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CHANGES TO THE PREFERRED MODEL OF CONSUMPTION AND THE ETHNIC IDENTITY CRISIS OF POLESHUKS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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The article tells about the cultural identity crisis of Poleshuks, concentrating on the changes which emerged in preferred model of consumption after the WWI. The author, inspired by the materials collected in Polesia by Józef Obrębski in the first half of Twentieth century, analyzes the causes and consequences of those significant changes.

Introduction

The land of Polesia lies between areas inhabited predominantly by Poles, Belarusians and Ukrainians. In the early twentieth century, the national and ethnic character of the land's inhabitants was the subject of numerous academic and political debates, which still echoed in publications printed towards the end of the last century. Scholars and politicians typically classified Poleshuks as belonging partly to Belarusian and partly to Ukrainian population. To support their claims, they relied on objectivist arguments, namely those functioning in the realm of linguistics or folk culture. The border between the "Belarusian" and "Ukrainian" Polesia as defined by the above criteria was drafted in a variety of ways, depending on arguments which were deployed rather freely and arbitrarily, such as elements of the language and culture of Polesian population [1.; 4.; 5; 6; 15.].

Idea at notion

In the 1930s, Polish anthropologist (ethnologist and sociologist) Józef Obrębski, a follower and associate of Bronisław Malinowski and Florian Znaniecki, carried out his own, thorough field research in Polesia together with his team. In his research of the region, he was the first to take into account the humanistic factor, and focused on the issues of cultural identity. Obrębski's research showed beyond any doubt that the a majority of the „native" inhabitants of Polesia constituted an ethnic group which was distinct from Belarusians, Ukrainians and other neighbouring groups. In his opinion, it still remained a distinct ethnic group at that time, although its own cultural identity showed advanced signs of decay [2.; 7.; 8.; 9.; 10.; 13.; 16.].

The Second World War and its political aftermath, and the post-war fortunes of Józef Obrębski and his premature death in 1967 prevented him from completing his research on Polesia. Consequently, he never got to publish the materials collected. By the efforts of several Polish academic institutions, virtually all of Józef Obrębski's materials on Polesia were published between 2005 and 2007 [11.; 12.]. This included both the materials printed before the Second World War, and those which the author never published or even prepared for print. They enable the analysis of numerous cultural processes which occurred in Polesia at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and during the interwar period, thus facilitating the understanding of the contemporary cultural situation in this region. To an anthropologist, one of the more intriguing phenomena which can undergo a closer analysis owing to Obrębski's research is the cultural identity crisis of Poleshuks after the First World War in the context of their pursuit of the preferred model of consumption. The emergence and future form of this model were closely related to the events of the First World War and its political and economic consequences.

The common belief in the early twentieth century was that Polesia remained an isolated land at that time, with an archaic folk culture which had "remained the same for centuries." Józef Obrębski challenged the rationality of this theory. He pointed out that until the 1860s, before the tsarist authorities abolished serfdom and granted land ownership to peasants, the foundation of Polesia's economic system was the co-existence of three social groups within the network of archaic social interrelations and economic dependencies. These groups were: affluent owners of great estates, or latifundia (who, while not very numerous, were outstandingly affluent by Polish and European standards of that time), most of whom had already had Polish national identity in the middle of the nineteenth century; Jewish traders; and extremely poor Polesian serfs who ran an almost self-sufficient economy which, in addition to land cultivation, relied heavily on primitive hunting and gathering exploitation of waters and forests. Undoubtedly, the overlapping national and social (class) divisions deepened the mutual distance, reluctance and cultural and social isolation between these groups. To Polesian peasants, the abolition of serfdom and the grant of land ownership were such a revolutionary change that some of them refused to accept farmlands, fearing the new economic situation and the responsibility associated with cultivating the land on their own. In the 1930s, when Józef Obrębski carried out his research, the period between the abolishment of serfdom and the outbreak of the First World War was remembered by Poleshuks as a time of prosperity, economic and social order within the community, and a relative social dignity. That period was contrasted with the previous one, which was regarded as a time of abject poverty, economic exploitation and social degradation, symbolised by physical and sexual assaults on peasants perpetrated by great estate owners, some of which involved beatings, *primae noctis* ("the right of the first night"), and forcing peasants to raise and support children born to their wives, yet conceived by lords [12. pp. 33-167].

Therefore, one may raise certain questions: If Poleshuks successfully survived the economic and social revolution caused by the abolishment of serf economy, why would their sense of identity be undermined by the changes brought by the First World War? If the conditions of the Polesian countryside were indeed very good after the elimination of serfdom, why did the common opinion (outside of Polesia) preserve the image of archaic Polesia, and how could the aspirations to the new model of

consumption damage the cultural (ethnic) identity of peasants inhabiting the land?

The abolition of serfdom and the grant of freehold to Polesia's peasants were clearly a revolutionary change for them, but only to a certain degree. It significantly increased the independence of the Polesian peasant, in fact forcing him to become self-sufficient, which, as I previously mentioned, was frequently against his will and concerns. It also put an end to the former, almost slavish dependence on the lord, which extended to a degree that had not been seen in Central and Western Europe for a very long time. Still, it did not completely sever the existing social and economic relations between the three groups of Polesia's inhabitants which I have already mentioned. The peasant still occupied the lowest position, both economically and socially, although his status was not as humiliating as it had been before. Most importantly however, the cultural and economic innovations which followed the elimination of serfdom were not in opposition to tradition. The traditional way of farming and the traditional social relations within the Polesian community were not transformed. In a way, they were reinforced. In fact, the basis of Poleshuks' social life and economy remained the extended family, which was very traditional in its structure. One may even venture to propose a theory that, paradoxically, after the abolishment of serfdom, its significance actually rose. Not only did the peasant enjoy a social position which conferred more (yet, still too little) dignity on him, but also gained a significant boost to his affluence, which was, in his own opinion, the product of the effective economic operation of the extended family as the basic rural economic unit.

The extended family had a remarkably patrilineal character. At the centre, there was the farm owner, highly respected by the rest of the household, and exercising ultimate and uncontested authority over them. His leadership applied to both running the farm and overseeing family and religious life. He occupied a place at home which was appropriate for his status, both at the table and in his bed at night. His sons, their wives and their offspring had to be perfectly obedient to him. As Obrębski pointed out, daughters were regarded as a transitory issue in the traditional Polesian family, and they left the family as soon as they got married. Their status, similar to that of daughters-in-law, was always distinctly inferior to that of men's, while the farmer's wife held the dominant position among women. One of the external manifestations of the underprivileged status of women was the common and almost compulsory wife-beating by their husbands [12. pp. 140-154].

The hierarchy of Polesian values highly favoured two closely interrelated notions: that of "the father" and "the patrimony", i.e. the family farmland, which constituted the basis of the family's economic existence. Importantly, land was a collective and ancestral property without which the extended family would not have been able to survive. Selling the land was not allowed. Instead, one had to take good care of it and pass it on to the next generations.

"Just as patrimony, being the foundation of the family's existence, is a common material value, a living space of the group, and the centre of its physical focus, so the father, the host in relation to whom the individual obtains the right to be present in that space, a specific position in the family and a rationale for its existence in the neighbourhood is a collective moral value for the family, and its spiritual focus. As the head of the family, he is an icon of the group's unity, its representative in relations with the external world, and an exponent of its collective will. As the leader of the patriarchal site, he is the embodiment of house and family traditions, a link between the generations of the living descendants and the dead ancestors," wrote Obrębski [12. p. 148].

The exceptional role of the father in the family translated into the privileged position of older men in the village community, and on their authority and rights – including the 'pecking order.' For example, when older men spent time in the inn, drinking and talking, younger ones were banished to the streets. The economic prosperity of a family determined the status of its head in the village community. It was the richest farm owners who set the pace of village life: they were the first to sow, harvest, etc., and it was them that others followed with respect and without envy [12. pp. 140-153].

However, the economic prosperity of the family, which determined its place in the village community, did not translate proportionally into increased consumption. "There are people in the countryside who have gathered about ten thousand roubles during their lifetimes, and no one could tell by looking at them. They usually exchange their money for silver […] and hide it in a safe place or bury it in the ground. […] Still, the rich do not change their traditional outfits nor build better cottages, nor do they introduce any novelties; they also do not buy more land. […] A wealthy farm owner only distinguishes himself from the others in that he can drink a bit more vodka on a Sunday, has a finer and more numerous flock, and wears shoes more often. His children wear the same ragged shirts and run in the streets, and his sons and daughters go to work being no different from the poorer ones," Jeleńska noted towards the end of the nineteenth century in her observations of Polesian community life [3. pp. 307].

For a clearer understanding of the subsequent changes, I need to point out two more features of the Polesian society at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, i.e. the village solidarity which manifested itself in the requirement to remain absolutely honest to one's own community (but not towards "strangers" such as landowners or Jews: stealing from the landlord was not condemned), and in the mutual help in solving all problems with which even the extended family could not cope. Another important aspect of their morality was premarital chastity, i.e. the sexual abstinence of both the woman and the man. Any departure from the rules of community life reinforced by tradition was met with an appropriate response from the community, from verbal condemnation to physical violence, which could be very brutal. The extended family and the social opinion were the primary institutions which guaranteed the transfer of intra-group values between generations, and the persistence of traditional culture [7.; 12. pp. 140-67].

Józef Obrębski was clearly right in undermining the view that the traditional culture of Poleshuks remained "constant throughout the centuries." However, those

who voiced such opinions were also right to an extent. This is because, regardless of all changes occurring in the Polesian society, and the Poleshuks' satisfaction with their own culture and economic situation after the grant of freehold, a Poleshuk still remained an embodiment of archaism, poverty, and economic and social backwardness in comparison to, and in the opinion of, his neighbours. Józef Obrębki explicitly summarized the stories of Poleshuks related by the adjacent communities which he collected during his field research: "At all times and places, non-Polesian populations perceive the features characteristic for Poleshuks as indications of savagery and barbarity, backwardness and primitivism, and as a moral and cultural anachronism. In addition, which is striking, a Poleshuk is a popular figure, an amusing conversational piece and an object of mockery in his absence. His ignorance, naivety and crudeness are almost proverbial" [12. pp. 195].

In these views, a Poleshuk is an illiterate person who has not seen the world outside his backyard and knows nothing about it [12. pp. 198-9, 263-4].

The beginning of the twentieth century brought the collapse of the archaic pastoral and farming economy, with the extended family as its basic economic unit. At the same time, it was a period which saw a sudden increase in the Poleshuks' exposure to the external world. Emigration for economic reasons to the United States (before the war) and to Argentina (after the war), mass travel in search of gainful employment to Russia (with the subsequent repatriation), and the correspondence with the former community changed the Poleshuks' view of the world. This knowledge was also abruptly altered by the stormy period of war, with its troop marches, power struggle, anarchy and chaos, demoralization, and at the same time, new opportunities to become familiar with the world outside, and new opportunities to earn a living. At that time, many Poleshuks came under the long-term influence of alien cultural environments, while the relations with their own background were reduced or completely severed. All this brought on a considerable increase in individualism which had been previously suppressed by the extended family [7.; 8.].

The intensified relations with the external world resulted in a significant depreciation of the Poleshuks' own culture, and dissatisfaction with the traditional way of life. "Our country is referred to as Polesia, up to Pinsk and to the very border. There is no worse country than this. I have travelled far, and I have been to Poland, Germany and China, and there is no worse land than this one" [12. p. 232]. This was a Poleshuk's typical opinion of his own homeland in the 1930s. Obrębski's interviewees emphasised the wealth of the countries which they visited during the wartime and post-war migrations or military service as compared to that of their own land. This also weakened the extend family and the social opinion as the bearer and guardian of the most precious community values [7.; 8.].

Exposure to new cultural patterns resulted in a desire to accomplish new values, primarily hedonistic ones. This led to the pursuit of such principles as "non-folk outfit, a diet not bound by the rules of lent and the prescriptions of economy, new forms of social life, and new forms of eroticism" [12. p. 282]. This was accompanied by the demoralising erosion of existing role models and the stability of marriage, the slackening of morals with respect to sexuality, the increasing number of family conflicts, the disappearance of community solidarity, and the intensified aspiration towards emancipation of the younger generation who demanded that their own individual shares be established from the family property, and strove for independence [7.; 12. pp. 230-235].

Traditionalists referred to the new situation as demoralisation, extravagance and debauchery. To the young enthusiasts of the new values, this was an attempt to accomplish a new cultural pattern associated with members of a socially superior group: the 'lordly' life. At the same time, a Poleshuk was impressed by the way of life of both Poles as a nation, which they also regarded as 'lordly,' and that of their neighbours, the Belarusian and Ukrainian peasants, whose wealth warranted, in the Poleshuk's view, a 'lordly' lifestyle [12. pp. 274-283).

The inability to accomplish these new patterns, which were limited, as has to be emphasised, primarily to new types of consumption, in their own traditional culture and community caused a crisis of ethnic identity among Poleshuks. In the 1930s, few admitted to Polesian identity and were proud of it, and those were mainly older people in the backcountry. The twentieth century generations were ashamed of their Polesian descent and the ethnonym of „Poleshuk," and even of their language, which was considered primitive and common. The phenomenon that occurred was termed by Józef Obrębski as "ethnic mimesis," where Poleshuks wanted to become superficially similar to neighbouring communities which they considered 'lordly,' and dismissed the image and ethnonym of a Poleshuk in conversations with strangers by applying the term to areas which lay further back in the country [7.; 12. pp. 230-234].

Conclusion

However, these changes did not result in the naturalisation of Poleshuks and in their assimilation into the Polish, Belarusian or Ukrainian societies, which surprised external observers. The reasons were twofold: Poleshuks' aspirations to the accomplishment of the neighbouring groups' cultural patterns remained restricted almost exclusively to consumption patterns; and the assimilation process was challenged by the overt despiteful and contemptuous attitude of Belarusian and Ukrainian peasants, local gentry, or Polish officials. As a result, the Polesian identity finally found itself in a state which was referred to by the contemporary Polish sociologist, Stanisław Orsini-Rosenberg, as "the phase of uncreative decay," [14. pp. 28-33] i.e. a situation in which the erosion of the existing system of values, being the basis of the group identity, was not accompanied by its creative transformation, but solely by individual aspiration to the adoption of foreign patterns which were regarded as superior. The failure of the aspirations to new models as well as the rejection by neighbouring groups not only deepened the social frustration of Poleshuks, but also contributed to the emergence of reluctance towards the neighbours (mainly Poles) and to the idealisation of the older Polesian culture to which,

however, there was no going back [7. pp. 441-443; 12. pp. 230-234].

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ МОДЕЛИ ПОТРЕБИТЕЛЬСКИХ ПРЕДПОЧТЕНИЙ И КРИЗИС ЭТНИЧЕСКОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ ПОЛИЩУКОВ В НАЧАЛЕ XX В.

Статья посвящена кризису культурной идентичности Полищуков, изменениям модели потребления после Первой мировой войны. Автор под влиянием материалов, собранных Юзефом Обренбским в Полесье в первой половине двадцатого века, анализирует причины и последствия этих радикальных изменений.

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЇ МОДЕЛІ СПОЖИВАЦЬКИХ СМАКІВ ТА КРИЗА ЕТНІЧНОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ ПОЛІЩУКІВ НА ПОЧАТКУ XX СТ.

Стаття присвячена кризі культурної ідентичності Поліщуків, змінам моделі споживання після Першої світової війни. Автор під впливом матеріалів, зібраних Юзефом Обренбським у Поліссі у першій половині двадцятого століття, аналізує причини та наслідки цих радикальних змін.