

Literary Insights into Industrial and Frontier Societies: Comparative View on Cultural Poetics of the Donbas and Upper Silesia¹—Part I

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ABSTRACT: This article provides insight into the historical representations and literary constructions of two old industrial borderlands in Eastern and East-Central Europe: the Donbas and Upper Silesia. The first part addresses key questions about comparative studies, cultural poetics, regionalism, and the conflicts in both borderlands. It also explores the historical transformations that have shaped the regions in distinct ways, highlighting industrialization, the geopolitical composition of a borderland, and regionalism as common aspects for comparison. In the second part, two novels [*The Length of Days. An Urban Ballad* (2017) by Volodymyr Refeyenko (*1969) and *East Wind* (1932) by August Scholtis (1901–69)],

¹ This text was created as part of the scholarly project titled “Poetics of Industrial Landscapes: The Donbas and Upper Silesia in Comparative Perspective,” funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (project number 01UL2204B). Our project aims to explore the epistemological approaches to the two old industrial territories that are, or were, politically and militarily contested. We focus on two main research questions. The first examines the specific cultural interactions between old industrial regions and the pressures of globalization, particularly the transition to an information society. The second research question addresses the cultural dimension of borderlands with varying loyalties to imperial and nation-states. The project seeks to explore whether these borderlands possess distinct cultural characteristics and how they are influenced by the dynamics of the industrial landscapes. To address these research questions, we primarily analyse fictional literature from the late 19th century onwards, which portrays industrial and frontier societies of the Donbas and Upper Silesia. By employing a comparative analysis, we aim to identify the culturally shaped regional ‘epistemological enclosures’ that have emerged in these industrial landscapes.



stemming respectively from the Donbas and Upper Silesian historical conflicts, are presented in terms of the complex borderland narratives they embrace (biographies, plots, narrations, genres, and portrayals/literary representations). This article revolves around the research question of whether examining the outbreak of violence in Upper Silesia during 1919–22 can provide insights into the potential future trajectory of the Donbas.

KEYWORDS: Donbas, Upper Silesia, cultural poetics, industrialization, frontiers, borderlands.

Introduction

In 2014, the Donbas region of Ukraine became a striking example of a borderland where internal and external socio-political factors led to casualties, displacement, and significant damage to its industrial infrastructure. After Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the Donbas remains an area of constant and massive military operations. The socio-political, economic, and cultural continuity of this region as a single and recognizable living environment is now coming to an end before our very eyes. As a result, there will be a need to find new and discursively productive approaches to the Donbas in the unknown future.

Our approach is to build upon the past by comparing the Donbas region to another industrial borderland—Upper Silesia. By deploying literary discourses, our objective is to present well-founded scenarios on how the Donbas and Upper Silesia regions have been claimed and constructed, specifically in relation to their interpersonally validated identity.

In the first part of this article, we discuss our understanding of comparative studies, cultural poetics, regionalism, and borderland conflicts in reference to our research objects. In the second part, we present the comprehensive subject of industrial borderlands in literature. We demonstrate how this allows us to identify the primary historical, political, and social coordinates of the regions. Additionally, we highlight significant differences between both regions while still providing a basis for their comparison.

Underlying Concepts and Problems

Comparative Studies

Today's literary theory can be traced back, among other sources, to comparative literary studies that emerged in the 19th century. During that time, scholars engaged in comparative studies examined the similarities, differences, and potential interdependencies between national literatures. Over the years, the evolution of literary scholarship has fostered a willingness to transcend

disciplinary boundaries, resulting in the emergence of transnational, intercultural, and transmedial approaches within comparative studies. These approaches encompass both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, allowing for a comprehensive examination of literature.²

Our comparison, for example, can be effectively framed within the taxonomy of comparative studies developed by the Slovakian researcher Dionýz Durišin,³ who distinguishes between two types of comparisons: those centred on contact zones and those focused on typological phenomena. Both types can be applied to our regions. The contact zone model assumes direct (internal) and indirect (external) connections between the subjects of comparison. Although we do not identify direct intertextual ties between the literatures of the Donbas and Upper Silesia,⁴ it remains crucial to critically examine potential external points of reference. The contact model proposed by Durišin implies the presence of a shared external exchange of information, particularly within the key areas of world literature⁵ that operate according to certain aesthetic principles. The presence of common sources of inspiration varies across different epochs, largely remaining divergent due to the distinct historical developments of our research subjects over time.

For example, the period between 1870 and 1917 can be defined as a time of respective imperial influences—the Russian and the German (Prussian) ones. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the impact of various imperial cultures on the Donbas and Upper Silesia as industrial areas.⁶ In 1922, the

² E. Zemanek, A. Nebrig, *Komparatistik*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2012, p. 10.

³ In the present article, we incorporate insights from Zelle's elaborations on Durišin: C. Zelle, *Komparatistik und 'comparatio'—der Vergleich in der Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft. Skizze einer Bestandsaufnahme*, Komparatistik: Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft, Synchron Verlag, Heidelberg 2005.

⁴ The only historical connection that could have led to a direct intertextual context is the forced labour of Upper Silesian prisoners of war, who were compulsorily sent to work as miners in the Donbas after World War II. However, no literary evidence of this historical fact is known to exist. Regarding the Soviet deportations from Silesia, see for example: U. Merten, *Forgotten Voices: The Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern Europe after World War II*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick—New Jersey 2012, particularly pp. 58–63 or Z. Woźniczka, *Z Górnego Śląska do sowieckich łagrów*, Wydawnictwo Śląsk, Katowice 1996.

⁵ The concept of world literature will be thoroughly examined in our project. At this stage, we align ourselves with Goethe's perspective, as he discussed his stance on the matter in 1827. Goethe's viewpoint emphasizes a transnational thinking influenced by global communication (see E. Zemanek, A. Nebrig, *Komparatistik*, p. 10). Nevertheless, we acknowledge that Goethe's progress optimism may be not relevant in contemporary times.

⁶ However, in terms of industrial regions, there are also other questions that need to be addressed more extensively, such as the role of Marxism and how it is reflected in literature. Additionally, one may ask whether and to what extent did French industrial naturalistic

Donbas entered the Soviet era, which persisted in its various neo-imperial manifestations until 1991. At the same time, between 1918 and 1945, the divided Upper Silesia was exposed to German-Polish national tensions. Subsequently, from 1945 to 1989, following its reunification, the region was subjected to the influence of “national communism”⁷ in the Polish People’s Republic. Nevertheless, it becomes possible to discuss the shared external influences between the Donbas and Upper Silesia during the latter period. After 1991, the prevalent experiences were centred around the structural economic transformation and the tensions which resulted from national policies of the Ukrainian and Polish states. At the same time, there were specific processes of transnationalisation taking place. In the Donbas region, there were (post-)Soviet and Eurasian (“Russkii mir”)⁸ dilemmas to contend with, while Upper Silesia began embracing a European vision of a region.⁹ These historical milestones gave rise to distinct literary forms.

The aforementioned Durišin’s second model of comparison, which focuses on typological phenomena, enables the identification of another plane of comparison. According to this model, the concept of *tertium comparationis*,

literature influence both Russian and German literatures, particularly regarding their reflection of respective industrial regions.

⁷ While the term “national communism” is often associated with Josip Broz Tito’s (1892–1980) Yugoslavia or Imre Nagy’s (1896–1958) National Communism program in Hungary, we argue that communist Poland also meets the criteria of “policies based on the principle that in each country the means of attaining ultimate communist goals must be dictated by national conditions rather than by a pattern set in another country” [see Encyclopedia Britannica online, National Communism, source: www.britannica.com/money/National-Communism (accessed 07 June 2024)].

⁸ While historically, in the Russian imperial projects, the Donbas did not acquire a symbolic meaning comparable to that of Crimea or Kyiv (as the cradle of the Kyivan Rus), after 2014 it gained valorisation through the Russian propaganda machine, which portrayed the Donbas as the bulwark of “Russkii mir” (literally, “Russian world”) and the utopian idea of a united Eurasia. This bulwark supposedly protects Russia from Ukrainian “fascism” and, by extension, from the malign European influences (see for example: M. Laruelle, TM. Laruelle, *The Three Colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis*, “Post-Soviet Affairs” 2015, issue 1, pp. 55–74).

⁹ We recognize the complexity of the European vision for a region. At this stage, we want to highlight a potential approach for European regions, which involves establishing a transnational space that incorporates a nuanced interplay between a genuine sense of belonging and the historical legacies, such as migration. These processes are intricately linked to the deliberate commercialization of regional resources, drawing upon diverse historical factors. For more details see: W. Łukowski (ed.), *Tożsamość regionów w Polsce w przestrzeni europejskiej. Materiały z konferencji “Regiony, regionalizm i Unia Europejska” zorganizowanej przez Wolny Sojusz Europejski Zielonych i Ruch Autonomii Śląska dnia 17.10.2003*, Ruch Autonomii Śląska, Katowice 2004.

or common ground, plays a decisive role. Typological comparison aims to explore both general and specific aspects. In the case of the Donbas and Upper Silesia, the common ground encompasses industrialization and the geopolitical composition of a borderland, which have shaped the regions historically and structurally, and should therefore be elaborated upon more thoroughly.

Industrialization is a complex phenomenon that unfolded during the 19th and 20th centuries and has undergone several revisions. Initially, it was regarded as an imperial strategy. Later, it was also perceived as a deliberate effort by communist and socialist governments to contribute to the so-called Great Acceleration of economy through centralized planning. Finally, industrialization came to be defined in terms of economic transformation and structural change.

The geopolitical composition of a borderland encompasses a variety of possible approaches. Building upon the work of Bartov and Weitz¹⁰, we assert that borderlands are unique areas of interaction where the border itself shapes social processes and allows for fluid identities. This results in ongoing debates surrounding political control and the emergence of a population affected by ideological tensions. Moreover, borderlands are geographically distant from the state centre, which presents challenges for their integration. As a result, borderlands are particularly vulnerable to various ideologically driven projects, which, in turn, can lead to outbreaks of violence.

Cultural Poetics

However, when it comes to comparative studies and *tertium comparationis*, regionalism itself emerges as the most compelling common ground, given its role as an overarching phenomenon that contributes to identity formation.¹¹ Regionalism, with all the phenomena it entails, proves to be an ideal research topic for cultural poetics. The latter term, however, requires some clarification. To provide a brief historical context, ancient poetics functioned as a prescriptive discipline that offered guidelines for poets and

¹⁰ O. Bartov, E. D. Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires. Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2013, pp. 1-22.

¹¹ We have identified industrialization, the geopolitical composition of a borderland, and regionalism as the main components of our *tertium comparationis*. Each of these aspects is rich in corresponding motifs. For instance, when considering the borderland, we can discuss sub-components such as the social actors involved in instances of violence: social movements, national activists, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and newcomers who find their way into literary works. Furthermore, the actions of these social actors give rise to attitudes that shape literary representations, such as tornness, cunning, or resourcefulness.

dramatists. In the 19th century, this normative poetics was transformed into descriptive and historical poetics that expanded knowledge about particular pieces of literature¹² and the historical development of literary forms and conventions.¹³

Nevertheless, the theoretical framework underpinning our analysis revolves around *cultural* poetics (specifically within the paradigm of new historicism). Unlike normative poetics, which was one of the inspirations for literary theory in the 19th and 20th centuries but served mainly descriptive purposes, cultural poetics represents a theory that seeks to explain the nature of literature through its surrounding actions, such as its emergence, interpretation, and, most importantly, its integration into societal discourses. Cultural poetics places literature within broader definitions and concepts.¹⁴ However, cultural poetics does not aim to become an all-encompassing, highly systematised form of knowledge production. Rather, it represents a literary theory trend from the 20th century that sought to develop interpretive languages and to explore literature in new contexts and applications.¹⁵ In other words, while some literary theories, such as Russian Formalism and the Prague School of Structuralism, focused on ontological questions about literature, others, such as phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and later cultural, gender, and queer studies, explored epistemological and hermeneutic questions. Cultural poetics operates on the premise that both literary works and their theoretical elucidations are deeply embedded within historical, ideological, social, and moral (i.e., cultural) contexts.¹⁶ Thus, as a literary theory, cultural poetics assumes the role of reinforcing and supporting a plurality of perspectives, where interpretation, as well as pragmatic and performative purposes, acquire primary importance.

Region and Regionalism

In light of the above, it is pertinent to re-examine the historical concept of a region. The predominantly spatial perception of a region has been a subject of scholarly discussions regarding the foundations of human identity, at least since the age of nationalisms. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries

¹² In this regard, the term “poetics” in the title of our project should be understood in a generalised or even figurative sense, since it indicates that there are identifiable poetic patterns that have emerged in relation to industrial borderlands, which require further exploration and understanding.

¹³ A. Burzyńska, M.P. Markowski, *Teorie literatury XX wieku*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2007, p. 18.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

in Europe, various relationships were developed between emerging nation-states, their citizenship regimes, and regions. Since the Napoleonic era, the dominance of centrally managed states with robust public administrations positioned regions as subordinate entities.¹⁷ However, in Europe of the 1990s, regions were re-discovered as driving forces of democratization, almost in terms of Fukuyama's "end of history," where the subsidiarity policy emerged as a bottom-up approach that promised to enhance Europeanization and globalization. Nevertheless, today, the concept of a region as a spatially constructed perception implies resentments arising from unresolved cultural, linguistic, and even religious issues that have persisted since the formation and consolidation of nation-states from the 19th century onwards. To this day, European regions are not always aligned with the states to which they belong and, in some cases, they may clash with EU politics as well.¹⁸

In East-Central and Eastern Europe, the level of ethnic and cultural regional complexity has historically been higher compared to that of Western Europe. The Eastern European nations, often intermixed within different borderlands, were subjects to various imperial influences. The emergence of new states after World War I further intensified regional tensions, largely due to the efforts of self-organizing and centralizing states. The politics of the Soviet satellite states in the aftermath of the World War II effectively suppressed these tensions, which ultimately led to the stagnation of regions as modes for structuring social space. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the concept of the region saw a revival in both East-Central and Eastern Europe, against the backdrop of the entire European continent.¹⁹

While these historical developments apply to Upper Silesia as distinct regional entity, the story of the Donbas was in many ways different. The territory of the Donbas, once known as the "wild field," served as a melting pot for multiple nations, cultures, and social groups from the 1850s onwards. After 1922, the Donbas also became a champion of Soviet industrialization. It was not until 1991, however, that the region turned into a borderland, similar to the regional spaces between the two World Wars in the rest of Eastern Europe. The Donbas became a borderland in a new country, which was routinely described as a contact zone between West and East.

¹⁷ J. Wódz, *Górny Śląsk jako problem polityczny: spojrzenie socjologiczne*, "Górnośląskie Studia Socjologiczne. Seria Nowa" 2010, issue 1, pp. 38f.

¹⁸ G. Abels, *Lass uns allein oder lasst uns rein. Zum (Des-)Integrationspotenzial eines „Europa der Regionen“*, „EUrosion POLITIKUM“ 2017, issue 1, pp. 35-40.

¹⁹ It is indeed tempting to explore this revival in terms of its 'cosmopolitanism' and delve into the question of the extent to which a sense of 'fatherland' is present. In particular, the concept of the "small fatherland" (*mala ojczyzna*) raises intriguing possibilities of transcending traditional notions of nationalism and entering a post-national era.

In the 1990s, Ukraine was simultaneously undergoing processes of regionalization, nationalization, and transnationalization. These processes involved the following aspects: Ukraine's transitional character and Soviet politics resulted in a lack of a prevailing concept of "banal nationalism,"²⁰ as well as a lack of consensus on a "civic identity."²¹ While these generalizing statements call for further scrutiny, we must first acknowledge the historical facts: the Donbas region entered the post-war era in 1945 as an 'ennobled' Soviet region, while Upper Silesia was nationalised as a result of Stalin's policies.²² This is one of the striking differences between Poland and Ukraine, particularly in terms of "banal nationalism," and it has a significant impact on the regional living environments. Regarding transnationalization, it must be added that after 2014, the Donbas was deliberately reconceptualised by the Russian politicians, writers and militants as an integral part of various neo-imperial projects such as "Russkii mir," "Novorossiia," and "Eurasia."

This particular outcome of the Soviet era could be considered one of the reasons why the Donbas could not develop its own European narratives. However, from 1991 onwards, the Donbas region also dealt with other typical Eastern European regional problems, such as nationalizing policies of a newly founded nation-state, a changing global economy, or the legacies of Soviet or socialist past. Furthermore, similarly to regions in East-Central and Western Europe, the Donbas community derived inspiration and a sense of pride from its material heritage, as it is epitomized, for instance, in the notion of "donetskii kharakter" (literally, "Donetsk character"), which attributes a certain identity and a peculiar collective mindset to all the Donbas inhabitants. This phenomenon can be examined through the lens of the "spatial turn," which explores cultural and social constructions in relation to the surrounding physical environment.

The historical specificity of the Donbas and Upper Silesia requires a special approach in terms of methodology. Firstly, we move away from a geographically static viewpoint²³ that categorises a region as a mere 'container' of a particular size, encompassing a range of different phenomena. By relinquishing this insular perspective on both regions, we adopt a more dynamic perspective that acknowledges agency and translocality of the Donbas and Upper Silesia,

²⁰ O. Myshlovska, U. Schmid (eds.), *Regionalism without Regions: Reconceptualizing Ukraine's Heterogeneity*, Central European University Press, Budapest 2019, p. 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²² A. Dziurok, B. Linek, *Dzieje najnowsze. W Polsce Ludowej (1945–1989)*, in: *Historia Górnego Śląska. Polityka, gospodarka i kultura europejskiego regionu*, eds. J. Bahlke, D. Gawrecki, R. Kaczmarek, Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej, Gliwice 2011, pp. 267–280.

²³ We follow the general approach of O. Myshlovska, U. Schmidt (eds.), *Regionalism...* The static approach to regions could be described as utilitarian one, as it has often been employed by centralizing movements such as state politics or nation building.

while trying to capture both these phenomena (i.e., agency and translocality) in literature and film.²⁴

In our view, the term “translocality” resonates with the theoretical premises of cultural poetics. For example, Burzyńska and Markowski encapsulate these premises as follows: firstly, new historicism challenges the notions of objectivity and neutrality in historical research. As a product of a post-romantic paradigm, it rejects the belief that historical works objectively reflect content and processes. Instead, new historicism, alongside cultural poetics, acknowledges Nietzsche’s idea that history is constructed through the instrumentalization of phenomena by various social actors.²⁵ Thus, all so-called “facts” are regarded as elusive as there is no direct access to them. These elusive facts gradually acquire the status of “common lore,” which becomes a rhetorically and poetically reinforced ideology.²⁶ In other words, culture can be considered as a text, and all its phenomena should be analysed as such. Cultural poetics suggests that literary studies can serve as a model for this type of analysis.²⁷

Regarding regional living environments, various ideological tensions arise, such as those related to material heritage, social culture, or national adjustment pressure, which find expression in literature and influence the collective perception of regional communities.

Comparative Perspective on the Conflicts in Donbas and Upper Silesia

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there is an increasing urgency to comprehend the conflict in the Russian-Ukrainian borderland. When comparing the complexities of both borderlands, a diachronic

²⁴ Regarding translocality see, e.g., the blog of a geographer S.A. Perth, *What is Translocality? A Refined Understanding of Place and Space in a Globalized World*, 25 September 2018, source: *What is Translocality? A refined understanding of place and space in a globalized world—Transient Spaces and Societies* (transient-spaces.org) (accessed 10 June 2024): “In my understanding, translocality is a variety of enduring, open, and non-linear processes, which produce close interrelations between different places and people. These interrelations and various forms of exchange are created through migration flows and networks that are constantly questioned and re-worked.”

²⁵ A. Burzyńska, M.P. Markowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 504f. This is also true for Hayden White’s poetics of history. White delves into the strategies of historical explanation, which include narrativization (for example, romantic, tragic, comic, satirical), reasoning (formalistic, mechanistic, organicistic, contextualistic), and ideologization (anarchistic, radical, conservative, liberal).

²⁶ As a self-organizing system of values and beliefs that can attribute an individual to a particular social identity.

²⁷ A. Burzyńska, M.P. Markowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 499ff.

perspective becomes essential. The military escalation in Upper Silesia from 1919 to 1922 and the ongoing military conflict in the Donbas since 2014 span nearly a hundred years, highlighting the significance of analyzing these regions over an extended period of time.²⁸

The crisis in the Donbas can be summarised as follows: since 1991, this region, which was previously elevated to one of the economically crucial areas of the Soviet Union, has faced multiple challenges and ultimately failed to adapt to structural and historical changes. This failure influenced the mechanisms of the collective perception of the Donbas. There were social actors in the regional community who were unable to reconcile with the politics of the Ukrainian state.²⁹ Additionally, the Ukrainian state, while slowly but steadily moving towards a “capitalist type of neo-patrimonial patron-client system,”³⁰ was unable to find common ground with the Donbas. The Ukrainian revolutions in 2004 and 2013–14 further exacerbated the situation, as the state’s memory politics clashed with the historically shaped *social memory* of the South and East of Ukraine.

Many researchers have consistently highlighted the significance of social memory and identity in the Ukraine’s South-East. Marta Studenna-Skrukwa, for instance, points out that the Soviet societal model, which had a tangible presence in Ukraine, emphasized a civil way of life, while ethnic affiliations

²⁸ However, it is important to mention the historical fate of the Donbas region between 1917 and 1922. In 1917, the Bolshevik revolutionary Fyodor Sergeyev (known as Artyom, 1883–1921) returned to the Donbas and established the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic. Within a year, this short-lived state entity was absorbed into the Bolshevik-controlled Ukrainian People’s Republic of Soviets, which was seen as a marionette-like state. Following the defeat of German and Austro-Hungarian Empires in World War I and Józef Piłsudski’s (1867–1935) failure to fulfil the conditions of his alliance with the leader of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, Symon Petliura (1879–1926), the Ukrainian territories emerged as the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. Today’s separatists in the Donbas region draw inspiration from the existence of the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic (see for example G. Szymanik, J. Wizowska, *Po połnocy w Doniecku*, Wydawnictwo Agora, Warszawa 2016, p. 44 and pp. 125ff).

²⁹ While the separatist and pro-Russian organizations were founded in the Donbas already in the early 1990s (e.g., “International Movement of the Donbas”), they never managed to seriously influence, let alone dominate the regional politics. However, in the early 2000s the anti-Western and, by extension, pro-Russian rhetoric was revived by the local oligarchs, the local political elites from the “Party of Regions,” and the regional branches of the “Communist Party of Ukraine,” which started emphasizing the “specificity” of the Donbas for the sake of electoral mass mobilization, arguing predominantly for the cultural incompatibility of the Donbas with the regions of Central and Western Ukraine.

³⁰ M. Tatur (ed.), *The Making of Regions in Post-Socialist Europe—the Impact of Culture, Economic Structure and Institutions. Case Studies from Poland, Hungary, Romania and Ukraine* Volume I, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Frankfurt am Main 2004, p. 18.

were relegated to the private sphere.³¹ In parallel, the industrial region fostered a distinct social identity rooted in the ethos of hard work. In the case of the Donbas, the image of a hard-working miner played a significant role in shaping the social fabric and collective identity of the region.³²

While elaborating on the existence of social identity in the Donbas, Studenna-Skrukwa examines the patterns of the emergence of modern nations, particularly those that originated in East-Central and Eastern Europe. Drawing on the modernist vision of the nation proposed by Ernst Gellner and Benedict Anderson, she highlights that the nation is a product of modernization, particularly urbanization and industrialization:

The nation is a product of progress and a result of modernization, taking shape in a three-phase patriotic process initiated by the patriotic intelligentsia. In the first stage, there is an interest in the folklore of a particular ethnic group, leading to an explosion of ethnographic studies aimed at developing a formula for identity. In the next phase, there is agitation, attempting to extrapolate this formula to other members of the community, until finally reaching the mass phase, where the demand for the creation of an independent, sovereign state arises. Therefore, the formation of a nation is a procedural act of creation, not without limits but based on specific material, and not without cause. It is historically dependent and driven by the necessity of social homogenization, closely linked to the phenomena of modernization and industrialization.³³

According to Studenna-Skrukwa, while economic processes and systemic transformations traditionally fostered national identifications, this was not the case in the Donbas. The image of “wild field,” coupled with extensive migrations and later the Soviet model of everyday life, contributed to this situation.³⁴ Thus, would it be plausible to assume that the economic crisis of the 1990s, along with the Ukrainian Revolutions, for the very first time, brought about a noticeable actualization of national issues in the region’s history?

Studenna-Skrukwa’s line of argument acknowledges the temptation to apply the East-Central European pattern of nation-building and to draw conclusions about its non-existent self-realization in the Donbas region. We would like to suggest that the situation on the ground was, and is, much

³¹ M. Studenna-Skrukwa, *Ukraiński Donbas. Oblicza tożsamości regionalnej*, Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, Poznań 2014, p. 11.

³² Ibid., p. 15.

³³ Ibid., pp. 33f. If not indicated otherwise, the translations into English in this article are the authors’ own.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 48ff.

more complex and cannot, even in preliminary manner, be captured by this framework. In our opinion, an initial point of reference should focus more intensively on Hiroaki Kuromiya's "fierce spirit of freedom"³⁵ in the Donbas. Studenna-Skrukwa further refers to Kuromiya and expands on his idea, highlighting sudden changes in attitudes and the fluctuating political support among the population, which ultimately can lead to apolitical attitudes.³⁶ We ponder whether it is feasible to extrapolate from the "fierce spirit of freedom" a series of recurring regional 'epistemological enclosures'³⁷ that have been observable in the Donbas since at least the Revolution of 1917. Among them, we observe a sense of national apathy, which causes susceptibility to propaganda and violence. Therefore, in the Donbas region, numerous national and social initiatives were and still are doomed to fail quickly. However, this does not mean that they did not exist – even alongside the pattern mentioned by Studenna-Skrukwa one may think of significant cultural and political projects undertaken by intellectuals from various backgrounds.³⁸ The local identity of the Donbas can be described as situational, with a particular inclination towards radicalism. The established traditions in the Donbas persisted throughout the 1990s, and the subsequent discourse of a European sense of belonging, originating from Western and Central Ukraine, troubled the region as a discursive 'newcomer.'

Additionally, after 2014, the authorities of the Russian Federation conducted information and later hybrid warfare tactics,³⁹ promoting idealized visions of the Soviet past and promising hopeful visions of the future under

³⁵ H. Kuromiya, *Ukraine, Russia and the Donbas in Historical Perspective*, 24 September 1996, source: Ukraine, Russia and the Donbas in Historical Perspective (pitt.edu) (accessed 11 June 2024), p. 2.

³⁶ M. Studenna-Skrukwa, *op. cit.*, pp. 48ff.

³⁷ In his short scholarly essay, Kuromiya examines these enclosures from a historical perspective and at the meso-level (see H. Kuromiya, *op. cit.*).

³⁸ Two names among many that deserve mention in this specific context, related to Ukrainian culture in the Donbas, are Mykola Skrypnyk (1872–1933) and Ivan Dziuba (1931–2022). Mykola Skrypnyk was an influential figure in the Ukrainian national movement, advocating for the Ukrainian language and culture. Ivan Dziuba, on the other hand, authored in 1968 "Internationalism or Russification?" ("Інтернаціоналізм чи русифікація?"), which became one of the most important texts of the Ukrainian dissident movement.

³⁹ We would like to cite Agnieszka Matusiak's definition of information and hybrid warfare: "The essence of hybrid warfare is the unconventional combination of military force with non-military actions, utilizing modern information and cyber technologies, as well as multi-faceted and multi-dimensional diplomatic, economic, and psychological influences." (A. Matusiak, *Wyjść z milczenia. Dekolonialne zmagania kultury i literatury ukraińskiej XXI wieku z traumą posttotalitarną*, Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Wrocław 2020, p. 246).

the auspices of the Kremlin. Russian actions targeted the Russophone population and fostered separatist movements in the region.

The crisis in Upper Silesia can be summarised as a military conflict that followed years of social and political agitations on both the German⁴⁰ and Polish sides. Kai Struve situates Upper Silesia within the aforementioned broader European context of the time, where, starting from the 19th century, historical and cultural disciplines played a significant role in shaping modern nations, defining their territorial borders, and establishing their future aspirations. Especially industrial borderlands became arenas where activism emerged as a result of the evolving collective ideologies.⁴¹ In this particular conflict, Polish side emphasized language as one of objective criteria for nationhood. In Upper Silesia, there was a minority population that spoke a regionally shaped mixture of Old Polish, Old Czech, and German.

To enhance our argumentation, we would like to view the situation in Upper Silesia from the German perspective⁴² and characterize Polish aspirations in the region as irredentism: Upper Silesia had become part of Prussia as a result of the outbreak of the Silesian Wars in 1740. A brief overview of the history of the former Duchy of Silesia shows that it was lost by the Polish Kingdom in 1335 to the Kingdom of Bohemia, which was later incorporated into the Habsburg monarchy in 1526. The region was subsequently taken over by Prussia as a result of the Silesian Wars (between 1740 and 1763). However, following the January Uprising of 1863–64, representatives of Polish public opinion began ideologically targeting this specific territory and its population. They identified the Slavic peasant minority who had been working in factories and coal mines under harsh conditions. This minority gained recognition in the eyes of the Polish activists, who, following the defeat of the uprising, repositioned themselves and began working more ‘organically’ towards national objectives, such as educating the masses.⁴³ The situation reached a boiling point after Germany’s defeat in World War I. While the Second

⁴⁰ The synonym for this, the so-called Culture Struggle (*Kulturkampf*) from 1871 to 1878, which was imposed on Upper Silesians after the establishment of the Second German Empire, was perceived by the Polish side as Germanization of the Polish minority in Upper Silesia. The *Kulturkampf* resulted in the alienation of the Polish-speaking Catholic minority in Upper Silesia from their state.

⁴¹ K. Struve, *Germanizacja i agitacja wszechpolska w XIX w. w historiografii niemieckiej*, in: *Historia Górnego Śląska. Polityka, gospodarka i kultura europejskiego regionu*, eds. J. Bahlke, D. Gawrecki, R. Kaczmarek, Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej, Gliwice 2011, p. 427.

⁴² This was elaborated on more precisely and from an international perspective by the Polish historian Ryszard Kaczmarek (see R. Kaczmarek, *Powstania Śląskie 1919–1920–1921. Nienzana wojna polsko-niemiecka*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2019).

⁴³ K. Struve, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

Polish Republic militarily ‘carved’ its territories in the respective borderlands, the question of the region’s affiliation became of great interest to the international community (due to Upper Silesia’s industrial infrastructure). Hence, Ryszard Kaczmarek argues that the military conflicts that erupted three times between 1919 and 1921 should not be placed in the tradition of Polish national uprisings, since in the case of Upper Silesia the aim was not the territorial reconstruction of a once-lost state, but an attempt to change the geopolitical situation by gaining resourceful infrastructure.⁴⁴

Indeed, there are notable differences between the military escalations in the Donbas and Upper Silesia, as well as the communicative environments surrounding them. The conflict in the Donbas has experienced a higher degree of military intensity and a longer duration compared to the military conflicts in Upper Silesia. Furthermore, the presence of the internet and social media in the contemporary era has significantly exacerbated the circulation and dissemination of information about the conflict. The impact on the respective populations is also different. In the Donbas, refugees have had to make difficult decisions to either flee to Russia, other parts of Ukraine, or seek refuge elsewhere, while those who remained have endured the hardships and consequences of ongoing military operations. By contrast, in Upper Silesia, after the plebiscite in March 1921 and the subsequent partition of the region, the inhabitants had to decide which side of the newly established border they wished to settle on. Finally, the positions and strategies of the parties conducting information warfare were, and are, distinct. In Upper Silesia, Polish agitators after 1864 saw themselves primarily as ‘creative artists’ disseminating ‘indigenous’ ideas among the plebeian Slavonic minority, and the politicians utilized both this background and a moment of weakness of a declining empire.⁴⁵ In the case of the Donbas, the region and the whole Ukraine still struggle with an empire that is unable to come to an end and deploys a risky amalgam of revanchist ideologies to justify its aggressive actions.

However, there are also some notable similarities between the conflicts in the Donbas and Upper Silesia, despite the time gap between them. One commonality is that both conflicts, although initially unfolding at a local level, eventually garnered international attention and became significant international affairs. The international community has been involved in

⁴⁴ R. Kaczmarek, *op. cit.*, pp. 5f.

⁴⁵ An empire that briefly re-emerged in its most pathological form during World War II. After 1989, the German Empire (excluding its revival between 1933 and 1945) became increasingly appealing to the Upper Silesian community. Looking at the example of Ukrainian Galicia and the Habsburg Empire, one could conclude that in our times, only dead empires can fulfil a culturally productive role.

various ways, including diplomatic efforts, sanctions, and peace negotiations, recognizing the regional conflicts as having broader implications. Moreover, the proximity of the border has played a crucial role in influencing and altering political and cultural processes in both regions.

Border regions often experience unique dynamics and challenges, shaped by their geographical location and interactions with neighboring territories. The presence of a border can introduce complexities such as cross-border migration, trade, and cultural exchanges, which have a profound impact on the development of a region. Thus, Braun and Kienitz advocate for a shift in perspective to better contextualize and identify different border effects.⁴⁶ This approach emphasizes the distinctiveness of borderlands and acknowledges that the processes taking place in these regions should not be generalized to the entire nation. By examining the specific dynamics and effects of border regions, a more nuanced understanding of their complexities and unique characteristics can be achieved.

In summary, both conflicts exhibit international dimensions and have been influenced by the proximity of the border, highlighting the significance of studying border regions as distinct entities within the broader political and cultural landscape. In the second part of the article, we will consider both the literary forms that display the specific dynamics and effects of border regions and the literary reflections of the proximity of the border.

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⁴⁶ R. Braun, O. Kienitz, *Comparative Politics in Borderlands: Actors, Identities, and strategies*, 30 November 2021, source: Comparative Politics in Borderlands: Actors, Identities, and Strategies (annualreviews.org) (accessed 15 June 2024), p. 305.

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