needed account of the Soviet experiment with nontitular minority nationalism. Although the end goal of this policy was to centralize the state and establish the Soviet regime in non-Russian peripheries, the Communist Party—at least on paper—was committed to national equality and went on to propagate national differences and secure cultural development for its diverse populations.

These experiments, each in its own way, aimed to defuse ethnic tensions. Nonetheless, the eventual withdrawal of state sponsorship led to an incredible escalation of ethnic-based conflicts. During World War II, Volhynia witnessed the most horrific scenes of ethnic cleansing between Poles and Ukrainians.[5] Later, the ostentatiously peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union exposed inherent national conflicts that continue to reverberate to this day.

There is a striking similarity in the strategies and mechanisms that determined the treatment of the Polish-speaking minority in Prussian Poznan, the Ukrainian and Jewish populations in interwar Volhynia, and Georgian-Ingilos and Talysh communities in postwar Azerbaijan. It is not surprising, therefore, that each author engages with the colonial paradigm to explain layered inequalities in these three regions. Goff rejects the colonial lens, which has to date been widely used for the study of Central Asia, suggesting it can be of little help in studying dynamics within a republic (5). Ureña Valerio and Ciancia, in contrast, embrace this approach to urge for a more nuanced perspective on their regions' imperial past. To be precise, *On Civilization's Edge* and *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities* demonstrate how Poles at the turn of the 19th century were both objects and subjects of the colonial agenda. As part of Germany, the Poznanian Poles were regarded as "not quite white."[6] As a result, they were subjected to German colonial images and desires, while the areas of the Prussian partition served as a training ground

[4] The term "Volhynia experiment" is taken from Timothy Snyder, *Sketches from a Secret War: A Polish Artist's Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); on this, see also Cornelia Schenke, *Nationalstaat und nationale Frage: Polen und die Ukrainer 1921–1939* (Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 2004).

[5] Jared McBride, "Peasants into Perpetrators: The OUN-UPA and the Ethnic Cleansing of Volhynia, 1943–1944," *Slavic Review* 75, 3 (2016): 630–54.

[6] On debates about whiteness, see Ivan Davidson Kalmar, *White but Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022); and Raul Cârstocea, "Ambiguous Whiteness and the Anti-Semitic Imagination: Jews in Eastern Europe between Colonised and Colonisers," submitted to *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. **<OP: Has this paper been published?>**

for the implementation of German colonial strategies. At the same time, however, Polish elites wished to emulate their German overlords, expressing their own ambition to join the colonial race overseas. Overall, the authors underscore how the region became complicit in the system of imperialism and colonization and was both racialized and racializing.[7]

Poland's sporadic colonial endeavors empowered Polish interwar nationalists, who frequently referred back to 19th-century Polish ventures and imbued them with a sense of cultural superiority. The expert knowledge and everyday experience of colonizers proved to be invaluable once Poland's "civilizing frontier" shifted eastward. Then it was the formerly disadvantaged Poznanians who found themselves at the top of the ethnic hierarchy of independent Poland, teaching the "most backward" residents of Volhynia how to reach civilization (Ciancia, 66).

In all these cases, modernity is a characteristic of the center, whereas borderlands and/or nontitular nationalities are viewed as dangerous, backward, or disloyal. Nonetheless, the peripheries determine what the center actually is; the standard of modernity is defined as the opposite of the perceived backwardness of the borderlands. The advances in medicine are the result of medical experiments carried out in the peripheries; the elusive spirit of Polishness gains its contours through the exclusion or assimilation of non-Poles. The Azeris, Azerbaijan's titular nationality, secure their standing in the Soviet Union by assimilating and bureaucratically erasing numerous minorities within their borders.

Each case study demonstrates how ethnicity is associated with a system of inequality, through which belonging to a particular group determines the amount of power and privilege each community can enjoy. When venturing overseas, Polish or Jewish explorers, Ureña Valerio shows, used the networks of imperial powers and often concealed their identity to succeed in their expedition. The few who wished to assert their Polishness and thus claim their potential discoveries for the Polish nation needed to constantly prove their worth and the right to participate in the expedition instead of "another young German researcher" (Ureña Valerio, 95). In the Second Polish Republic, access to education, state position, and political representation was often reserved for Poles. Instead, the existence of a Ukrainian national identity—often defined as "Ruthenian"—continued to be questioned, while Jews remained at the very bottom of the ethnic hierarchy. More often than not, the value of ethnic identification for the state was assessed by its potential to assimilate into a dominant nationality. In

[7] For a similar perspective on Hungary, see Zoltán Ginelli's "Postcolonial Hungary" project at https://zoltanginelli.com/.

the Soviet case, titular nationalities were privileged to have republics under their names, and despite continuously opposing Russian hegemony, they were treated as equals within Soviet space. Recognition of other nontitular nationalities was in the hands of Soviet ethnographers, statisticians, and demographers, who often arbitrarily decided which group would remain and which would be erased from their registers.

Nonetheless, despite such bureaucratic efforts to standardize and order populations, identities in the German, Polish, and Soviet peripheries remained hard to pin down. Even claimed "majorities" were not easy to define. Ureña Valerio explores the mechanisms for making Poles, in the absence of a state of their own, in the 19th century (through racialized science or engagement in overseas colonialism), while Ciancia shows that even in the 1930s this process was far from over. Volhynia thus becomes a laboratory for determining Polishness and "awakening" Poles, which often meant assimilating others. The case of Soviet Azerbaijan offers another example of how within two decades ethnic and national identities could be ascribed, constructed, and enforced from above, and how those categories still determine the everyday life of minority communities today.

The lack of a strong national consciousness among borderland populations is often defined as "national indifference."[8] Indeed, each of the studies under review concurs that identities in the respective peripheries could hardly be disentangled. They were often amorphous and situational; personal and collective identifications were determined by a certain amount of privilege that belonging to a particular group could confer on its bearers. When explaining the making of Polishness in Volhynia, Ciancia introduces the novel concept of "national *uncertainty*" (202–4). "National uncertainty" was a political strategy employed by the Polish authorities that implied the deliberate downplaying of fixed national categories, or rejecting their existence altogether, to push for assimilation. Communities with an uncrystallized level of national consciousness—defined as "nationally uncertain"—provided a demographic opportunity to turn Volhynia into a Polish stronghold. At the same time, the Soviet government, equally intent on the amalgamation of its diverse populations, went in the opposite direction: promoting national identification and making officially legitimate categorizations the basis of its administrative and even economic reforms.

[8] Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, 1 (2010): 93–119. Also see the forum on "national indifference" in *Kritika* 20, 1 (2019), especially Alexei Miller's "'National Indifference' as a Political Strategy?" (63–72).

Overall, these studies of minority identities in European borderlands challenge conventional approaches to history writing. They show how restrictive national paradigms can be when studying minorities. "Nationalized histories" exclude nondominant populations from their narratives, while national archives often conceal sources for understanding minority experiences. Turning attention to nondominant groups can easily undermine traditional arguments and periodizations. So is the case of the Soviet interwar nationalities policy of *korenizatsiia*—although *korenizatsiia* initiatives toward titular nationalities declined by the end of the 1920s, the level of national-cultural support given to minority communities only increased and continued to be implemented well into the 1930s. In addition, the authors elevate local and regional histories, showing how those local accounts and studies of marginal communities can correlate with the global context while enhancing our knowledge of the global world.

On a broader scale, the three books under review form a welcome contribution to the ongoing scholarly debate about the need to decolonize East European and Slavic studies. Their focus on the margins of modern empires (or nation-states with imperial ambitions, as Poland proved to be) pinpoint the asymmetrical relationship between the center and the periphery and examine the place of Eastern Europe in larger colonial projects.[9] The multiplicity of perspectives presented by Ciancia, Goff, and Ureña Valerio highlight that the people in Eastern Europe (including those in the former Soviet republics) were not only victims of imperial, centrally defined colonial projects but themselves became producers of colonial attitudes and practices, directed either overseas or locally, toward their own peripheries. Thus these works pave the way for new and more nuanced perspectives on the ambivalent and contradictory nature of the region's "in-betweenness," raising the issues of victimhood, complacency, and shared responsibility.

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[9] Felix Ackermann and Agnieszka Pufelska, "Preußen postkolonial: Ansätze zu einer Geschichte polnisch-preußischer Asymmetrie," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 47, 4 (2021): 529–33.

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