
Given the praise for his 2003 *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999*, the expectations for Timothy Snyder’s new book *Sketches From a Secret War: A Polish Artist’s Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine* were high. Snyder’s new book is narrower in scope, but much like *The Reconstruction of Nations*, *Sketches from a Secret War* is a study of the society in the Polish-Soviet borderland. While *Reconstructions of Nations* covers over 400 years of history, *Sketches from a Secret War* largely limits itself to the first half of the twentieth century.

During the 1920s, the Soviet leadership experimented with a nationalities policy, known as *korenizatsiia* or indigenization. A central aim of this policy was to shore up support for the young Soviet order among its ethnic minorities by encouraging and promoting their languages and cultures through massive affirmative action programs. Another aim, almost as important, was the Soviet intent to destabilize its Western neighbors, especially Poland, by attempting to win the hearts and minds of its significant Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities. Terry Martin refers to this policy as the “Piedmont Principle,” the Soviet attempt to exploit cross-border ethnic ties in order to exert political influence into neighboring states.

In his new book, Snyder turns his attention to that section of the Polish political elite that, following Piłsudski’s 1926 coup d’etat attempted to utilize a similar policy against the Soviet Union, by exploiting the *korenizatsiia* for their own purposes with the intention of undermining the Soviet system. This strategy became known as the Promethean principle, after the titan who blessed humanity with light, and cursed humanity with hope.

Among the leading “prometheans” was Henryk Józefski (1892-1981), one of Piłsudski’s lieutenants and national activists. As part of the plot behind Piłsudski’s 1926 coup, Józefski soon rose to the position of governor of Volhynia, one of Poland’s poorest provinces. There, he tried to implement a policy of relative liberalism as Poland rapidly drifted further into authoritarianism. Whereas the Ukrainian and Belarusian national movements were ruthlessly repressed in neighboring Galicia, Polessie and the Wilno region, Józefski’s Volhynia employed a policy of relative tolerance, aimed at defusing the explosive ethnic tensions in interwar Poland’s eastern borderlands. While these policies had some success, Józefski incurred the wrath of extremists from both ends of the political spectrum. Józefski belonged to a political tradition similar to that of Piłsudski. Starting up in the anti-communist left, and opposed to both communism and Polish endecja, Józefski slowly drifted further right. Yet he attempted to work the system from within, implementing a relatively liberal minority policy in Volhynia, as governor of the province. Throughout his long life, Józefski was convinced that the Soviet Union was an artificial creation that would sooner or later collapse. He became a leading architect of the Polish government’s attempts to bring it down. He did not live
to see this happen, but history seems to have validated some of his convictions. The promethean principle followed the same logic as the Piedmont principle. It was intended to ease ethnic tensions within the multi-ethnic Polish state, but also stimulate subversive activities within the USSR. Ultimately, Józefski's more moderate line failed. Józefski's experimental policies barely reached beyond the borders of Volhynia, while the rest of Eastern Poland implemented a harsh policy of forced Polonization. The insensitive policies of the Polish government led to a growth in political radicalism. In Galicia the extremist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists grew strong while the communists had much support in Volhynia and among the Western Belarusians. This radicalization led to the meltdown of the multi-ethnic order in Volhynia, culminating in genocidal campaigns, the end results of which were the largely ethnically homogeneous societies which we find today on both sides of the post-war Polish-Ukrainian border.

Józewski's attempts at Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation earned him enemies among extremists on all sides. Józewski survived four assassination attempts by Soviet agents, Ukrainian nationalists, Polish nationalists and Polish communists. While they all failed in their assassination attempts, the extremists were largely successful in erasing Józewski and his political vision from popular memory. Snyder deserves much credit for restoring Józewski to his place in the historical narrative.

It is as a historian of modern Polish history that Snyder has his greatest merits. He brings back to life a part of history, suppressed in Soviet historiography and the national narratives of the successor states. By challenging the nationalist narratives and using Polish, Ukrainian and Soviet primary sources, Snyder raises issues which were long neglected and reminds us that there was little homogeneity of policy in Poland, and that the prevailing policies of suppression of national minorities met opposition also within the highest levels of Polish society. There was nothing inevitable about the policies that brought the eastern Polish borderlands to the abyss of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Alternative paths could have been taken. However, these voices of moderation had problems of making themselves heard in a political environment dominated by increased Polish and Ukrainian nationalist extremism. After the war, there was little space allotted to people like Józewski as the entire political landscape had been reconstructed from scratch by Nazi and Soviet totalitarians. Much like in *The Reconstruction of Nations*, Snyder recalls the vanished, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Eastern Europe in an effort at rescuing its memory from oblivion, challenging the nationalistic and government-organized attempts to suppress its memory.

Snyder has done a wonderful job of weaving these historical events into a master narrative which is thought-provoking, challenging and groundbreaking. *Sketches of a Secret War* gives an excellent and stimulating introduction of the complex history of interwar Poland and Polish-Ukrainian relations. Snyder continues the myth-breaking enterprise of *The Reconstruction of Nations*, reminding the reader that the ethnically homogenous nation-states that appeared in Eastern Europe after World War II are recent phenomena. They are not a given, and there was nothing inevitable about the processes that resulted in genocide. By effectively challenging the narratives of the totalitarians and ethnic cleansers who created the current borders and crushed the multinational societies of the Eastern Polish borderlands, Snyder rescues an important part of