

DOI 10.36074/grail-of-science.15.03.2024.081

## KRESY AS AN ELEMENT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: THE CONTEXT OF BORDERLAND

Natalya Korol 

PhD, historical sciences

Department of Theory and History of Culture

Faculty of Philosophy

Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine

**Summary.** One of the structural elements of national identity is the concept of homeland. In the Polish national consciousness, the concept of a homeland is very often marginalized. To replace him in the epicentre of humanitarian studios, the concept of «kresy» arises. Given the historical overlay of territories that are both «native land/homeland» for Ukrainians and kresy/borderland for the Polish nation, it is worth attempting to rethink the etymology and historical evolution of the concept of «kresy» in the context of its significance for national self-identification. It is also advisable to outline within which methodological approaches it is possible to carry out a scientific study of the phenomenon of Kresy as a space of borderland and an element of national identity. Given the modern civilizational situation and the new establishment of the boundaries of civilizations, the joint efforts of scientists in rethinking the borderland (and kresy) as a space of a common civilizational frontier are necessary.

**Keywords:** borderland, national identity, national consciousness, Kresy, postcolonial discourse, narrative.

The drama and scale of the situation in which Ukraine found itself with the beginning of the active period of Russian aggression dictate the need for a paradigmatic understanding of things that allow us to understand the behaviour (and its motivation) of our geopolitical neighbours. This study will focus on Poland as one of the most active allies of Ukraine. Specifically, about the determinants of its world view and, therefore, geopolitical self-positioning. One of these determinants of the national world view (świadomość narodowa—this is the term used much more often in contemporary Polish humanitarian discourse) is national identity.

The concept of national identity, comprehensively considered in the work of the same name by Anthony Smith [7], (which in the time since its publication received the status of a classic fundamental study, one of the key ones in the field of studies on identity), courageously withstood the test of marginalisation in the age of total interest in globalisation, liberalisation, and multiculturalism. In our present, when an attempt is being made to reanimate the imperial discourse both in the geopolitical format and in the humanitarian space, such seemingly long-established concepts as the nation-state, the right of peoples to self-determination, and national identity

need additional advocacy and, at the same time, rethinking. That is why the concept of national identity has again found itself in the field of view of many modern researchers, including Ukrainian ones. Among them, we can name the famous Kyiv culture researcher Natalia Kryvda [4], sociologist Danylo Sudyn [8], and many others. The reactualization of national identity in modern humanitarian discourse takes place with the application of the analysis of the same key elements that the above-mentioned Anthony Smith singles out in the structure of this phenomenon. One of the structural elements of national identity is the concept of territory (native land, homeland). Its importance and system creation are voiced by modern Ukrainian researchers. Thus, Nataliya Kryvda, considering the models of national identity and highlighting the standard components of the Western model, puts the concept of «historical territory» in the first place [4]. Danylo Sudyn, proposing an active interpretation of national self-identification, notes the importance of the concept of «land and blood» in nation-building processes and in the structure of national identity [8].

It is precisely in the Polish national consciousness that certain paradoxes exist with this identification marker. For the modern mass consciousness of Poles (we note separately that we are not talking about the world view of scientists), the key territorial element and an analogue of the homeland is the concept of Kresy. which, in principle, correlates with or is similar to the concept of the boundary. The concept of one's own territory, and with it, the concept of homeland, is very often marginalized. In its place, the concept of «Kress» finds itself at the epicentre of national consciousness and, at the same time, in the focus of humanitarian studies. As an element of national consciousness, cress becomes the basis of national stereotypes and behavioural patterns.

The historiography of cross-studies can be structured according to the bipolar principle. On the one hand, there is an incredibly large-scale set of works performed in a nostalgic and apologetic vein, such as «Elegy about Kresy» [13] by Andrzej Novak. The opposite pole of the humanitarian discourse is represented by attempts to critically understand the phenomenon of «Kresy», mainly using the methodology of the anti-colonial paradigm. The most significant among such works is «The Myth of the «Eastern Suburbs», or How to Put an End to It» by Daniel Beauvois [1].

Taking into account the historical overlapping of territories that are both the «native land/motherland» for Ukrainians and the Kresy/borderland for the Polish nation, it is worth making an attempt to rethink the etymology and historical evolution of the concept of «Kresy» in the context of its significance for national self-identification. It is also expedient to outline within the framework of which methodological approaches it is possible to carry out a scientific study of the phenomenon of borderlands as a borderland space and an element of national identity.

We will separately outline the evolution of the concept of borderland in its historical and scientific aspects. The concept (as a theory) of the frontier was originally proposed by Frederick Turner in his report «The Significance of the Frontier in the History of the United States» [15], which he delivered in 1893 at the convention of the American Historical Association. The concept of the «frontier» as a dynamic moving border, which forms the boundary between «barbarism» and «civilization»

and is the basis for the creation of new social institutions and identities, has significantly evolved through thorough and fierce discussions (one of them can be read on the pages of the journal «Ukraina Moderna»[5]) and eventually found its updated interpretation and proper place in modern humanitarianism. The direction of border studies (in other words, border studies) replaced frontier theory. With regard to terminology, the terms border, borderland, or boundary are much more often used in scientific discourse.

In each case, theoretical interpretations of the phenomenon of border territories have many directions and dimensions; they were best structured by the American historian Alfred Rieber. Based on a broad historiographical analysis, the researcher singles out three main historical and analytical approaches to understanding the border. The first of them is the territorial border, a concept that took shape with the growth of centralised states and is determined by state policy. Historically, this type of border is represented by a state and/or military border, which, as French historical experience shows, will be closely related to the territorial dimension of the national body. The second meaning of the concept of border was formulated in the works of social historians and anthropologists. This is the border of social, cultural, and economic structures, which, while maintaining its geographical and territorial dimension, emphasises the subjective «human» component of interaction and demarcation. The third meaning of the concept of border is a symbolic border in mental geography, which is articulated and manifested in the definition of large symbolic regions, such as «Europe» or «Eastern Europe». Based on the developed typology, the author offers a comparative picture of the border phenomenon in history, highlighting the historically formed types of border formed under the influence of state, cultural, and environmental factors [6]. All three types of border/frontier interpretation—state-territorial, social-anthropological, and mental-geographic—can be observed when analysing the phenomenon of Kresy.

Trying to consider the correlation between the concept of the homeland and the concept of kresas as borderlands, it is worth turning to the historical past in order to understand the process of evolution of the semantic and conceptual content of the concept of «kresy». The proper name «Kresy» (with a capital letter) meant, in the 17th and 18th centuries, a narrow strip of borderlands («outlying lands») in the southeastern part of the First Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It is also believed that initially the word «Kresy» meant defensive settlements on the border of Podillia and Ukraine, which protected the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the Tatar invasion and later the Cossack raids. Over time, this word was used to designate the borderlands of the southeastern border.

The turning point in the evolution of the concept of cress was the 19th century. After the brutal divisions between Russia, Austria, and Prussia, the period of Polish statehood — the First Commonwealth — ends. According to Norman Davies, «Poland was now an idea. It existed in human thoughts, even if it could not always be seen on earth, in the material world» [2, p. 460]. The consequence of the loss of statehood is two interrelated processes: efforts to restore it (through political struggle and uprisings) and the process of nation formation. «Due to the lack of a national state, the Polish national consciousness had four main sources of inspiration: the church, language, history, and race» [2, p. 466]. and precisely at the

intersection of language and history, a new, mythologized image of the Cress is formed in the literary environment. To some extent, it resonates with Turner's frontier and is fully consistent with Alfred Riber's mental-geographical type of frontier. The Eastern Wall of Western Civilization The land was promised to the Polish people. The most representative is the title of Oskar Haletsky's book «Borderlands of Western Civilization» (1952)[11]. The author says kresy wschodnie, which appeared as a civilizational border between the Western, Roman Catholic, culture and the Orthodox Russian world.

The concept of «Kresy» in its modern interpretation appeared in the middle of the 19th century; it was used by Vincent Paul in the rhapsody poem «Mohort» (1856), which glorifies the chivalry of the border defenders. In the poem, the concept was used in the Old Polish sense as a term to denote a distant borderland that lives in its own rhythm [14]. Soon it acquired a broader geographical meaning and began to mean the southeastern lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, lost as a result of divisions and transformed into a constituent part of the Russian Empire, which in Russian nomenclature were called «Southwestern provinces». In the 19th century, the entire territory of the Russian partition, which was not part of the Kingdom of Poland, was usually called «taken lands» in Polish culture.

From the moment of its introduction in the literary world and in general, as well as in general humanitarian discourse, the concept of cress has been systematically evolving. It changes, and, ultimately, each stage of change in the semantic content of this meaning can be correlated with a certain methodological paradigm that allows us to understand its role in the history, culture, and politics of Poland.

The formation of the Polish national consciousness and the structuring of the national identity, the elements of which acquire a very colourful, peculiar, or, if Polish, characteristic sound, In attempts to understand the historical past, the concept of kresy is gradually being mythologized. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, it began to be actively correlated with the concept of the Terniv frontier: Kresy is the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of both nations, which promotes civilization and is an outpost of this civilization and protection from the wild East.

The best understanding of the mythologized interpretation of Kresy space is offered by Krzysztof Kwasniewski in his scientific investigation, «Polskie Kresy Wschodnie a Deutsche Ostmarken» [12]. The researcher describes, from the point of view of social psychology, a set of characteristics that later became established in the mass and national consciousness as an idea of a kind of «promised land». 1. Zoning, understood, however, more as a direction than as an area; 2. greater emphasis on peripherality than on gravitation to the centre; 3. the advance and expansion of state ownership (predominance of state thinking over national thinking, state assimilation over national counterculture); 4. a one-sided feeling of power, superiority, and automaticity of belonging to a higher, titled ethnic class, which is endowed with rights; 5. satisfaction with what has been achieved; 6. the eternal connection with youth and courage, with adventures; 7. satisfaction from the involvement of «strangers», but faithful implementers of their own aspirations [12, p.24]

At the end of the 19th century — at the beginning of the 20th century — the era of «great national histories» begins in historical science. As noted by Nataliya

Yakovenko, «the nation was identified with the glorious people of the past, and its existence on the supposedly private territory was interpreted as evidenced in a continuous succession from the most ancient times to the present; cultural or political advantages over neighbours were emphasised; and the image of an external enemy was constructed» [9, p.176]. The researcher speaks of the teleological nature of such a historical construction: «the existence of the nation appeared as the inevitable realisation of a predetermined goal» [ibid.]. In this way, the grand narratives of the national histories of the peoples of the European continent, including the Polish one, are formed. The narrativist model of historical discourse presupposes, first of all, not the search and explanation of historical texts but their interpretation, which, in turn, sees in them a combination of logic, poetics, and rhetoric, which ultimately create a certain «code» that the historian seeks to convey to others [3, p. 215]. The phenomenon of kresy is organically incorporated into the more general concept of «specific territory», and the teleological nature of historical development is justified by the civilizational mission.

That is why, at the beginning of the 20th century, and primarily in the period of the Second Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the word «kresy» began to be written with a capital letter again, and its meaning extended to the territories that were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Eastern Galicia. After the Riga Treaty of 1921, which defined the line of the new Polish eastern border, the concept of «lost regions» was used, also known as «external regions» or «far regions», which meant the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which, according to the treaty, were included in the USSR. Instead, the «inner borders» were identified with the territory between the Curzon line and the eastern border. At that time, Lviv and Vilnius were considered the main cities of Kresy. During the interwar period, namely from 1918 to 1939 (the Second Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), the semantics of kresy changed somewhat and became part of the nationalist discourse itself: kresy became synonymous with Polishness. After all, the theory of the frontier of civilization is also present: the Polish state is interpreted as the border of Western civilization with the reincarnation of the Russian empire — the Soviet Union. «In the minds of the Polish elites of the interwar period, the Eastern Kresy had not only economic value but also formed the basis of the status of a superpower and therefore of the existence of the Commonwealth of Nations», Przemysław Żurawski Vel Grajewski notes in his article [16].

The collapse of the socialist system in 1989 led to a «great return» in the study of the borderlands. Taking into account the fact that during socialist times the PRL (Polish People's Republic) tried to push the term «kresy» to the margins of scientific discourse as much as possible, interest in it both as a concept and as in its (glorious) past flares up with new force. In fact, in Poland at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, the understanding of kresy follows clearly demarcated (even mutually exclusive) directions. The first direction can be interpreted within the paradigm or methodology of memory studies. Kresy in the mass consciousness turns into some kind of para-biblical, lost paradise, the promised land, from which almost every Polish family originates — and in fact becomes the object of uncritical interpretation.

In modern Polish humanitarian (also political) discourse, Kresy went beyond spatiality and became the embodiment of national memory, national consciousness,

and ultimately, national identity. By hyperbolizing and mythologizing the identity and specificity of the borderland, which gave Poland artists and statesmen of world scale: Mickiewicz, Slovacki, Szymanowski, Kosciuszko, and Piłsudski, the concept of Kresy turned into the embodiment of concentrated Polishness. «Kresy sprzed II wojny ... często przedstawiane są w konsektu sentymentalnym i wspomnienowym, jako «kraj lat dziecinnych» i raj utracony»[16] notes P. Vel Grajewski in his research.

The imaginary space formed in this way on both sides of the Polish-Ukrainian border, which is nourished thanks to the asymmetrical national memory of both peoples, gave birth to two concepts: the Eastern Kresy in Poland and Zakerzonny in Ukraine. The first is a collective image of the «lost lands» of the former territories of the Second Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and a product of the colonial discourse of the revival of Greater Poland «from sea to sea». From the Ukrainian side, it is opposed to the concept of Zakerzonnya — strands of Ukrainian ethnographic territories along the Polish and Belarusian borders from north to south, which until 1947 were mainly inhabited by Ukrainian autochthons. This is the idea of nostalgia for the lost extreme western primordial Ukrainian lands, which stems from the idea of reviving Ukraine from the Syan to the Don. Both concepts — Great Poland and Great Ukraine — are manifestations of historical romanticism and the product of a nationalist interpretation of history based on the principle of «land and blood». Due to the antagonism between the two approaches, finding a compromise or at least conducting a dialogue within the framework of this paradigm appears to be a difficult task.

Instead, the second direction, which tries to make sense of the Kresy using critical thinking, makes this attempt within the framework of postcolonial studies, based mainly on the tools and methodology proposed by Edward Said. It is this trend that interprets kresy as a typical colonialist attempt at self-positioning and self-understanding. Despite the total dominance of the interpretation of Kresy in an apologetic vein, it should be noted the presence in the Polish (and ultimately Ukrainian) humanitarian discourse of works that analyze the colonial and post-colonial aspects of the so-called Polish borderland.

K. Kwasniewski, a professor of sociology at Jagiellonian University, sees Kresy as an expansion of annexationist thinking in terms of expanding the state space to the national border and therefore positions it as an area of assimilation and acculturation. The researcher singles out various attempts to legitimise the offensiveness of the abuse of the Kresy for their own (and non-ethnic) community, such as a sense of mission, the spread of «true» faith, civilization, science, and culture [12, p. 27].

The author of another such analytical research, «Kolonialne i postkolonialne aspekty polskiego dyskursu kresoznawczego (zarys problematyki)»[10], Bohusław Bakula, claims that the language of Polish kresological studies contains unconscious language constructions, figurative clichés that impose their image of the world, and definitional tendencies to exclude others, although much is said about dialogue, multiculturalism, and understanding from the point of view of science and/or ideology. This indicates an extremely wide spread of colonial forms of memory, while the object of colonisation (that is, the population of the Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Lithuanian lands) is removed from the boundaries of subjectivity, if not deliberately undesirable. Without going into the essence of these works, the author summarizes

their common features, namely: 1) idealization of multiculturalism with Poland in the center as a means and the only key to explaining this world in its entirety; 2) rejection of languages recognized as borderline and minority languages (even if this minority is on the borderlands and constitutes the majority); 3) demonization, exoticization or idealization of the Other, non-Poles; 4) interpretation of the border region as a component of the concept of the Polish historical and civilizational mission; 5) avoidance of genuine, real contact with the Other (non-Polish) through the barrier of conditional dialogue, that is, dialogue, which is actually a monologue of the highest Polishness; 6) marginality as conditional pluralism, because it is centered around the most important value, which is Polish culture; 7) paternalism; 8) polonization of cultural diversity abroad; 9) imposing one's own perspective, terminology, and vision of border culture on others [10, p. 20]. In order to overcome the colonial paradigm in the Polish humanistic discourse, the researcher proposes to create a project of «integral comparative studies», which, in combination with post-colonial theory, will become a starting point for interdisciplinary studies of the so-called «borderland», which overcomes the invisible and visible borders of scientific consciousness associated with the colonial discourse.

. Summarising the above, it is possible to single out the specifics of opposite approaches in modern interpretations of the concept of «Kresy». First of all, kresy embody the idea of the quintessence of «Polishness», in some places replacing the concepts of homeland and national territory. In such a semantic context, the concept of Kresy is antagonistic to the concept of Ukrainian territories «from the Syan to the Don». It is obvious that, taking into account the modern civilizational and cultural situation, the transformation, and the new establishment of the borders of civilizations (European and Moscow-Soviet), the joint efforts of scientists are necessary to rethink the borderland (and Kresy) as a space of a common civilizational frontier.

### References:

- [1] Бовуа, Д. (1998). Міф «східних окраїн», або як йому покласти край. Україна: культурна спадщина, національна свідомість, державність, № 5.
- [2] Дейвіс, Н. (2008). *Боже ігрище: історія Польщі* (П. Таращук, пер. з англ.). К.: Вид-во Соломії Павличко «Основи».
- [3] Зашкільняк, Л. (1999). *Методологія історії від давнини до сучасності*. Львів: Львівський національний університет імені Івана Франка.
- [4] Кривда, Н. (2022). *Національна ідентичність*. [online]. Доступно: Кривда Н. Національна ідентичність. [Дата звернення 17 грудень 2023]
- [5] «Поверх кордону»: концепція прикордоння як об'єкт дослідження. (2011). *Україна Модерна*. №18. С.47-79. [online]. Доступно: Poverkh\_kordonu\_kontseptsii\_prykordonnia\_iak\_obiekt\_doslidzhennia.pdf [Дата звернення 17 грудень 2023]
- [6] Рібер, А. Я. (2003). Зміна концепцій та конструкцій кордонів: порівняльно-історичний підхід. *Ab Imperio*. (1), с. 23-46. [online]. Доступно: Зміна концепцій та конструкцій кордонів: порівняльно-історичний підхід. . [Дата звернення 17 грудень 2023]
- [7] Сміт, Ентоні Д. (1994). *Національна ідентичність*. К.: Основи.
- [8] Судин, Д. (2023). *Українська ідентичність 2.0: бути українцями після 24 лютого 2022 р* [online]. Доступно: Українська ідентичність 2.0: бути українцями після 24 лютого 2022 р - Данило Судин - YouTube [Дата звернення 31 січень 2024]

- [9] Яковенко, Н. (2007). *Вступ до історії*. Київ: Критика.
- [10] Bakula, B. (2006). *Kolonialne i postkolonialne aspekty polskiego dyskursu kresoznawczego (zarys problematyki)*. Teksty Drugie, 6, s. 11-33. [online]. Доступно: WA248\_68418\_P-I-2524\_bakula-kolonial.pdf. [Дата звернення 17 січень 2024]
- [11] Halecki, O. (1952). *Borderlands of Western Civilization. A History of East Central Europe*. N.Y.: The Ronald Press Company.
- [12] Kwaśniewski, K. (1999). Polskie Kresy Wschodnie a Deutsche Ostmarken. *Przegląd Zachodni*, nr 3. [online]. Доступно: C\_II\_472-C\_II\_473BP-1999\_3-53.pdf [Дата звернення 17 січень 2024]
- [13] Nowak, A. (2011). *Wstęp. Elegia o Kresach / Czarna księga Kresów*, red. J. Wieliczka-Szarkowa, Kraków, s. 7–13.
- [14] Pol Wincenty. *Dzieła Wincentego Pola wierszem i prozą*. T. 1 ser. 1, Poezye. [online]. Доступно: Polona [Дата звернення 17 грудень 2023]
- [15] Turner, Frederick Jackson. (1920). *The Frontier in American History*. N.Y.: Henry Holt and Company. [online]. Доступно: Turner: The Frontier In American History (virginia.edu) [Дата звернення 17 січень 2024]
- [16] Żurawski vel Grajewski, P., Kresy – dzieje pewnego pojęcia. [online]. Доступно: Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski: Kresy – dzieje pewnego pojęcia (teologiapolityczna.pl). [Дата звернення 17 січень 2024]