



John J. Kulczycki. *Belonging to the Nation: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Polish-German Borderlands, 1939-1951.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 416 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-65978-0.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Morrow Clark (West Texas A&M University)

Published on H-Poland (September, 2019)

Commissioned by Anna Muller (University of Michigan - Dearborn)

A Question of Belonging

The fate of the populations inhabiting the “Recovered Lands” of postwar Poland depended on an interpretation of nationality that both preserved the resources of the Polish state and eliminated any potential threat of perceived revisionist, imperial, or racist incursions across the border. In *Belonging to the Nation*, John J. Kulczycki, professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago, focuses on the process by which groups were identified as worthy of inclusion among the desired nationals by first Nazi German officials, then Polish intellectuals and Allied diplomats, and finally, by the communist apparatus that was the People’s Republic of Poland. Despite the 1939 start date, the narrative is less about German occupation policy and more about Polish response to the question of belonging during and after the war. The author explores the process of including or excluding citizens as border changes were debated, then negotiated, then ratified. The implications were dire, as exclusion resulted in expulsion. Inclusion was not without consequences either, as the People’s Republic sought to redefine and reimpose a unified idea of Polishness.

While the author acknowledges the irony of nationality policies imposed first by a racially motivated Germany, then by a resource-oriented communist state, the actual policies are not equated, nor are direct lines drawn from one totalitarian system to another. Kulczycki brings a lifetime of thinking about identity in border regions to this work. Subtle asides about the social implications of

language policy and education among Szczecin’s Polish-speaking population carry the authority of past monographs. A career spent reading past obfuscations of bureaucrats in multiple languages pays off with a narrative about how decrees were implemented. With characteristic attention to detail, Kulczycki manages to assemble a myriad of original sources and statistics to support his argument that process and practicality played a larger role in borderland nationality policies than ethnic identity, blood, or even patriotism.

Perceived failures of minorities treaties after World War I led to a general acceptance of population transfers as a better means for managing mixed populations. As early as 1940, it was presumed that there would be some form of transfer after the war. Rarified diplomatic conversations about borders and idealized presumptions about homogeneity were replaced with politically weighted rhetoric about the “Recovered Lands” of Poland’s western border. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union, “Polish demands for German territory and the expulsion of its German inhabitants expanded in parallel with the negotiations leading to the loss of the eastern lands” (p. 55). Official government and press messages invoked the repopulation of Piast Poland as a countermeasure, compensating for the aberration of Teutonic corruption. As the end of the war approached, Polish communists managed to indict the Crusades, Catholicism, ethnic Germans, *Junkers*, and the

kingdom of Prussia. Kulczycki reports that over 1.2 million of the repatriates from the “former eastern territories” were resettled into former German territory, “constituting about 18 percent of its population” (p. 87). It seems that, in one gesture, vice premier of the Provisional Government (and later first secretary of Władysław Gomułka) dismissed the debates of the previous generation about the value of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as an ideal, when he argued it was urgent that former German lands be Polonized and Germans prevented from remaining or returning, saying “We have to throw them out because all countries are built on national principles and not multinational ones” (p. 87). No more the inclusive rhetoric of Józef Piłsudski, this decision sounds more like Roman Dmowski than anyone else. Kulczycki explains that the manipulation of identity politics served the incoming communist regime. By focusing on victory over the German enemy, the postwar Polish government could distract citizens from the loss of the *kresy* and from the nuance of identity that characterized the borderland.

The long influence of nationalist theory is evident as Kulczycki sets up his argument. Echoes of Ernst Renan, Anthony Smith, Geoff Eley, and the vocabulary of “imagination” that always evokes Benedict Anderson resound alongside references to Ernest Gellner and Rogers Brubaker. Like Gellner, Kulczycki recognizes that nations are contingent, and like Brubaker, he seeks to consider nationalism beyond interwar minority politics. *Belonging to the Nation* reaches past concerns about minorities or diasporas into the study of reluctant or apathetic nationalities, touching on regional identities as a powerful refuge in an era marked by nationalisms inspired by a violent or righteous cause. Thus, this work bridges those nationalism conversations of the immediate post-1989 era with contemporary concerns about the importance of regionalism and the rise of populism. It asks, quite simply, both “who belongs?” and “who decides?”

In grappling with midcentury consequences of nationalism a generation after the Cold War, Kulczycki’s work expands our understanding of national identity while it exposes how the blunt instrument of the state was employed as communism established its grip on Poland. Kulczycki does not explain the circumstances that pushed the Polish border westward, but he posits them in a larger German, Polish, and European context. Because he knows better than to equate the Potsdam agreement with the long process of Germanization undertaken by the German Empire (which included both economic migration and resettlement), Kulczycki can also point out the contrast between how German mi-

norities informed *Lebensraum* and how the postwar Polish attempts to reclaim and repolonize the autochthons of the border region undermined, rather than reinforced, their identities.

Nazi leadership had established a model for expanding the category of nationality by invoking political and economic behaviors when it classified the population of the Reichsgau Danzig-West Prussia in 1939. Poles who had lived in the territory since before 1918 were Polish, as were those who migrated in after that year, while residents who claimed and embraced “Germanness” were offered *Volksdeutsche* status (p. 43). Local administrators understood that racial definitions in this borderland would not yield the desired results, and a process for “re-Germanization” commenced.

Like the Nazi authorities before them, postwar Poland faced a plethora of definitions for what it meant to be Polish, especially for autochthons. Thus, Silesia, Mazuria, West Pomerania, and Gdańsk/Sopot initially established local criteria. Kulczycki does not parse these critically so much as lay them out based on local definitions, but he demonstrates the breadth of historical debate about nationality and identity with such asides as: “as Piotr Madajczyk suggests, ... they pursued not so much ethnic cleansing as nationality cleansing. One had to declare one’s national loyalty to Poland, not just Polish ethnic characteristics” (p. 120). Polish-sounding names, practice of traditions, use of Polish at home or in prayers, membership in a Polish organization, ancestral residence on Polish territory, not joining the Nazi Party, or raising children in the “Polish Spirit” all qualified individuals, to various degrees, for Polish nationality. This was, naturally, complicated by the exigencies of imperial occupation and more recent Germanization efforts. Kulczycki acknowledges, in the resigned tone of one familiar with bureaucracy, that “thus, the verification process ultimately depended on provincial and local officials, who mostly came from prewar Poland and had no knowledge of conditions under German rule. Furthermore, the quality of officials ... frequently declined the lower one went down the administrative hierarchy” (p. 128).

The Potsdam Conference marks the midpoint of the monograph, tracing the verification of nationality by region, teasing out the necessary differences between regions. The result was a both delicate and brutal implementation of MZO (Ministry of Recovered Lands) policy by provincial offices. “The simultaneous pressure on local officials to retain autochthons and expel as many Germans as quickly as possible resulted in a certain dis-

sonance” (p. 178). While predominantly focused on the question of Polish nationality, Kulczycki also addresses the fate of Jewish populations, noting that when Jews in Łódź were assigned to “other” nationalities, among Germans and Roma, the act was quickly rescinded. This pales, of course, in comparison with the Kielce pogrom. While some might find the limited discussion of Jews or Ukrainians in the monograph frustrating, in-depth treatment of lesser-known groups like Slovincians, Kashubians, Warmiaks, and Mazurians offers much to the discipline.

The author demonstrates a carefully researched understanding of resettlement patterns in the West, a clear-eyed attitude about the economic motivations for the timing of expulsions, and in-depth knowledge about the long-term consequences of peripheralizing autochthons in their own regions. Kulczycki mourns opportunities lost and the severity of expulsions due to abuse in the Recovered Lands by 1946. The story concludes in 1951, by which point the complications of class and national belonging were made more awkward because across the border was a fellow communist state, the German Democratic Republic. At the same time, citizenship laws in the Federal Republic of Germany also influenced nationality decisions. The entire narrative is tinged with irony: irony that populations who were indifferent or ambivalent about nationality were forced into categories; irony that many were expelled who might have been loyal or contributed to a successful future for Poland; irony that Polonization efforts and marginalization alienated groups and inhibited the very cohesiveness they purported to promote.

Kulczycki’s tone in addressing this occasionally approaches one of surprise, noting that the transfer of populations in Poland during the postwar era contradicts the usual experience of migration, since the borderland populations (autochthons) were expected to alter their self-identification to match that of the incoming group, rather than vice versa. This was an ideal arrangement, since it allowed for the disruption of traditional patterns as the communist regime established itself, while reinforcing an ideology of equality. Any dual identity that might have been felt by autochthons would be subsumed and replaced by one driven by sense of persecution and defiance.

Much like those charged with implementing policy, in addition to defining inclusion, and expelling those excluded, Kulczycki offers explanations of how authorities Polonized (or re-Polonized) various populations. Name

changes were made easier by abolishing legal fees in records offices. Clergy were pressured to discourage German names at christenings. Tensions in the western borderland were exacerbated by in-migration. When parsing the factors that divided repatriates and locals, it would have been interesting to read a longer endnote or epilogue more specifically addressing the impact of Poles from the *kresy*, especially the cultural differences that marked the educated elites from prewar Lwów and Wilno.

At the outset of the account, the author declares his intent to address the “process” of deciding who qualified as German, or Polish, between 1939 and 1951. He elucidates that while establishing nationality was the goal of each regime, “material and political considerations often overrode the officially declared bases for decisions” (p. 300). Bureaucracies can be arbitrary, even while arguing that decisions were clear-cut. Certainly such decisions were often dire and could not account for shades of identity or individual preferences for blended culture. By the end of the monograph, Kulczycki offers insights specific to Poland, but that are applicable broadly, by demonstrating the process by which new regimes recognize fellow nationals, remove those who would not be included, and then repopulate regions and reeducate inhabitants to enforce and preform national ownership. The work also demonstrates how historians have, over the generation since 1989, come to accept, then critique, the desirability of a homogeneous nation-state.

In the end *Belonging to the Nation* is a useful, at times subtle, teasing apart of issues of identity and action, from a plethora of original sources revealed in dozens of notes. Often a single endnote includes references to multiple primary documents, even from different archives. An occasional aside explains a translation, clarifies meaning, or disputes claims in an original source. Kulczycki also uses the endnotes to summarize or compare historical positions or to offer a rare jewel of an anecdote from decades of research and interaction with international scholars. There is not a bibliography per se, nor a need for one with such thorough notes. Nevertheless, the narrative is not smooth reading, and the presumption of a knowing reader is pervasive, leading one to understand that the audience will be those who can navigate the acronyms used in communist bureaucracy without need for much explanation, or that one will understand idioms spouted by regional administrators, such as “the German hordes might again invade the Polish lands with fire and sword” (p. 187). Graduate students, researchers, and historians of Poland will benefit most, followed by

those seeking comparisons with other regimes that prioritized ethnic cleansing or national reeducation. Thus, *Belonging to the Nation* falls into the same category as other borderlands writing that exposes, but does not choose a side in, debates in Central Europe about the political, economic, and even the security consequences of state-imposed population transfers. Libraries can place this latest work by Kulczycki alongside monographs about regional identity, East Central Europe, ethnic cleansing, nationalism, and counter-national works by such scholars as Kate Brown, Timothy Snyder, Tomasz Kamusella, Norman Naimark, Padraic Kenney, Andrew Demshuk, Celia Applegate, and Brian Porter-Szűcs. It is also useful to understand the process that informs the stories told in more specialized works and monographs that function as case studies about plebicides, identity, or population transfers from such scholars as Gregor Thum, Winson Chu, Chad Bryant, Richard Blanke, John Connelly, and Karin Friedrich.

This book offers English-speaking Polish historians a single reference for local and central government policies on nationality. It also reveals gaps in the literature that deserve consideration. For instance, the author makes

glancing references to the particular problem of interethnic marriage and the fate of women stranded across the border from spouses due to the exigencies of war or expulsion. This would be worth exploring by borderlands historians and gender historians, now equipped with an understanding of nationalization policy and process as presented in Kulczycki's book.

Kulczycki aptly navigates a broad historiography of conversations about borderlands, from a passing and efficiently summarized critique of Alfred-Maurice de Zayas on expulsion to close linguistic parsing of how Polish politicians reference regional language use in the twenty-first century. Kulczycki not only breaks up narratives dependent on ethnic nationalism as a desired premise for organizing the state but also reminds historians of Europe that the chronology of the twentieth century is not broken at 1945 but includes continuities of assumptions, even across conflicting ideologies. Kulczycki does not blur ideologies together but instead gets at the heart of the process. This offers insight into both political transition in the middle of the twentieth century and the assumptions about nation and belonging at play in contemporary Europe today.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland>

Citation: Elizabeth Morrow Clark. Review of Kulczycki, John J., *Belonging to the Nation: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Polish-German Borderlands, 1939-1951*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. September, 2019.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50406>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.