

Soviet Nationality Policy and the Forgotten Periphery: Book Review of Kate Brown's *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*

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A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland (Harvard University Press, 2005) tells the story of a dynamic borderland region between historic Poland and Russia called *Kresy*.¹ By employing a distinct approach to the study of time, space, and its people, Kate Brown argues that in the process of building a modern state over the course of three decades, the Soviet Union destroyed the borderlands and transformed its hybrid, multi-faceted, and nuanced culture into a homogeneous and ethnically pure nation-state. The purpose with which Brown takes on this project has particular merit: she wrote this book to bring attention to a region that was central to the formation of nationality policy in the Soviet Union, yet was always treated as a periphery, labeled as backward for its “informality” and locality. Brown’s prose almost resembles that of literary narration; it serves as her platform to raise sympathy for places and peoples that were never considered important enough to become parts of history, and whose stories cannot be excavated via traditional archival research. The author’s ethnographic approach, however, can act as both virtue and vice: while the unique narration makes her book stand out, her ultimate criticism of the nation-state loses some legitimacy and appears overly skeptical due to the very pathos with which she writes. Despite this drawback, the book presents an insightful survey of a region whose history was otherwise lost, and tells a compelling story of the movement of peoples and identities across time and space.

In order to support her research, Brown consults a myriad of non-traditional sources, such as oral histories, material culture (photographs), and archival records, ranging from central-party sources in Moscow to village documents gathered in Zhytomyr. Brown travelled around the countryside, read local newspapers, and conducted interviews with specific individuals, which is why she notes that in the process of writing this book, she “became ethnographer-journalist [herself]”.² It is useful to separate her methodology from her rhetoric. At the beginning of the book, Brown puts forward a disclaimer, mentioning that there are rewards for only those readers that agree to “take this journey through oral testimony, rumor and unverifiable occurrences”.³ Therefore, it seems that readers should engage in a type of contract with the author to fully come to appreciate this book for what its mission is. The strength of Brown’s work lies in two aspects: she tells a story of a region that was left neglected and overlooked in history, while telling it with a stylistic approach to writing that is also, in and of itself, neglected and overlooked in historical storytelling. Hence, not only does Brown give a voice to people that never had it, but she also gives attention to unusual types of sources that are deemed useless in historiography.

Brown’s argument is based on a “bottom-up” trajectory, which spotlights it in the discussion about nation-states. By starting at the micro level and then zooming out, she successfully demonstrates that the idea of a “strong Soviet state” against “weak

victimized people” did not stand the test of the culture of *Kresy*. Instead, we are told the story of people who dictated their own lives, who silently broke the laws of the state in attempts to save their long-lasting traditions, and who spoke a different language than the government, literally and metaphorically. In her detailed analysis of the diverse local customs of *Kresy* and the state’s mission to homogenize them, Brown shows that deportation of national minorities in the borderlands served the grand Soviet goal of creating a “...distilled nation-space for modern governance.”⁴ While her argument is well-supported by her evidence, to some extent Brown disregards the other side of the coin – the point of view of the state. Therefore, her ethnographic “bottom-up” approach turns to vice here: she talks about taxonomy systems and standardization techniques employed by the Soviet government; however, she fails to address *why* this was the *modus operandi* of the state to begin with. The building of nation-states, and statecraft in general, inherently entails establishing some sort of cohesion and a sense of formality. This institutionalization is how governments are able to rule their subjects, because, in Brown’s own words, “to name is to control.”⁵

Brown is a character of the story that she tells. In a way, she appears as the representative of people that never had the voice to represent themselves. While the author’s argument about nation-states can leave the reader with clarifying questions, her book brings a unique contribution for three principal reasons. First, her discussion about identity and nationality urges us to think about how physical borders and official state documents affect our sense of individuality as well as belonging. Brown often uses words such as “Germanness” and

“Polishness,” which is an interesting way to emphasize that identity in *Kresy* was a spectrum, and that it was exactly this absence of rigid categories that prompted the Soviet state to ascribe labels of particular nationality to locals. Secondly, Brown’s discussion on the supposed backwardness of *Kresy* sheds light on the standards of “progress” adopted by the Soviet state, and how these very standards dictated the borderlands’ path towards destruction. Third, the depiction of a state afraid of its unruly subjects is a powerful move on the part of the author – almost an attempt to gift long-lost agency back to the people of *Kresy*. This representation allows us to see that the centralized state apparatus ultimately rests on power that is “atomized” which is one of the ways to go beyond the thought paradigm of a consolidated nation-space.⁶

Brown’s project is successful because it first and foremost showcases to other scholars the incredible merit that consulting nonconventional sources has. It provides a unique perspective on the Soviet nationality policy and augments the power of those that were continually deemed powerless vis-à-vis the state.

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¹ Brown, Kate. *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*. Harvard University Press, 2003.

² Brown, Kate. *A Biography of No Place*, p. 16.

³ Brown, Kate. *A Biography of No Place*, p. 13.

⁴ Brown, Kate. *A Biography of No Place*, p. 230.

⁵ Brown, Kate. *A Biography of No Place*, p. 127.

⁶ Brown, Kate. *A Biography of No Place*, p. 14.