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TERRITORIAL STATUS OF THE WESTERN BELARUSIAN LANDS IN THE SOVIET-POLISH RELATIONS DURING THE WORLD WAR II AND THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

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The article is devoted to the analysis of problems in the Soviet-Polish bilateral relations during World War II and the Great Patriotic War (1939–1945). International relations during that period present the object of the study, the Soviet-Polish bilateral relations during that period is the study subject. The purpose of research is to characterize the role and place of the Western Belarusian lands united with Belarus in autumn 1939 in the mutual relations between the USSR authorities and the Polish government in exile, left powers of the Polish national liberation movement (Union of Polish Patriots, Polish Committee of National Liberation, Krajowa Rada Narodowa). The main task of the USSR government at that time was to preserve territories which became part of the territory of the Soviet Union in autumn 1939, including the territory of Western Belarus. The international legal recognition of unification of Western Belarus and the BSSR took place only in 1945, when Belarus became the member of the United Nation Organization.

Key words: boundary; Great Patriotic War; Soviet-Polish border; Poland; Polish government in exile; Soviet Union; UN; unite; Western Belarus; World War II.

ГОСУДАРСТВЕННО-ТЕРРИТОРИАЛЬНЫЙ СТАТУС ЗАПАДНО-БЕЛОРУССКИХ ЗЕМЕЛЬ В СОВЕТСКО-ПОЛЬСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЯХ В ГОДЫ ВТОРОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ И ВЕЛИКОЙ ОТЕЧЕСТВЕННОЙ ВОЙНЫ

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Рассматриваются проблемы двусторонних советско-польских отношений в годы Второй мировой войны и Великой Отечественной войны. Объектом выступают международные отношения в этот период, предметом – советско-польские двусторонние отношения. Цель исследования – охарактеризовать роль и место западно-белорусских земель, воссоединенных с БССР осенью 1939 г., во взаимоотношениях руководства Советского Союза с польским эмигрантским правительством, левыми силами польского национально-освободительного движения (Союз польских патриотов, Крайова Рада Народова, Польский комитет национального освобождения). Показано, что для руководства Советского Союза было важно сохранить территории, которые вошли в состав СССР осенью 1939 г., в том числе и территорию Западной Беларуси. Отмечается, что международно-правовое признание факта воссоединения Западной Беларуси с БССР произошло только в 1945 г., после вступления БССР в состав ООН.

Ключевые слова: Вторая мировая война; Великая Отечественная война; советско-польские отношения; Западная Беларусь; советско-польская граница; Советский Союз; польское эмигрантское правительство; воссоединение; ООН.

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A problem of the Soviet-Polish relations during World War II and the Great Patriotic War was then and still is one of the most researched topics for the Belarusian historians. First of all, it's stipulated by the problem of Western Belarus, which became an integral part of the USSR and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) in 1939. In this respect, it is necessary to focus on few fundamental issues typical to the Belarusian historiography at the present stage of its development.

It should be noted, that the modern Belarusian historiography is far behind in the development of problems of international legal mechanisms reviewing norms and principles of the international law that could substantiate and give a legal assessment to the events which took place in 1939. In the vast majority of research papers Belarusian historians provide a historical and political assessment, which is unequal to the legal one. At the same time, only in the combination of these two approaches it is possible and necessary to give a thorough and scientifically objective evaluation of the events of September, 1939, and assess the status of the Western Belarusian lands during World War II and the Great Patriotic War, taking into account Belarusian national interests.

By focusing on the Soviet-Polish relations, the researchers did not pay attention to the role and place of Belarus in the Soviet-Polish relations, but only "revived it in memory", as far as the Curzon Line taken as the post-war Soviet-Polish border, partially passed through its territory, as well as due to the necessity of the mutual resettlement of Polish and Belarusian population from the territory of western regions of BSSR to Poland, and from Poland to BSSR. Thesis, that the final territorial reunification of Belarusian lands took place in 1939, appeared, retained sustainability and is still preserved in the Belarusian historiography, starting from September, 1939. However, it reflects the Belarusian-centric view on the events of 1939 and has a historical and political rather than juridical and legal estimation [1, p. 204]. However, in terms of the international law, there was no international recognition of the Belarusian lands reunification into the one state in 1939. Six long years passed comprising World War II and the Great Patriotic War from September, 1939 until the final international legal recognition of this fact in 1945.

The aim of this article is to analyze the role and place of Belarus in the Soviet-Polish relations during World War II and the Great Patriotic War, as well as the struggle of the Soviet Union political leadership for the international legal recognition of the fact of territorial unification of Belarusian lands in one state.

The Soviet Union's position on this issue has undergone significant tactical changes without affecting strategic ones. It was all about the fact that the Soviet leadership considered preservation of Western Belarus

and Western Ukraine in the USSR which were reunited in the autumn 1939 as one of the most important foreign policy objectives.

Aggression of the Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union in June, 1941 drastically changed the situation. The task to defeat the Nazi Germany forced the Soviet Union and Poland to unite under the Atlantic Charter (1941) and to renew diplomatic relations broken off in 1939. The Soviet Union, which signed the Agreement on restoring diplomatic relations with the Polish government in exile of W. Sikorski on 30 July, 1941, declared that "the Soviet-German treaties of 1939 regarding territorial changes in Poland are invalid" [2, p. 35]. However, the Soviet Union and the government of W. Sikorski assessed the situation and considered this agreement from various perspectives, especially in the part which dealt with post-war borders and the territory of Western Belarus. The Polish government in exile and political forces that supported it, the Polish emigration, wide circles in occupied Poland believed that it is a real step towards the future of the international recognition of the borders established by the Treaty of Riga in 1921 [3, p. 104]. Leaders of the Soviet Union regarded Article of the Agreement on "territorial changes" just as "the denunciation of their political agreements with the German Reich" [3, p. 105] and did not give up with the acquisition of the territory.

Fundamental contradictions in this question inevitably resulted in an uncompromising political and diplomatic struggle in the bilateral Soviet-Polish relations. The first thing which revealed fundamental contradictions between the both countries was the question on the nationality of citizens of Western Belarus, who, in accordance with the USSR Law "On the Citizenship of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" of 19 August, 1939, acquired the USSR citizenship [2, p. 46]. However, Polish government in exile was absolutely against it. It believed that by doing so the Soviet Union confirmed the legitimacy of including eastern territories of Poland into the Soviet Union in 1939. After the restoration of diplomatic relations with the government of W. Sikorski, the Soviet leadership's position in this matter underwent minor changes. The Soviet government in December, 1941 recognized the right to citizenship for "the persons of Polish nationality", that "gave them the right to serve in the Polish army" [4, p. 208, 214]. At the same time, all other citizens of Western Belarus – Belarusians, Ukrainians, Jews – had to be recruited into the Red Army. It provoked protests from the Polish side. However, the USSR People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs during 1941 and especially 1942 [2, p. 46–47] categorically rejected claims of the Poles. Moreover, in 1942 Stalin's position significantly strengthened, which was associated with the improvement of the situation on the Soviet-German front. While discussing conditions of the Anglo-Soviet agreement in May, 1942, Stalin firmly declared that "we

will solve by force questions of the borders, or rather the guarantees of security on our borders in a certain area of our country" [3, p. 105].

The policy of confrontation with the Polish government in exile and at the same time search for political, historical, ethnographic grounds for the legitimacy of unification of the Western Belarusian lands in one Belarusian state becomes a priority for the leadership of the Soviet Union. The beginning of 1943 was the crucial period from this point of view. The meeting between J. Stalin and the Ambassador of the Polish government in exile to the Soviet Union T. Romer was planned for 26–27 February by agreement with W. Sikorski government. It was envisaged to discuss a wide range of bilateral Soviet-Polish relations. While discussing a question of the Soviet-Polish border with T. Romer, J. Stalin told to the Polish Ambassador that "unification of the Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples took place in the autumn 1939. Ukrainians and Belarusians are not Poles. The Soviet Union did not annex any Polish provinces. All the Polish provinces were ceded to Germany" [5, p. 61]. The victory in the Battle of Stalingrad gave more confidence to Stalin in defending his point of view on this matter. At the end of the conversation Stalin roughly stated to T. Romer, that "there is no and there will be no government in the Soviet Union that would agree to change borders of 1939 with Poland and tear away from the USSR regions, which inclusion in the USSR is provided by the USSR Constitution" [3, p. 123].

Justifying the legitimacy of the Soviet Union claims to eastern territories of Poland for the first time in its statements TASS referred to Lord Curzon, who, as stressed in the statement: "Despite his unfriendly attitude toward the Soviet Union he knew that Poland cannot claim the Ukrainian and Belarusian lands, and the Polish governmental circles do not wish to show understanding on this matter so far" [6, p. 4]. Thus, long before the Teheran Conference (28 November – 1 December, 1943), which adopted the Curzon Line as the Soviet-Polish border, the top political leadership of the Soviet Union voiced its position on this issue, and J. Stalin at the meeting with T. Romer made it clear to the latter that the Soviet Union will not make any concessions to the Polish government in exile on the issue of the future Soviet-Polish border.

At the conference in Teheran (28 November – 1 December, 1943) leaders of the USSR, USA and Great Britain reached an agreement on the western border of the USSR with the Curzon Line taken as a basis without any consultations with representatives of the Polish government in exile [7, p. 405, 411]. The beginning of 1944 drastically changed the situation. On 3 January, 1944 the Red Army troops crossed the Polish border that existed before 17 September, 1939. In this regard, the Polish government in exile in its statement on 5 January, 1944 noted that the post-war Poland should exist with the borders defined in 1921. In response

the Soviet leadership in the statement from 11 January, 1944 stated no less categorically that the Western Belarusian and Western Ukrainian lands are an integral part of the USSR. At the same time, the Soviet leadership expressed readiness to a compromise by saying that "the Soviet government doesn't believe that borders of 1939 are unchangeable. These boundaries may be corrected in favor of Poland in that direction for the areas where the Polish population prevails to be transferred to Poland. In this case, the Soviet-Polish border could pass along the so-called Curzon Line" [2, p. 167].

Left forces of the Polish national liberation movement the Krajowa Rada Narodowa (KRN), the Union of Polish Patriots (UPP) agreed with the position of the Soviet Union on the question of the Soviet-Polish border and the decisions taken within the Teheran Conference. On 15 July, 1944 a mandated representative of the KRN E. Osubka-Moravski and the Chairman of UPP W. Wasilewska appealed to J. Stalin with a letter where they stressed that "the most urgent thing is the adoption by the Provisional Polish Government of the Curzon Line as a basis for establishing the border between the USSR and Poland. Restoration of the Soviet administration on the territories west to the Curzon Line (for example, in the western part of Bialystok region) threatens to weaken positions of the democratic camp and to decrease the Polish public confidence in the Soviet Union" [8, p. 12–131].

In January – February, 1944 the Soviet government making advances to Western allies made an attempt to discuss the statement of 11 January, 1944 with the Polish government in exile and offered to make a statement that the "Curzon Line, established by the Riga Treaty, is a subject to change and that the Curzon Line is the line of a new border between the USSR and Poland" [2, p. 175]. Despite some concessions of the Soviet Union on the matter, the Polish government in exile flatly rejected the Soviet proposal citing the fact that it was not based on a legal basis and, therefore, cannot be considered as a border.

In principle, the border issue, as well as which part of the territory of Bialystok region will be transferred to Poland, was defined in July, 1944. The Chairman of UPP W. Wasilewska and a mandated representative of the KRN E. Osubka-Moravski on 15 July, 1944 addressed to Stalin with a letter in which they justified the necessity to transfer the western part of Bialystok region to Poland [9, p. 79]. On 21 July formation of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PCNL) was proclaimed, which on 22 July, 1944 addressed with a manifesto to the people of Poland with the message and desire to settle the question of the Soviet-Polish border according to the ethnic principle. The UPP and PCNL recognized that "the eastern boundary should be a line of neighbourly friendship rather than a barrier between us and our neighbours, it should be resolved according to the principle: Polish lands – to Poland,

Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian lands – to the Soviet Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania” [9, p. 79].

Negotiations between the Soviet government and the PCNL took place on 24–26 July in Moscow, where the question of the state border between the USSR and Poland occupied the most important place on the agenda. A project on the eastern part of the Belarusian area proposed by J. Stalin left all Bialowieza Pushcha and the biggest part of Suwalki region to BSSR [10, S. 150.], which was significantly different from the Curzon Line. The Poles, after having analyzed the Soviet proposal, did not agree with it, especially in the part of transfer of Bialowieza Pushcha to Belarus. During the subsequent negotiations J. Stalin agreed to give Augustow and Suwalki to Poland, however, as for Bialowieza Pushcha, he was uncompromising and did not even want to discuss the matter. He substantiated his position by arguing that he was not interested in the issue of increasing the territory of the Soviet Union, but in the interests of the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples. Nevertheless, taking into account interests of the Poles, he agreed to give them half of the territory of the Pushcha and a site Belavezha [10, S. 152]. On 27 July, 1944 V. Molotov and E. Osobka-Moravski signed an agreement on the Soviet-Polish border which adopted the Curzon Line as the base with derogations from it in favour of Poland (on the Belarusian part): “part of the territory of the Bialowieza Pushcha in the area Nemirov – Jalowka located to the east from the Curzon Line with the villages of Nemirov, Hajnowka, Bialowieza and Jalowka on the side of Poland” [2, p. 327]. Thus, the territorial uncertainty – which areas of Bialystok region will become part of Poland and which will remain as a part of the BSSR – was completed in July, 1944.

Analysis of the signed Soviet-Polish agreement of 27 July, 1944 draws attention to two fundamental aspects to which Belarusian and foreign historians did not pay the necessary attention. They noted that the settlement of the Soviet-Polish border was realized according to the principle: “Polish lands – to Poland, Belarusian – to the Soviet Belarus”. The question arises: what criteria (national, historical, geographical, ethno-confessional) were taken as a basis, who and when during the war “held” the distinction between “Polish” and “Belarusian” lands? In our view, during the July negotiations it was observed a shift from the ethnographic principle of determining the border and its substitution with a political wording. The US Ambassador to the USSR G. Kenan paid attention to this important moment. He stressed that “in the question of borders, I noticed that they seem to be determined in accordance with political and strategic considerations of Moscow, using an ethnographic principle contained in the PCNL Manifesto, which implies a considerable freedom of understanding” [11, p. 132].

Moscow talks in October, 1944 with the participation of J. Stalin, W. Churchill, S. Mikolajczyk and PCNR representatives once again demonstrated that Stalin

did not intend to make any concessions and compromises to the Polish government in exile on the border issue. When on 15 October, 1944 S. Mikolajczyk tried to debate with J. Stalin on the Curzon Line, the latter not only did not take into account the arguments of S. Mikolajczyk, but “flared up, got up and demonstratively left the negotiations” [5, p. 65].

Decisions taken within the Crimea Conference (4–11 January, 1945) played an important role in the international legal recognition of the question of the Soviet-Polish border. Speaking at the conference J. Stalin stated that the consent of the Soviet government for the Curzon Line to be the Soviet-Polish border is a principal position of the USSR, and it would not go for any concessions on this issue. After discussions heads of the three governments – the USSR, USA and the Great Britain – agreed that Poland’s eastern border should run along the Curzon Line with derogations in some regions from 5 to 8 kilometers in favour of Poland [12]. We would like to emphasize that the Yalta agreements were legally binding and consolidated the Curzon Line as the Soviet-Polish border, indicating on the accession of the territory of Western Belarus to the BSSR.

At the Potsdam conference, leaders of the USSR, USA and Great Britain (17 July – 2 August, 1945) didn’t actively discuss the question of the Soviet-Polish border. The conference participants agreed that the issue of the border was solved at the Yalta Conference [13].

The international legal recognition of the border between the USSR and Poland allowed the two countries to conclude a bilateral agreement on the Soviet-Polish border instead of a temporary agreement of 27 July, 1944, which on 16 August, 1945 was signed by the Deputy Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR V. Molotov and the Chairman of the KRN E. Osobka-Moravski [14, p. 322–323].

However, the Polish delegation in 1945 tried again to agree with the Soviet Union on the transfer of all of the Bialowieza Pushcha to Poland. In August, 1945 the Soviet-Polish negotiations were held before signing of the Soviet-Polish border agreement. The Polish delegation announced to the Soviet delegation its plan, according to which all the Bialowieza Pushcha was supposed to be a part of Poland. The Polish side stressed that “the definition of the political borders through the forest threatens its destruction as a monument of world importance. The reserve, which is located in the forest, requires for its preservation. Therefore, Poland’s borders must remain the whole forest [15, k. 18]. However, the Soviet leadership position was solid and substantiated the fact that territorial changes were stipulated in the Soviet-Polish agreement on 27 July, 1944. It should be noted that the Belarusian side was interested in the fact that the Bialowieza Pushcha would completely remain on the territory of the Byelorussian SSR. The First Secretary of the BSSR Council

of People's Commissars P. Ponomarenko in June, 1945 sent to the Chairman of SNK USSR V. Molotov a letter in which he argued the need to abandon the Pushcha as part of Belarus. P. Ponomarenko also appealed for support to the President of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR V. Komarov with the fact that he asked V. Molotov on leaving the forest as part of the Belarusian SSR. V. Komarov in his letter to V. Molotov in particular emphasized that "it is necessary to take measures to restore the protected mode in the forest and there is a need to unite its divided parts into a unified whole" [16, f. 601]. However, even this coordinated position between the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and the BSSR government was not successful.

The BSSR accession to the UN had a significant meaning for reunification of Western Belarus with the BSSR. First Secretary of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and simultaneously the Chairman of the BSSR Council of People's Commissars P. Ponomarenko at the meeting of the BSSR Presidium (30 August, 1945), where the question of the UN Charter ratification was discussed, stated: "Working at a conference in San Francisco, among all the international legal acts our delegation carried out the establishment of western borders and thus from the perspective of international

law, we have the legal grounds for unification of Belarus. This is a significant fact. There can be no retrieval to the previous state in history or revision of this issue. This is extremely important because we actually reunited in 1939, but kept our position open because it was a bit difficult. Now it is recognized internationally and is considered to be an inviolable factor. For Belarus it is the matter of historical significance [17, p. 315–316].

Thus, reunification of Belarusian territories, which took place in September, 1939, received the international legal recognition only 6 years later – in 1945. In conclusion its need to emphasize that the territorial status of Western Belarusian lands during the World War II and the Great Patriotic War was finally resolved in 1945. The political leadership of the Soviet Union defending the national and state interests of the USSR defended the national and state interests of Belarus and the Belarusian people. The decisions of the international conferences of the period of the World War II and the Great Patriotic War (Teheran, Yalta, Potsdam), which determined the Soviet-Polish state border, confirmed the legitimacy of Western Belarusian lands reunited with the BSSR in 1939, which lead to the territorial and ethnic consolidation of the Belarusian people.

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