



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN THE HISTORY
OF EXPERIENCE

No Neighbors' Lands in Postwar Europe

Vanishing Others

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CONTENTS

No Neighbors' Lands: Living with Vanished (and Rarely Returning) Others in Post-1945 Europe	1
Anna Wylegała and Sabine Rutar	
 Part I The Point of Departure: Experiencing the Catastrophe	27
 The Prussian Spirit of the Land: Fighting Fascism and Legitimizing Annexation in Soviet Kaliningrad, 1947–1953	29
Nicole Eaton	
 “The Poles Are Taking Over All of Rabka”: A Microhistory of Ethnic Cleansing	51
Karolina Panz	
 New Neighbors' Land: Istria and the Complexities of Solidarity	75
Pamela Ballinger	
 Native Borderland Children in the Belgian-German and Polish-German Borderlands. Comparing Verification and Nationalisation Narratives After the Second World War	101
Machteld Venken	

Part II A New Brave World: Dysfunctionality, Justice, Reconstruction	127
Doctors, Craftsmen, and Landlords: How Vanishing Others Influenced the Galician Economy During and After the Second World War	129
Anna Wylegała	
The Joy and Burden of Living: Roma Communities in the Western Borderlands of the Postwar Soviet Union	155
Volha Bartash	
Among Neighbors and Relatives: Intercessions and Jewish Persecution Through the Lens of Bulgaria's Postwar Trials (1944–45)	179
Nadège Ragaru	
Rape on Trial: Criminal Justice Actors in 1940s' Soviet Ukraine and Sexual Violence During the Holocaust	205
Marta Havryshko	
Part III The Unbearable Lightness of Things: Property Issues	229
"The Alienation Lacks Any Legal Basis": The Fate of Jewish Property in Postwar Hungary	231
Borbála Klacsmann	
A Conditional Restitution and Strategic Silences: The Shifting Political Value of Ethnic Germans in Communist Romania	255
Emanuela Grama	
The Fate of Property in the Kočevje (Gottschee) Region during and after the Second World War	279
Mitja Ferenc	

Property as Metaphor: Home and Belonging in Goran Vojnović's Film <i>Piran – Pirano</i> (Slovenia, 2010)	305
Sabine Rutar	
 Part IV Living with the Dead: Memory and Commemoration	331
"The Matter of Four Screws": Holocaust Commemorations in (Post-)Soviet Russia (the Case of Rostov-on-Don)	333
Irina Rebrova	
 New Settlers as Implicated Subjects: Case Study of Collective Amnesia in Czech Silesia	359
Johana Wyss	
 We, the Perpetrators: Remembering Violence Committed by One's Own Group in the Polish-Ukrainian Conflicts	383
Małgorzata Łukianow	
 Post-1945 No Neighbors' Lands: A Conclusion	407
Sabine Rutar and Anna Wylegała	
 Index	413

Native Borderland Children in the Belgian-German and Polish-German Borderlands. Comparing Verification and Nationalisation Narratives After the Second World War

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The belief that nation-states could achieve security and homogeneity by assimilating minorities underpinned many policies in both Eastern and Western Europe after 1945.¹ As also the chapters of Eaton and Panz in this edited volume make clear, borderland changes approved at postwar international conferences went hand in hand with national verification

¹Hans Lemberg, ed., *Grenzen in Ostmitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert: aktuelle Forschungsprobleme* (Marburg, Lahn: Herder Institut, 2000), 168, 179.

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campaigns selecting who could stay and who must leave, as well as nationalisation campaigns aiming to make borderland inhabitants indistinguishable from people from the country's core. This study compares the Belgian-German border region of Eupen-Sankt Vith-Malmedy (hereafter ESM), an area covered with woods and agricultural land, and the Polish-German border region of Upper Silesia (hereafter UpS), more specifically its most rural part with a comparable size, the Lubliniec district within Polish Upper Silesia, which belonged to the Polish state before and after, and was annexed to the German Reich during the Second World War (Fig. 1).

Comparing ESM with the Lubliniec district of UpS seems unusual, but postwar resettlements and expulsions took place in both. It is not commonly known that the verification campaign in ESM resulted in a number of local inhabitants having to leave for Germany. In Poland, on the other hand, most research on postwar verification and nationalisation has been conducted in the many areas that fell under Polish jurisdiction after the war,² with West Upper Silesia, for example, operating as a rich laboratory for cultural and sociological research on early post-war nationalisation.³ Less is known about how children experienced verification and nationalisation after the Second World War in a region that had already belonged to Poland in the interwar years. The Lubliniec district was located at a state border line before and during the war, but shifted to a more central location once Poland's state borders were redrawn after the war.

This chapter examines how international decisions on border changes, and the national policies that accompanied those decisions, influenced the narratives of inhabitants who stayed as children in the Belgian-German or Polish-German borderlands after 1945. In particular, it analyses and compares how native borderland children growing up during the early postwar period narrate their experiences of verification, rehabilitation and nationalisation policies. Verification is referred to as the establishment and

² Jan Misztal, *Weryfikacja narodowościowa na Śląsku Opolskim 1945–1950* (Opole: Wydaw. Instytutu Śląskiego, 1984), 160; Maria Szmaja, *Niemcy? Polacy? Ślązacy! Rodzimi mieszkańcy Opolszczyzny w świetle analiz socjologicznych* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 199.

³ Danuta Berlińska, *Mniejszość niemiecka na Śląsku Opolskim w poszukiwaniu tożsamości* (Opole: Stow. Instytut Śląski, 1999); Antonina Kłosowska, *National Cultures at the Grass-Root Level* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2001); Szmaja (2000).



Fig. 1 German territorial changes in the twentieth century. Source: Machteld Venken, ed., *Borderland Studies Meets Child Studies. A European Encounter* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017), 10

implementation of criteria and procedures for sorting Germans from, respectively, Belgians or Poles.⁴ Rehabilitation is the procedure through which those who were considered to have collaborated with the enemy during the Second World War were granted the opportunity to live as citizens in Belgium or Poland. Nationalisation is interpreted as the actions undertaken by representatives of the nation-state to include borderland inhabitants into the nation. How do locals from the German-Belgian and German-Polish borderlands recall their upbringing in the specific historical setting of the early postwar years, and how do their narratives compare? Do the fundamental differences in political regimes—the restoration of a

⁴Bernadetta Nitschke, *Wysiedlenie ludności niemieckiej z Polski w latach 1945–1949* (Zielona Góra: WSP, 1999), 102.

liberal nation-state with parliamentary democracy in Belgium, and the installation of national communism in Poland—result in radically different experiences and narratives? Or can we, despite dissimilar political conditions, detect similar patterns in how interviewees narrate verification and nationalisation?

This study examines native borderland inhabitants growing up in the early postwar years, from 1945 until the mid-1950s. Tara Zahra's research has already shown that children were privileged over adults as central objects of early postwar nationalising projects all over Europe, not primarily because they were considered innocent and vulnerable, but because they represented the "biological and political future of national communities."⁵ Throughout postwar Europe, there was a widespread consensus that children had been hindered by the war in their development and needed to be properly educated in order to become responsible citizens. They were to form the system's backbone, regardless of whether that system was democratic or communist.⁶

The age cohort selected for this study consists of children born between 1930 and 1939. While members of this cohort were too young to go through the verification procedure as independent individuals, even the youngest have vivid childhood memories of their early postwar years.⁷ Later, in the mid-1950s, a new historical era began both in Belgium and in Poland: Belgium simplified border-crossing regulations in a bilateral agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany (1956) and Poland allowed more family members to join their relatives in East or West Germany (1955–58).⁸

It is only recently that the testimonies of those growing up in the 1930s have received scholarly attention. Previously, there was scepticism about children's ability to understand the situations they had been in, as well as their capacity to reproduce their experiences. However, psychological

⁵Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 20.

⁶Machteld Venken and Maren Röger, "Growing Up in the Shadow of the Second World War: European Perspectives," *European Review of History* 22, no. 2 (2015): 199–220.

⁷Fiona Jack, Gabrielle Simcock, and Harlene Heyne, "Magic Memories: Young Children's Verbal Recall After a 6-Year Delay," *Child Development* 83, no. 1 (2012): 159–172, 160.

⁸Dariusz Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949–1989* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2010), 112–13.

research on child eyewitnesses in court indicates that child accounts should not be dismissed but assessed in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. This has encouraged historians to research child agency in acting and post-action narrating, instead of perceiving children as pure objects in historical events.⁹ Shortcomings in language use and references to time and place fail to justify why rich descriptions of interpersonal relations and everyday life conditions cannot contribute to reconstructing a fuller picture of past life practices. Testimonies here are considered a gateway to examining the impact of social and political relations on childhood experiences.¹⁰

By means of oral history, this article builds a clearer picture of how children after the war experienced and narrated verification and nationalisation. Seven biographical interviews were conducted in Belgium with previously publicly unheard local inhabitants born between 1930 and 1939, with the duration of the interview ranging between 33 minutes and 2 hours.¹¹ In addition, 19 autobiographies (published or archived) and 88 interviews gathered under the citizen science project *Damit nichts verloren geht* ('So that nothing gets lost', 2005–08) were included. While the entire interview collection is diverse, it offers the best available entrance into the life worlds of children from the early postwar period. In Poland, 12 long biographical interviews were conducted with local inhabitants born between 1930 and 1939, with the duration of the interview ranging between one and seven hours.¹²

⁹Gail S. Goodman and Jennifer. M. Schaff, "Over a Decade of Research on Children's Eyewitness Testimony: What Have We Learned? Where Do We Go from Here?" *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 11 (1997): 5–20.

¹⁰Joanna Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland: Survival and Polish-Jewish Relations during the Holocaust as Reflected in Early Postwar Recollections* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), 16, 92.

¹¹Interviews with Hermann Langer, Johanna Gallo-Schmitz, Josef Altenberg, Martin Schröder, Monique Janssen, Franz Ingenleuf and Johanna Stoffels, conducted in ESM in 2012–13 by Wendy Müller for the research project FWF V 360—G 22. The interviews are archived and can be consulted in the Belgian Royal Archives in Eupen.

¹²Interviews with Edward Karpe, Kazimierz Bromer, Jan Myrcik, Edward Wieczorek, Kazimierz Koszarek, Jerzy Ciba, Aniela Trybus, Maria Magdalena Wolik, Waltrauda Brzezina, Teresa Wieczorek, Stefania Morysson-Stoksik and Jerzy Malec were conducted in the Lubliniec district in 2013–14 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski for the research project FWF V 360—G 22. The interviews are archived and can be consulted in the History Meeting House in Warsaw (Dom Spotkań z Historią).

THE LUBLINIEC DISTRICT IN EAST UPPER SILESIA

During the twentieth century, the regions to the east and west of Germany underwent repeated changes in sovereignty. Most of ESM, which covered 1053 km², was German until 1918, joined the Belgian state in 1920, was annexed by Germany in 1940 and returned to Belgium after Hitler's last offensive, a change approved in the Potsdam Agreement. However, the Polish-German border region covers a much larger area of 103,000 km², and not all terrains switched sovereignty in the same way. East Upper Silesia, for example, was Polish in the interwar years, under German rule in the Second World War, and was later reunited with Poland. Other border regions, including Warmia, most of Masuria, and West Upper Silesia, were part of a territorial dispute in the aftermath of the First World War, but remained German until 1945. Their change to Polish sovereignty was also confirmed in the Potsdam Agreement.

The Lubliniec district covered 700 km² and counted approximately 50,518 inhabitants in 1938 and 51,067 in 1949.¹³ Between 1945 and 1947, about 3248 people left or were forced to leave for Germany, and 47,764 native inhabitants stayed.¹⁴ The postwar Lubliniec district was a part of the postwar Silesian voivodship, in which "the greatest number of people subject to ethnic verification actions and rehabilitation" lived.¹⁵ Scholars usually detect three stages in the de-Germanisation of Poland's border regions: the evacuations and flights before the arrival of a foreign army, the wild expulsions immediately after the end of the war, and organised resettlements following the Potsdam Agreement.¹⁶ In 1941, the German regime installed the *Deutsche Volksliste* (hereafter DVL), which classified borderland inhabitants according to their knowledge of the language or membership of pro-German versus pro-Polish organisations, with DVL I inhabitants considered to be more German than DVL IV inhabitants. Most inhabitants in UpS received a DVL III classification, which granted individuals German citizenship on revocation and yielded

¹³ Adam Dziurok, "Narodowa identyfikacja," in *Województwo śląskie 1945–1950: Zarys dziejów politycznych* ed. Adam Dziurok and Ryszard Kaczmarek (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2007), 598.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 574.

¹⁵ Adam Dziurok and Ryszard Kaczmarek, eds, *Województwo śląskie 1945–1950: Zarys dziejów politycznych* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2007), 750.

¹⁶ John J. Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Polish-German Borderlands, 1939–1951* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 67.

to (forced) enrolment in the German Army.¹⁷ Between the end of the Second World War and the signing of the Potsdam Agreement, the borderlands formerly annexed to the German Reich experienced an implosion of moral values and social bonds between inhabitants, in which people considered of German descent were often subject to wild verifications and even wild expulsions from their homes.¹⁸ Later, an official verification policy aimed to separate inhabitants according to the war classification of the DVL. At first, inhabitants with a DVL I or II classification were to leave the country, whereas those with a DVL III or IV classification could undergo a rehabilitation procedure and be granted the right to stay.¹⁹ Whereas ESM inhabitants accused of collaborationism were held in prison, inhabitants with a DVL I or II classification from UsP were too numerous, and were therefore housed in detention camps with deplorable living conditions.²⁰ During the verification procedure, unverified people faced acts of physical violence, forced labour, and were not entitled to health insurance or to their own property.²¹

Verification procedures and practices varied from village to village and relaxed over time, enabling more people, including those with a DVL II classification, to stay.²² As a result, those who were deemed Polish through verification did not always identify with Poland as their nation-state. It took historians a long time to start to research how the Second World War had looked like on the ground in the border region. As late as in the twenty-first century, they pointed to pragmatism both from officials (who wanted local blue-collar workers to stay and intellectuals to leave) and from individuals (who could keep their house if they declared themselves

¹⁷ Ibid., 39.

¹⁸ Piotr Sztompka, "Kulturowe imponderabilia szybkich zmian społecznych: zaufanie, lojalność, solidarność," in *Imponderabilia wielkiej zmiany: Mentalność, wartości i więzi społeczne czasów transformacji*, ed. Piotr Sztompka (Warsaw, Kraków: WN PWN, 1999), 265–82.

¹⁹ Dziurok (2007), 544–5.

²⁰ Ibid., 578 and further.

²¹ Bernard Linek, *Polityka antyniemiecka na Górnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1950* (Opole: Stow. Instytut Śląski, 2000), 379.

²² Philipp Ther, "Die einheimische Bevölkerung des Oppelner Schlesiens nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg: Die Entstehung einer deutschen Minderheit," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 26, no. 3 (2000): 407–438, 424.

Polish).²³ Many native inhabitants underwent a rehabilitation procedure, but accurate figures are scarce. In 1946, for example, the rehabilitation committee was dealing with 5498 native inhabitants possessing a DVL II classification.²⁴ By 1949, 1105 Polish migrants from the former eastern Polish provinces that had been re-incorporated into the Soviet Union after 1945, and 2198 Poles who had migrated from the country's centre, had also found a home in the Lubliniec district.²⁵

A total of 54,701 Silesian children initially verified as Poles were given the opportunity to move, with or without their mothers, to join their fathers who had earlier been transported to occupied Germany after the Red Cross drew international attention to the refusal of Polish authorities to undo their verifications.²⁶ Children of mixed marriages, moreover, were often removed from their German relatives so they could become reliable Polish citizens.²⁷

THE REGION OF EUPEN, SANKT VITH AND MALMEDY

The ESM inhabitants were better informed about the imminent arrival of the United States Army—which came to Eupen in September 1944, and the rest of the region (including St Vith and Malmedy) after the Ardennes Offensive in 1944/45—than the UpS inhabitants were regarding the arrival of the Red Army. As ESM locals who had been cooperating with the Nazi regime had had more time to leave than their counterparts in UpS, few were left to be wildly verified or expelled in the early postwar period.²⁸ Even though the main part of Belgium had been occupied and ESM annexed, the Belgian government used the same measures to verify people's war activities throughout the country as it considered the annexation to have been illegal.²⁹ Twenty-five per cent of around 60,000 ESM

²³ Andreas Hofmann, *Die Nachkriegszeit in Schlesien: Gesellschafts- und Bevölkerungspolitik in den polnischen Siedlungsgebieten 1945–1948* (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 2000), 271.

²⁴ Dziurok (2007), 547.

²⁵ Ibid., 598.

²⁶ Linek (2000), 377–83.

²⁷ Ines Hopfer, *Geraubte Identität* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2010), 229–30.

²⁸ Peter J. Elstob, *Hitlers letzte Offensive: Die Ardennenschlacht* (Munich: List, 1972), 29, 46.

²⁹ Martin Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 115.

inhabitants were suspected of having collaborated with the enemy, of whom 1503 (quadruple the Belgian national average) were found guilty. More than 7000 had their civil rights removed, either temporarily or permanently, and courts annulled the Belgian citizenship of 1325 male citizens along with their families, who saw no reason to stay and decided to leave, mostly for occupied Germany.³⁰

Verification also severely affected the way in which public life was organised. Around half of all men entitled to vote (Belgian women would receive that right in 1948) were excluded from compulsory voting in the 1946 elections.³¹ Citizens deprived of civil rights could not be civil servants. However, penalties for collaboration softened by the late 1940s, and many people initially condemned were found not guilty during their appeal.³²

In order to draw borderland inhabitants closer to the country's core, a nationalisation campaign was launched. Local studies on nationalisation in schools demonstrate how, in a country where the constitution prescribed free use of the French, Dutch and German languages, the French language was revered in education.³³ The Eupen-St. Vith region received cultural independence in 1970, but that had much more to do with the unitary Belgian nation-state being dismantled and with language and education policies being directed towards regions than with the involvement of borderland inhabitants.³⁴ In the 1990s, local historians started to research local inhabitants' involvement in the Second World War and post-war verification and nationalisation.³⁵

³⁰ Carlo Lejeune, *Die Säuberung, Bd. 2: Hysterie, Wiedereingliederung, Assimilierung (1945–1952)* (Büllingen: Lexis Verlag, 2007), 83–5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

³² *Ibid.*, 85.

³³ Ursel Schmitz, *Zur bildungspolitischen Entwicklung des Sprachenproblems in den belgischen Ostkantonen seit 1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994), 17.

³⁴ Hubert Jenniges, *Hinter Ostbelgischen Kulissen: Stationen auf dem Weg zur Autonomie des deutschen Sprachgebiets in Belgien (1968–1972)* (Eupen: Grenz Echo Verlag, 2001).

³⁵ See, for example, Carlo Lejeune. *Mut zur eigenen Geschichte. Der 8. Mai 1945. Anmerkungen zur ostbelgischen Vergangenheit* (St.Vith: Aktuell, 1995).

SIMILARITIES IN NARRATIVES ON VERIFICATION

Testimonies pay significant attention to verification. Despite differences in how verification policies were implemented, interviewees often recall similar experiences. The first similarity lies in their negative attitudes towards verification principles. Children frequently did not know what was at stake on a political or legal level, and also report that adults rarely attempted to explain this to them. They nevertheless understood that verification affected people they liked and had confided in, an awareness that often stayed with them later in life. A man from ESM recalled, for example:

After the end of the war, I witnessed policemen visiting my mother and wanting to know from her what the political orientation of my father had been [...] My father, who came from a very pro-German family, had nevertheless not been a party member—I do not know why. The police wanted to take my mother to sign a declaration that my father had been an NSDAP member. But my mother refused [...] Despite the threats, she did not give her signature. As a child I experienced these interrogations and I developed disdain for all policemen for years.³⁶

The interviewee recalls not having known why his family was pro-German during the war, or why his father did not join the NSDAP. Leaving factual accuracy aside, we note that the interviewee strongly sympathised with his parents without knowing whether his father was to be considered guilty, despised those who wanted to take his father away, and stated that this feeling influenced his later life.

Native borderland children in UpS also found the early postwar verification principles unclear. Jerzy Ciba, for example, experienced the verification of his father, a local Silesian who had been enrolled in the German Army, and who had deserted and fought for the liberation of Europe in the First Polish Armoured Division of the Allied Armed Forces. Ciba did not understand why his father was sought after he returned to Poland, and feared his father would be taken away:

Later we got a card that he was missing at the front, so we didn't know if he was just dead or what was going on [...] And only after a few months,

³⁶ Damit nichts verloren geht, Private Archive of Carlo Lejeune, C1/02-70-34-M. The names of interviewees are not provided. See also the interview with Willi Wittrock, born 1941, conducted in Reuland on 14 August 2012 by Wendy Müller.

through Sweden, we received the information that my father was in England [...] I remember my father's return because it was very characteristic. Namely, we didn't know, of course, when he would return, because he was brought to Gdynia by ship, and then he came back by train. After an hour, when he returned, the first guests were security officers. They had a conversation with him, they threw all of us out of the house, and [...] my father brought some rings because he thought that in such a country, maybe in the future, if I got married, such a ring would be needed. Because he got his pay there, he could easily buy it. Well, he gave these rings to these security officers, and something else, coffee or so, all he brought they took away. So that they would leave him alone.³⁷

By taking away the present his father had brought for him from the West, the Secret Service officers made clear to the boy that his father was not welcome in postwar Poland. His father, however, soon started work as a postman in a town further away (in Chorzów), where he encountered no further problems and eventually regained his Polish citizenship. Almost 70 years later, Jerzy Ciba reflected that "those who were somehow clever could do different things [...] Even leave. They were already in another town, where one talked differently to them," but that others were

postwar victims. They took them to camps somewhere. And because they couldn't organize their own defense or ordinary life problems, they were physically destroyed. They died in these camps. And this is the worst thing that happened here after the war.³⁸

Whereas Polish administrative sources mention a deportation camp in Lubliniec from which 641 local inhabitants with a DVL I or II classification were deported in July 1945, and 149 *Volksdeutsche* from the district who were kept in prison in August 1945, no records are available about the number of people who may have died there.³⁹ Jerzy Ciba, however, was convinced that injustice had been done to locals, including his father.

A second similarity marking the narratives of native borderland children is a feeling of disorientation following the disintegration of their communities. An interviewee born in the Belgian borderlands, for example, described how wild verification shattered the social order. Having described

³⁷ Interview with Jerzy Ciba, born 1938, conducted in Gliwice on 9 November 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Dziurok (2007), 567, 580.

how the daughter of village peasant leader Martin Theissen had her head shaved along with her father, he continued:

A Feidler [a boy—MV] was shaving the wife of Martin Theissen. When he had half-shaved her, she said (she was a friend of mother Feidler) to him: "If your mother could see what you are doing to me, it would not fare you well!" He hesitated for a moment, then he dropped the scissors and said: "I will not cut any further!" Then Paulis [the local teacher—MV] picked up the scissors and completed the haircut [...].⁴⁰

Research on Jewish child memories of the Second World War has already shown that children vividly remember what happened to their peers and, thanks to that specific viewpoint, enrich historical knowledge.⁴¹ The interviewee recalls seeing a young person stopping what he was doing when he realised he was shaving a friend of his mother. One could interpret this as the young person acting according to values shared by the interviewee's community, with respect for the elderly being a social code standing above reprisal. The interviewee experienced a mismatch between his moral standards and those practised in his direct social environment. He is confused that the local teacher, one of the most respected community members, continues the shaving.⁴² This observation leaves him with a feeling of disorientation even today. He realises he could have been in the same situation as the peasant family if his parents' war activities had been different. The shaving punishment made him uncertain about what social codes to follow in the future: to whom should he be loyal and why if state borders and national sovereignty are liable to change?

In UpS as well, interviewees ranked the social order of their community above the national differences that verification aimed to introduce. This is, for example, how Waltraud Brzezina recalled the death of her grandfather, who had received a DVL II categorisation:

Later, they took my grandfather to prison, because he was in favor of Germany and had *Volksliste* number two. And after the war he was imprisoned

⁴⁰Damit nichts verloren geht, Private Archive of Carlo Lejeune, B1/09-80-31-M, Interviews with 4 Interviewees, Born 1931, Report 2.

⁴¹Boaz Cohen and Rita Horvath, "Young Witnesses in the DP Camps: Children's Holocaust Testimony in Context," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 11, no. 1 (2012): 103-25.

⁴²Stjepan Gabriel Meštrović, *Emile Durkheim and the Reformation of Sociology* (Boston, MA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1993), 60.

[for this]. He was very abused in this prison, he was beaten very much. Later he got to the hospital. In this hospital, a guard stood next to him, but he could neither speak nor eat. And later he was brought out of this hospital, because he was already [...] He died in a week. Such memories are terrible. I was six years old at the time, but I remember that much. I remember my grandfather, he was such a poor wretch. His legs were thinner than my hands. Tragedies, tragedies! [...] And we had a neighbor who was an insurgent [who fought on the Polish side in the Silesian Uprisings (1919–22)—MV], he was in prison, and my grandfather saved him and pulled him out of this prison. And after the war, he became mad and reported the worst things about my grandparents.⁴³

As a little girl, Waltraud Brzezina saw the consequences of the oppression of Polish state representatives on her grandfather. For Waltraud, moreover, a local inhabitant was to blame for the fate of her grandfather. She seems to have grown up with a feeling that both the German and Polish regimes had been foreign to Silesians, and that it had been the task of locals to help each other out. The worst thing had happened; that social code had been broken. Both in ESM and UpS, borderland children believed that verification disrupted the social rules governing their village communities. The verification was of an arbitrary nature, did not offer convincing results, and left native borderland children disoriented.

Native borderland children growing up in both Belgium and Poland recall that their right to aid depended on how aid distributors judged their parents during the verification campaign. As most of Belgium suffered relatively little damage, the heavily devastated small southern part of ESM, which reportedly had the harshest living conditions in postwar Belgium, could easily be identified as requiring humanitarian aid.⁴⁴ The distribution of that aid, however, was politically motivated and deprived children whose parents had been accused of collaborationism. One testimony shows how the family of an interviewee struggled to make ends meet while his father was in prison awaiting trial: "From that point on, the Red Cross considered the family was no longer entitled to civic rights, which meant that no parcels or support were to be expected anymore."⁴⁵ The interviewee

⁴³Interview with Waltraud Brzezina, born 1938, conducted in Lisowice on 17 November 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

⁴⁴Gerd Kleu, *Die Neuordnung der Ostkantone Belgiens 1945–1956: Politik, Kultur und Wirtschaft in Eupen, Malmédy und St. Vith* (Essen: Klartext, 2007), 120.

⁴⁵Damit nichts verloren geht, Private Archive of Carlo Lejeune, B1/15–90–37–M.

recalled how his feelings of uncertainty increased when his mother stopped receiving income in September 1945 and the family relied on the help of acquaintances and sympathisers. After the verdict, the boy's father lost his civil rights and was not allowed to continue teaching, but he could keep his Belgian citizenship and, from 1946, the family received state-sponsored child allowances, putting the children on equal legal terms with those from the mainland. Nevertheless, the interviewee's narrative is dominated by a sense of injustice for the impact that the verification policy had on his family, and utmost respect for the people who made up for the discrimination that the family faced.

Although war devastation was on a larger scale in Poland, its subsequent territorial changes larger and its recovery slower, Polish authorities made efforts to provide aid (money, clothing and shoes) in UpS from 1946 onwards. However, this did not satisfy needs and verified citizens appear to have had privileged access. Children of unverified parents often did not receive enough milk and/or were locked up, with or without their parents, in detention camps awaiting deportation to Germany, despite international regulations.⁴⁶ Maria Magdalena Wolik, born into a family that received a DVL II classification, recalled how in the difficult days of the early postwar period, when the family was released from a detention camp but was not entitled to aid, a neighbour helped her mother to feed her little sister. Although grateful, Maria remains frustrated to this day because that help was insufficient: "My youngest sister [...] was not even one year old. I remember that Mrs. Fronczykowa always gave us a small pot of milk [...] She always gave it to us when we went. But what is such a pot of milk for such a child?"⁴⁷

Even though governments in both Belgium and Poland adopted policies to end postwar child discrimination, native borderland child narratives remain dominated by feelings of inferiority and an aversion to officials.

⁴⁶ R. M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 234.

⁴⁷ Interview with Maria Magdalena Wolik, born 1933, conducted in Lubecko on 16 November 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

SIMILARITIES IN NARRATIVES ON NATIONALISATION

Prompted by security concerns, officials in various countries believed nationalisation to be a cornerstone of postwar reconstruction. Nation-states resolved to take control not only of their territories and borders, but also of their children, who were to be “captured and remodeled by nations looking to expand their ranks.”⁴⁸ Verified borderland children were considered assimilable, and a series of policies were adopted to mould these children into future model citizens. It is unsurprising, therefore, that native borderland children chiefly focus on their experiences of nationalisation within their testimonies.

Native borderland inhabitants in both Poland and Belgium were supposed to relinquish German-sounding first names and surnames. In UsP, name changes in official paperwork were obligatory, but the policy was not always effectively carried out.⁴⁹ Jan Myrcik, for example, remembered: “My sister-in-law, who was born in Bytom in a German family, was called Edeltraut Kolbe. Edel is a noble, traute—as if trusted. They christened her Urszula Koczula. Her brother, Horst was his name, was given the name Janik.”⁵⁰

Waltraud Brzezina, on her turn, could keep her name, but recalls having been discriminated against:

I had a name—Waltraud, German, because my dad was more for Germany, and my mother was a real Silesian. And my dad gave me that name. To this day, I have that name because I will not change what my parents gave me, but I was persecuted at school. A school principal was so terrible that he even tried to molest me, but I was a firm girl and I did not give up. I was persecuted very much. He was so angry with me that he didn't let me start the next class. And I never complained to anyone, never [...] There were more children like me.⁵¹

In ESM too, the names of native children were often orally transformed into French ones. An interviewee recalled his first school day in 1945:

⁴⁸ Zahra (2011), 36.

⁴⁹ Szymeja (2000), 154.

⁵⁰ Interview with Jan Myrcik, born 1931, conducted in Koszęcin on 10 August 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

⁵¹ Interview with Waltraud Brzezina, born 1938, conducted in Lisowice on 17 November 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

We had to line up in rows and were then asked for our names. Then came one of the first, that was Wansart Nicholas. Mister Johan asked him: "What is your name?" "Wansart Nicholas." "WHAT is your name?" "Wansart Nicholas," he said. Slap, he had one on his cheek. "This means that from now on your name is Wansart (French pronunciation) and is no longer Wansart (German pronunciation), remember that well!"⁵²

Native borderland children were also encouraged to exchange their language for French or Polish respectively when speaking in public. Local officials were often fired because they were considered war collaborationists and were replaced by state officials from the mainland who communicated the link between the locals and their state in the official language.⁵³ As *Niederfränkisch* and *Rheinisch*, versions of German spoken in ESM, are closest to *Hochdeutsch* and barely related to French, while Silesian is a tongue related to Polish influenced by German, this change seems to have been more difficult for children in Belgium.⁵⁴ An interviewee recalled, for example: "All forms were in French and the staff of the administrative district were all in favor of Belgium."⁵⁵ In UpS, Polish handbooks from the late 1930s were brought back into the schools. Jan Myrcik remembered:

In 1945 [...], for the second time in my life, the Polish school was founded. There were no textbooks. My parents somehow had kept the textbooks from before the war through the occupation. It was a punishment! Up to prison! You were not allowed to have any Polish books. And after the war, the German ones were not allowed. During the war, it was not allowed to speak Polish, and just after the war, it was not allowed to speak German.⁵⁶

In sum, native borderland children grew up in a traditional and isolated world that centred around work on family farms and featured scarce

⁵² Damit nichts verloren geht, Private Archive of Carlo Lejeune, B1/09-80-31-M, Interviews with 4 Interviewees, Born 1931, Report 1. See also Interview with Rudolf Kolvenbach, born 1944, conducted in Eupen on 18 August 2013 by Wendy Müller.

⁵³ Machteld Venken, "Nationalisation Campaigns and Teachers' Practices in Belgian-German and Polish-German Border Regions (1945-1956)," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 42, no. 4 (2014): 223-41.

⁵⁴ Ulrich Ammon, Hans Bickel, and Alexandra N. Lenz, eds, *Variantenwörterbuch des Deutschen* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2004), L.

⁵⁵ Damit nichts verloren geht, Private Archive of Carlo Lejeune, A3/20-80-36-M.

⁵⁶ Interview with Jan Myrcik, born 1931, conducted in Koszęcin on 10 August 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

contact with officials.⁵⁷ They all negatively recall the brief but emotionally difficult moments when state officials introduced them to the core values of the nation. They searched for ways to escape their isolation and feelings of national domination, but could not leave for Germany. Sentences such as “between us and Germany was a wall” frequently recur in their testimonies.⁵⁸ Between the end of the 1940s and the mid-1950s, westward out-migration from UpS came to a halt, and the Belgian-German border remained one of the most difficult to cross in Western Europe until the mid-1950s, earning the name of the Glass Curtain.⁵⁹

DIFFERENCES IN NARRATIVES

Testimonies from native borderland children in ESM have a notably more positive tone than those from UpS in recalling the end of the Second World War. Children in ESM often refer to the arrival of the Americans in a joyful way: “I ate my first chocolate then. Before we hadn’t known it [...] We were free, had hung out with the Americans who we had smoked cigarettes with and got up to other stuff.”⁶⁰

In contrast, fear of the Soviet Army was a central feature in all testimonies from UpS, as Soviet Army soldiers often indiscriminately treated local civilians as Germans.⁶¹ In early 1945, Soviet authorities deported around 16,000 Upper Silesians to Donbas and Siberia, burned down villages and terrorised inhabitants.⁶² Aniela Trybus remembered how soldiers of the Red Army treated her because they considered her to have been German:

⁵⁷ Andreas Fickers, “Die Veränderung von Raum und Zeit durch die Erfahrung der Welt,” in *Spuren in die Zukunft: Anmerkungen zu einem bewegten Jahrhundert*, ed. Carlo Lejeune, Andreas Fickers, and Freddy Cremer (Büllingen: Lexis Verlag, 2001), 117.

⁵⁸ *Damit nichts verloren geht*, Private archive of Carlo Lejeune, A4/05-80-30-W.

⁵⁹ Lejeune (2007), 231; Stola (2010), 66.

⁶⁰ *Damit nichts verloren geht*, Private Archive of Carlo Lejeune, B8/08-60-34-M. See also Emil Gennen, *Die Amis kommen! Ein zwölfjähriger Zeitszeuge erinnert sich: Dokumente, Notizen und Eindrücke zur Befreiung des südlichen St. Vithes Landes sowie der angrenzenden luxemburgischen und deutschen Ortschaften im September 1944* (Burg-Reuland: Beschützende Werkstätte Meyerode, 1995).

⁶¹ Throughout Poland, inhabitants were afraid of the Soviet Army. See Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga: Polska 1944–1947: ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2012), 343.

⁶² Ther (2000), 421.

When I was four years old, the army entered Lubecko and started bombing. We escaped to the basement, and [...] when they entered this basement, there were a lot of people hiding there, they threw everybody out and put us against the wall. Really, I remember it [...] I was four years old but I remember it all. How they came in with these rifles and put us under [...].⁶³

Contrary to the situation in ESM, in UpS children were also directly targeted during the verification campaign. Maria Magdalena Wolik, for example, whose parents had been classified as DVL II during the war, recalled how after her father was "taken away" to the Soviet Union in 1945, where he eventually died, her mother and siblings were forced to leave. When officers approached their house, Maria's mother escaped through the window, thinking that if she left the children, the officers would not take away the house. Maria Wolik honours her mother's successful attempt to help her children leave the collection point they were brought to by relying on the different treatment they were given as children; Maria and her sister received permission from the officer to leave, supposedly to get their baby sister's soother. Maria and her sister hid and saw their mother and baby sister being "loaded on a wagon" and driven away.⁶⁴ After three days, their mother and baby sister returned. Until today, Maria celebrates her birthday twice: "Because this birthday was the birthday of the Mother of God [...] Because it was terrible for us. Because dad was gone and my mother was taken away with my little sister."⁶⁵ The interviewee does not put the blame for "being left alone" on her mother, who left the children on their own twice, but on the verification officers.

When, after the sham national elections in 1947, the Polish state dramatically interfered in borderland communities by collectivising the agricultural sector and punishing those who spoke German in public, Polish nationalisation took on a dictatorial dimension. At this point, the Belgian and Polish political regimes significantly diverged. The fear of Stalinist repression can be felt in testimonies. Kazimierz Koszarek, for example, remembered how:

⁶³ Interview with Aniela Trybus, born 1939, conducted in Lubecko on 16 November 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

⁶⁴ Interview with Maria Magdalena Wolik, born 1933, conducted in Lubecko on 16 November 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

When we were in class 11, Generalissimus Stalin was hanging on the wall, but without the rim, only the paper itself. And someone, a silly one, shortly before the finals, tore this Stalin down. Damn it! I don't know if they found out who did it, I don't think they did. But it was dangerous, because none of us may have gotten to college because of that.⁶⁶

It is worth looking at what Stalinist repression could do to an individual child like Jerzy Ciba, whose father, as mentioned above, had fought on both fronts, and who in the early postwar years was living in a big house with his extended family, including his aunt. Her husband had fought for the Polish case in the Silesian Uprisings (1919–22), had worked as a policeman in Polish Upper Silesia in the interwar years, and when the Second World War broke out was evacuated further east, where the Soviet Army took him into captivity, deported him and executed him as part of the Katyn massacre, the mass execution of nearly 22,000 Polish officers mainly by the Soviet secret police in 1940. In the afterwar period, Jerzy Ciba was sometimes considered her son:

(J.C.): Aunt had problems.

(Interviewer): Which aunt, the one who lost her husband?

(J.C.): Yes, the one with whom we lived. Because those who spied on us probably identified me as her son. Perhaps those problems that I had were due to the Secret Services being uninformed?

(Interviewer): So, as a "Katyn child"?

(J.C.): As a "Katyn child," yes.⁶⁷

Instead of being perceived as a child of a local inhabitant categorised as DVL III during the war, or as a child of an ex-combatant who fought for the liberation of what became seen as the hostile Western world during communism, Jerzy Ciba thinks he was perceived as the child of his uncle, the embodiment of what the communist regime no longer stood for: an elitist, bourgeois Second Polish Republic. Now grown up, Ciba still wonders whether the problems he encountered while being taught by members of communist-oriented partisans in his local school in the early postwar years may have been the result of this misconception.

⁶⁶Interview with Kazimierz Koszarek, born 1931, conducted in Lubliniec on 9 November 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

⁶⁷Interview with Jerzy Ciba, born 1938, conducted in Gliwice on 9 November 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

Native borderland children also have different criteria regarding the delineation of membership of social groups. The testimonies from ESM reveal that there was a conflict line between children whose parents had been pro-Belgian or pro-German during the Second World War. Let us consider this example: "Children whose parents had done misdemeanor often suffered later on. When they wanted to start something with a girl, then their parents' deed was held up and they often felt guilty too, without being guilty."⁶⁸

The testimonies from UpS, however, differentiate between more groups, and in finding alliances mostly disregard war and verification classifications. The larger postwar immigration in UpS causes native borderland children to focus more on "who came from where" in the early postwar years, than on the war and verification experiences that marked the collective identifications of children in the Belgian-German borderlands. Kazimierz Bromer summarised, for example: "We have four groups: Silesians, those from Westphalia, repatriates and settlers. And the Silesians and repatriates got along best. Here are the western borderlands, here are the eastern borderlands."⁶⁹ Despite administrative sources from the late 1940s mentioning hostility between locals and immigrants from the pre-war Polish eastern lands, like Bromer, most interviewees refer to the borderland experience they share with the latter and evaluate relationships between the two as good.⁷⁰

A final difference lies in the opportunities for witnesses to compensate for nationalisation policies in other spheres of their everyday life. Once they had finished school, most children went to work in Wallonia. Narrators often point to feelings of inferiority while recalling their contact with people from the country's centre. They explain how discrimination occurred because their local language was associated with the past war occupier.⁷¹ A Belgian interviewee summarised his situation in Wallonia:

⁶⁸ *Damit nichts verloren geht*, Private Archive of Carlo Lejeune, B1/05-80-35-M.

⁶⁹ Interview with Kazimierz Bromer, born 1931, conducted in Lubliniec on 10 August 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

⁷⁰ IPN BU MBP 314, k. 142, Raport miesięczny WUBP w Katowicach za okres od 1 VII do 31 VII 1948, quoted in Dziurok (2007), 602. See for example: Interview with Maria Magdalena Wolik, born 1933, conducted in Lubecko on 16 November 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

⁷¹ *Damit nichts verloren geht*, Private Archive of Carlo Lejeune, A1/08-80-31 W.

"We were just the *vatschis*, the cow boys. That was the lowest job."⁷² Only a handful of educated native borderland children outgrew their inferiority complex and pursued careers such as journalism or medicine in the country's centre.⁷³

Since UpS had more local jobs on offer, outmigration to the centre of the country for study or work was rare. However, because of the inward migration of Poles from elsewhere in the country and from interwar Polish eastern provinces to UpS, and because of the social advancement policy of the new communist regime, which valued enthusiasm for the regime above professional skills, competition for the better paid jobs was high. Edward Wieczorek, for example, born in UpS, found a successful strategy to develop his career. By learning Polish well, he managed to outdo the immigrating Poles in the communist regime's social advancement policy: "Good mastery of the Polish language meant that at the Dymitrów mine, I could dominate many who were there at the time of social promotion. I could spark there, you could say, among these bandits."⁷⁴

A more common strategy, however, was to leave Poland. From the mid-1950s, migration from both border ESM and UpS increased, but more natives left UpS than ESM. Every interviewee from UpS had a family member or neighbour who left for Germany from the mid-1950s onwards. The Belgian-German border became easier to cross legally, and the geographical position of ESM next to Germany even made it possible for local inhabitants to live in Belgium and go to school or work in Germany.

⁷² Damit nichts verloren geht, Private Archive of Carlo Lejeune, B1/24-60-37-M. See also Förderverein des Archivwesens in der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens V.o.G., ed., *In Stellung: Einblicke in das Leben ostbelgischer Dienstmädchen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Eupen: Grenz Echo, 2007); Interview with Franz Ingenleuf, born 1933, conducted in Sankt Vith on 16 August 2012 by Wendy Müller.

⁷³ Hubert Jenniges, *Eifeler Kindheit: Erinnerungen aus einem fernen Jahrhundert* (Eupen: Grenz Echo, 2004); Emil Mertes, *Emil Mertes erinnert sich... Verantwortung als Mediziner und Politiker. Eine ostbelgische Karriere* (Eupen: Grenz Echo, 2005).

⁷⁴ Interview with Edward Wieczorek, born 1938, conducted in Koszęcin on 17 August 2013 by Grzegorz Kaczorowski.

CONCLUSION

Although verification and nationalisation were more severe in Poland than in Belgium, more similarities than differences are observed in how native borderland children from the Belgian-German and Polish-German borderlands ascribe meaning to the experiences that so dominantly marked their lives. Using a comparative approach to look beyond differences of postwar political regimes, it appears that native borderland children affected by the outcome of international peace talks and national policies hold much in common.

Although native borderland children born in the 1930s were supposed to form the backbone of national order, the policies that ensued had a deeply negative and long-lasting impact on their personal development and self-identification. Native borderland children were too young to understand the essence of verification, but nevertheless observed that it affected the people in whom they had put their trust (or even themselves), disrupted the social order in their communities and rescinded their right to humanitarian aid. Nationalisation measures, such as name changes and contact with state officials in a foreign (albeit national) language, were experienced as intimidating. Differences in the historical context explain why the end of the Second World War and the recovery period in the Belgian-German borderlands is narrated more positively than in UpS. In addition, some native borderland children from UpS were directly affected by the verification campaign, as they were sent to detention camps. Testimonies from native borderland children in UpS are also marked by a fear of Stalinist repression, and, unlike their peers in the Belgian-German borderlands, interviewees delineate group membership based not on the war, but on the inhabitants' postwar status.

The verification and nationalisation policies of Belgian and Polish early postwar authorities had an effect diametrically opposed to their aims. Instead of becoming a virtuous generation of national citizens securing the nation's stability, this age cohort of native borderland children report that they experienced alienation, emotional resistance against the postwar political order, and developed a lifelong awareness of the historically changing political and social situation of their home territories.

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