Chapter 3

Ukraine and the RSFSR

How to Find a Common Border

> Drawing on precise national-ethnographic data, we must conclude that the existing borders of the UkrSSR are hardly precise and justifiable.
>
> —Panas Butsenko, 1927

These pages are quite simply not the place for a discussion of Ukraine and the debates over its prospective territories in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As intellectually stimulating and engrossing as the works on linguistics, ethnography, and cartography produced by experts such as Stepan Rudnyts'kyi, Eugeniusz Romer, or Yefim Karski may be, they had little influence on the people who had to negotiate and demarcate the border between Ukraine and the RSFSR in and after 1919.[1] This was even more true because local populations had a rather pragmatic approach to nationality before 1917.[2] At the Paris Peace Conference, representatives from the Ukrainian People's Republic (Ukraïns'ka narodna respublika, UNR) sought recognition from the victorious powers, but all their efforts were in vain. The Entente powers ultimately preferred Ukraine to be a part of a renovated Russian Empire. Thus all the petitions, studies, and debates concerning Ukrainian territory circulating during the conference were of almost no consequence in the founding of the sole Ukrainian territorial unit that survived the troublesome aftermath of the First World War—that is, Soviet Ukraine.[3]

Soviet Ukraine took shape outside the Entente's sphere of influence. According to western politicians, Poland and Romania were to contain the Bolshevik revolution. The outcome of the Polish-Soviet War and

the Peace of Riga in 1921 defined most of Soviet Ukraine's western border, while Soviet commissions decided the Russian-Ukrainian border in the north and east.[4] According to the 1926 census, twenty-nine million people lived in Ukraine, about 20 percent of the population of the Soviet Union. Economically, Ukraine was the strongest of the republics after the RSFSR.[5]

Putting a Shattered Empire Together Again

After the collapse of the tsarist government in February 1917, the Ukrainian Central Rada (Ukraïns'ka tsentral'na rada), an assembly of Ukrainian political and social activists in Kiev, claimed to represent the interests of all Ukrainians within the Russian state. The Rada deputies initially preferred autonomy to independence. Due to requests from the Provisional Government in Petrograd, the representatives of the Rada accepted that a constituent assembly would establish Ukraine's borders. In the interim, the Rada was expected to function within five previously imperial gubernii: Kiev, Poltava, Podolia, Volhynia, and parts of Chernigov.[6] Following the Bolshevik revolution that same November, the Rada defined its territory unilaterally. In doing so, the deputies were prudent and supplied a preliminary list, according to which Ukraine would include the following imperial gubernii: Kiev, Podolia, Volhynia, Chernihiv, Poltava, Katerynoslav, Kherson, and Taurida (without Crimea). In Kursk, Kholm, and Voronezh Gubernii plebiscites should decide territorial affiliation.[7] Roughly two months later, the deputies formally proclaimed the independence of the UNR.

Throughout the Civil War that followed the Bolshevik revolution, the ideal of a united Ukrainian state with a defined territory remained a fiction. Over the course of 1918 and 1919, the armed forces of numerous states and movements battled for control of the Ukrainian lands: the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, General Skoropadskii's Hetmanate, the UNR, the Donetsk-Krivoi Rog Soviet Republic, tsarist loyalists under Anton Denikin, anarchists under Nestor Makhno, Poland, and of course the nascent Soviet state.[8] Borders were in a state of permanent flux. For example, the Hetmanate briefly occupied the region around Belgorod, a town in the southern part of Kursk Guberniia.[9] This town would become one of the stumbling blocks in Soviet debates over the RSFSR-Ukrainian border. Moreover, after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in November 1918, Ukrainian activists, native to eastern Galicia, established a Western Ukrainian People's Republic.[10]

With that, a second Ukrainian state emerged outside the former Russian Empire, although the newly created Polish Republic would soon overrun it.[11]

Amid the chaos that unfolded after the withdrawal of German and Austro-Hungarian occupation forces, the Bolsheviks tried to export their revolution. With Moscow's support, Ukrainian communists in early 1919 created a satellite state in the south, the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic (Ukraïns'ka sotsialistychna radians'ka respublika, UkrSSR).[12] When attempts to seize power in Kiev failed, this newly proclaimed Soviet government established itself in Kharkiv.[13] This town near the border with the RSFSR would remain the Ukrainian capital until 1934, even though Kiev was larger and seen as the historical center. Kharkiv was easier to access from Moscow.

In early 1919, the RSFSR and the UkrSSR began to consult officially over the future of their shared border. These negotiations were hastily arranged and did not last long. The result was a border convention signed on 25 February 1919. The Central Rada's definition of the Ukrainian lands, described above, served as a blueprint. Negotiators defined Ukrainian territory using the borders of the imperial gubernii. However, there were two major differences. Negotiators did not adopt the idea of plebiscites in contested areas, and they divided Chernigov Guberniia between them.[14] Nonetheless, the parties to the talks understood that these borders were preliminary and subject to later discussion.[15]

At first, Soviet space was not clearly compartmentalized. The eastern border between the UkrSSR and the RSFSR is a striking example. During the Polish-Soviet War, a first territorial transfer between the RSFSR and the UkrSSR took place in the early spring of 1920. The western parts of the Oblast of the Don Cossack Host (Oblast' voiska donskogo) were ceded to Ukraine. The idea behind this move was to bring the industry of the Donets Basin (Donets'kyi basein, Donbas), which had also been split between the RSFSR and the UkrSSR, under the administration of one Soviet republic. By doing so, the Soviets hoped this would improve coordination in the war effort against Poland.[16] The transfer took place not long after the Red Army defeated White forces in the region. Due to the ongoing war, the Soviet government did not discuss this territorial revision with local representatives. Here the ethnographic principle, which had played a decisive role in assigning gubernii the previous year, was now ignored. For similar economic and administrative reasons, the Cossack communities (*stanitsa*)

Figure 9. Ukrainian borders between 1917 and 1924.

around Lugansk were also added to the UkrSSR between August 1920 and October 1921.[17] In the west, the outcome of the war against Poland settled the borders of the UkrSSR. By the terms of the Peace of Riga, the Soviets had to surrender the western parts of Volhynia Guberniia to Poland in 1921.[18] Meanwhile, in the southwest, Romania occupied and annexed Bessarabia up to the Dniester River. The Bolshevik government never officially recognized this latter loss of territory. They chose instead to wait for a fitting opportunity to revisit the matter.[19]

After the Civil War, the Bolshevik leadership turned to the question of how to administer the space under the Red Army's control. As we have seen so far, the early Soviet state was quite chaotic with regard to territorial matters. Entities inherited from the old regime coexisted alongside new, nationally defined territories or formally independent Soviet republics such as Ukraine. As late as the mid-1920s, the internal structure of the Soviet state was still open for negotiation.

Internationalist and Austromarxist ideas in the upper party echelons went into steady decline as the Civil War drew to a close, even though some of Gosplan's experts continued to promote such inclusive approaches. The party leadership was leaning toward the formation of a federation or a union of states organized along national-ethnographic lines.[20] However, the Soviet discourse about "nation" and "nationality" was heterogeneous, to say the least. Even though Soviet experts emphasized slight but decisive differences, most of those engaged in such debates were politicians, and they used terms such as "ethnographic" (*etnograficheskii*), "national" (*natsional'nyi*), and "national-ethnographic" (*natsional'no-etnograficheskii*) or "nation" (*natsiia*) and "nationality" (*narodnost'* or *natsional'nost'*) interchangeably.[21] Thus the meaning of these terms often blurred, as they could refer to language, culture, or the organization of the economy among a certain part of the population when linking these factors with territory.[22] In short, the participants—the Ukrainian representatives among them—began to apply such terms to define a population group and their perceived interests as opposed to other communities within the Soviet state. Going forward, I use these words and phrases not as analytical terms but as they came up during this contentious political discourse.[23]

The Ukrainian communists were also far from homogeneous. Since their formation in 1918, they had split into three competing factions: the leftists, the centrists, and the "Yekaterinoslav group" or rightists.[24] The leftists were mostly convinced internationalists. They insisted

on an independent Ukraine within the newly established Communist International but abstained from any "nationalist" policy. The Yekaterinoslav group promoted a close association with the Russian Communist Party. Whereas the rightists and leftists (each for their own reasons) were skeptical of Ukrainian nationalism, centrists such as Mykola Skrypnyk, an esteemed Old Bolshevik, saw in it positive potential. These centrists received a large boost of additional support in 1920, when the *borot'bisty*, left-wing Ukrainian Socialist-Revolutionaries, joined the ranks of the KP(b)U. Among them were activists like Oleksandr Shums'kyi and Mykhailo Poloz. In the first years of Soviet rule, these three factions of the KP(b)U competed fiercely for power and influence. The internal party tensions that resulted led to a series of Ukrainian first secretaries in quick succession.[25]

Shifts in politics among party leaders in Moscow allowed centrists in Kharkiv to gain more and more influence. In the mid-1920s, they grew to become the dominant faction.[26] The power struggle within the party leadership in Moscow weakened the Ukrainian party's leftists, who opposed the NEP. The centrists profited from korenizatsiia, which they then helped implement by pursuing Ukrainization within party and state institutions. Resolutions against "Great Russian chauvinism" would provide the discursive background for the debates to come.[27] The Sultan-Galiev affair, however, also made clear to all that there were red lines they had to observe.

The Ukrainian centrists' rise to power provided opportunities for younger party activists such as Panas Butsenko, an ardent follower of Skrypnyk and Shums'kyi and their Ukrainization policies. In July 1923, Butsenko became secretary of the Ukrainian Central Executive Committee (VUTsVK), which was the nominal head of the state administration. His responsibilities as secretary included overseeing territorial reforms, national minority affairs, and border revisions with the RSFSR. As part of his job, he promoted the formation of national rural soviets and raiony for Soviet Ukraine's Germans, Poles, Jews, and Bulgarians, among others, but he also publicly claimed the same rights for the Ukrainian-speaking population in the RSFSR.[28]

The Balancing Act of the Cherviakov Commission

Many regional and national actors thus saw opportunities to extend their influence and power. The heads of the newly established kraia within the RSFSR were in a rather privileged position. Nikolai Eizmont,

party secretary in what would become North Caucasus Krai, laid claim to about 15,000 square versta (17,000 square kilometers) with approximately 600,000 inhabitants in eastern Ukraine.[29] The North Caucasus was one of the testing grounds for raionirovanie in the RSFSR and was still reconsolidating itself administratively. For support, Eizmont could rely on experienced experts like Vasilii Khronin, the head of Gosplan's local branch. In his memoranda, Khronin proposed adding the port of Tahanrih (today Taganrog) and the coalmines of Shakhty to the North Caucasus. He based his arguments on the fact that these towns were majority Russian-speaking. According to him, Tahanrih had the only deep-water port that was potentially available to the North Caucasus. The coalmines of Shakhty, in Khronin's view, would provide electricity and fuel.[30]

Party and state institutions in the North Caucasus launched a full-fledged propaganda campaign to reinforce their claims to Ukrainian territory. Vasilii Khronin edited a brochure with scientific studies summarizing all of the arguments for the region's transfer to the RSFSR.[31] The local newspaper *Sovetskii iug* (Soviet South) personified this campaign in a caricature that depicted Tahanrih as a weak old man who would profit from unification with the economically potent North Caucasus.[32]

Ukrainian representatives opposed such claims and sought to counter the "sinister" propaganda from the North Caucasus.[33] They pointed to the Ukrainian-speaking population in the surrounding villages and the role Tahanrih played in the development of industry in the Donbas.[34] Leading Ukrainian centrists were confident that they could easily foil these "Great Russian chauvinist" claims.

Quite to the contrary, Panas Butsenko and his comrade Mykhailo Poloz, the head of the Ukrainian State Planning Commission (UkrDerzhplan), sought to revise the northeast border in favor of the UkrSSR.[35] The volosti and uezdy along the southern rim of Briansk, Kursk, and Voronezh Gubernii were expected to be attached to Ukraine given their Ukrainian-speaking majorities. In the spring of 1924, the Section for Raionirovanie at UkrDerzhplan compiled a comprehensive dossier detailing their territorial claims.[36] UkrDerzhplan's experts had carefully analyzed the population of the gubernii in question. In addition, they were of the opinion that the regional sugar industry should be united under the Ukrainian republic. Most of the refineries were in the southern part of Kursk Guberniia, whereas the sugar beets were grown in Ukraine.[37] National-ethnographic considerations aside, they, too, were

Figure 10. Map of border revisions in Kursk Guberniia, 1924–1928.

trying to improve "their" local economic base at the expense of their neighbors—much like the officials in the North Caucasus.

Some Ukrainian claims went much farther. In 1924 Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi, a highly respected Ukrainian historian and statesman, wrote a memorandum for the Soviet Ukrainian government that called for the inclusion of the Kuban region in the UkrSSR as Ukrainian-speaking Cossacks lived in this area. His expert opinion became part of the Ukrainian side's official claims.[38]

The Ukrainian and Russian party leaderships agreed that they would have to discuss these territorial issues. Against the backdrop of the recent border revisions in favor of the Belarusian SSR in the spring of 1924, it initially seemed that the general political climate favored Ukraine rather than the RSFSR. Leading centrists lobbied successfully for the establishment of a bilateral Russian-Ukrainian border commission.[39] However, this commission would meet only behind closed doors because the topic under discussion could easily enflame nationalist sentiments within the Soviet state.[40]

A bilateral commission made up of representatives from the Russian and the Ukrainian Soviet republics had to find feasible solutions for conflicting territorial claims. Aleksandr Cherviakov, then chairman of the Belarusian TsIK, was assigned to head the commission in

April 1924. It was his job to play the role of a neutral broker and represent the interests of the union as a whole.[41] On the eve of the first meeting, the Ukrainian representatives Butsenko and Poloz harbored great expectations. They had staked out claims on about 35,000 square versta (roughly 40,000 square kilometers) from the gubernii of Briansk, Kursk, and Voronezh.[42] Almost two million people lived in the territories in question. According to their statistical data, the vast majority of the population in the border areas were Ukrainians.[43] The Politburo of the KP(b)U supported these claims in the northeast, but they gave Butsenko and Poloz strict orders not to raise the Kuban issue, including all claims toward North Caucasus Krai. These territories were taboo, even for discussions among comrades behind the scenes.[44]

The Cherviakov Commission brought together party officials with contradictory approaches and aims. The lines of conflict were quickly exposed at the very first session on 1 July 1924. Both representatives of the RSFSR, Aleksandr Beloborodov and Martin Latsis, were leftist revolutionaries. Beloborodov had been commissar for internal affairs since 1923 and was one of Trotsky's close allies. Latsis had made his career within the Cheka. In 1919 he had even run the political police in Ukraine for a brief time. Even today, he remains infamous for his quip that, in times of revolution, the guilt or innocence of an individual is determined not by evidence but by class background.[45] In 1918 and 1919 Latsis also ranked among the critics of the party's nationality policies, favoring instead, like Bukharin and Georgii Piatakov, an "international" approach focused on the proletariat.[46] After the Civil War, Latsis had changed his line of work in constructing socialism and moved from the political police to agriculture and economics.

Both of the RSFSR representatives saw issues related to nationality as formalities, which stood in stark contradiction to the approach of their Ukrainian comrades. Beloborodov emphasized that the commission should organize the border revision according to economic considerations alone. He argued that adherence to ethnographic maps would produce inefficient, jagged borders.[47] The Ukrainian representatives insisted on the importance of national-ethnographic criteria. Hence finding agreement between the two sides was going to entail severe challenges. Even if Latsis and Beloborodov had not belonged to the party's leftists, they would have stuck to the economic line. They could not openly raise "Russian" national arguments without facing accusations of "Great Russian chauvinism."[48] Both sides tried to present their proposals as the most "efficient" (*tselesoobrazno*) way to deal with the

issue. "Efficiency" was a Soviet buzzword. It was an empty, convenient shell that could be filled with any random content. Thus the central debate within the Cherviakov Commission revolved around what the most "efficient" solution would be.[49]

Some days after the commission's strained first meeting, the Ukrainian side had to accept its first major setback. The very nature of this blow reveals a great deal about decision making and power politics within the Soviet state. The Politburo in Moscow decided that the parts of eastern Ukraine around the towns Tahanrih and Shakhty had to be ceded to the RSFSR. In doing so, the Politburo not only bypassed the bilateral commission under Cherviakov. It made this decision even though Tahanrih and Shakhty had belonged to territories transferred from the RSFSR to the UkrSSR just four years previously. Relying exclusively on Khronin's expertise, the Politburo explained this re-revision by citing the North Caucasus's need for a deep-sea port and the ethnographic composition of these areas.[50] Representatives of the Ukrainian state and party apparatus protested in vain, but they had to stick to the rules of the game.[51]

Due to summer holidays and the need for further studies, the Cherviakov Commission did not meet until mid-October. Poloz and Butsenko expressed their displeasure with the Politburo's decision to the full extent permissible within the Soviet framework—they boycotted the commission's second session on 13 October 1924.[52] Cherviakov and the RSFSR representatives were left to plan the implementation of the border changes around Tahanrih and Shakhty on their own. They followed the Politburo's recommendations without hesitation and expressed their hope that there would be no "dissent from the representatives from the UkrSSR next time."[53] Butsenko and Poloz had to agree to the border revision at the next meeting on 21 October.[54] To make things worse, however, they had to give their assent to a fait accompli, since a bilateral regional commission had already demarcated the future border, and the territories in question had been transferred on 1 October.[55]

This setback did not discourage Butsenko and Poloz at first. They had also received some promising signals. They now turned self-confidently to their claims in the north. On 18 October Butsenko had been able to publish an article on the border issue in the all-union newspaper *Izvestiia*. There he publicly pointed to the necessity of considering ethnographic boundaries in negotiations over the Russian-Ukrainian border. He drew on resolutions from the Twelfth Party Congress and the legacy of Lenin's nationality policies.[56] In the commission meetings,

Poloz had taken the same line, repeatedly arguing that "the Ukrainian population forms a large majority in the border areas [of Kursk, Voronezh, and Briansk Gubernii]. The basis of our national policy is to serve the cultural needs of these people."[57] As a member of the board of directors at UkrDerzhplan, Poloz had also contributed to a memorandum in which he argued that the ethnographic principle should be fundamental, but that the border should meet regional economic needs. Thus the town of Belgorod, with sugar refineries in the outskirts, ought to belong to the UkrSSR.[58]

Within the Cherviakov Commission, two new factors emerged that seemed to dampen the prospects of Ukrainian success. First, representatives from Voronezh and Kursk Gubernii were invited to attend the next meeting. Even though they did not have a formal say in the proceedings, a majority of those sitting in the room were now against any major revisions to the borders.[59] Second, the Cherviakov Commission decided to create a subcommission of experts because the commission members saw themselves as ill-suited to evaluating all of the reports and statistical data each side had submitted. It should come as no big surprise that Cherviakov called on Konstantin Yegorov to head this subcommission.[60] As we have seen previously, Yegorov considered himself as an expert on wide array of matters, and he was still quite critical of "national-ethnographic" arguments in matters of territory, preferring instead arguments that addressed economic efficiency and exigencies of governance.[61]

After a meeting in Moscow on 23 October, Panas Butsenko grew increasingly pessimistic. In a report to the Central Committee of the KP(b)U, he complained about the general change in tone:

> we faced more and more difficulties from the representatives of the RSFSR, especially from the delegates from Kursk and Voronezh Gubernii, who showed up at the commission only to protest with a demonstrative walkout. We noticed a clear reluctance to discuss the project of the UkrSSR. Certain comrades even raised their voices and used terms like *Malorossiia* and *Velikorossiia*. They were referring to *malorossy* . . . in Belgorod Uezd who do not want to join our republic. They also pretended that there were a lot of petitions from the population of the [Ukrainian] Novgorod-Seversk, Sumy, and Kharkov Okruga asking to join the RSFSR.[62]

In the wake of the setback involving Tahanrih and Shakhty, the Ukrainian representatives were now facing counterclaims in the north from

the representatives of the RSFSR.[63] Butsenko, however, pressed forward in his struggle for a resolution of the border to Ukraine's advantage. He asked the TsK KP(b)U to appeal to its Russian counterpart to establish a binding line not only for the southeast but also in the north.[64] Furthermore, he urged UkrDerzhplan to counter the Russian claims and provide him with the best expertise they had: "Please prepare [the data] with all the attention required as the issue has taken on an extraordinarily serious character in the commission. For every village we claim, the Ukrainian government has to provide a precise economic and ethnographic foundation."[65]

In the meantime, Yegorov's commission of experts had started work, and soon enough, the same divisions arose that existed within the Cherviakov Commission itself. Yegorov was assisted in his efforts by one Troitskii of Gosplan and a certain Vdovichenko of UkrDerzhplan. Together they had an effective say in matters. However, delegates from the border gubernii joined their sessions as well. During the first meeting at the main Gosplan building in Moscow, the experts agreed to use all of the materials available on the topic, in particular the census data of 1897 and 1920. Yegorov also promised that Gosplan would provide all of the publications and office supplies needed.[66] Ethnographic data remained highly contested and prone to bias. Every side collected and counted by its own methods and arrived at different figures.[67]

The ongoing debates within Yegorov's subcommission mobilized the regional administrations as well. In October and November 1924 they issued a barrage of statements and counterstatements to promote their own cause and sent them to Yegorov or Cherviakov. Cheating and unfair arguments were not the exception but the rule. Neither regional nor local functionaries on either side of the border had the greater Soviet commonwealth in mind but solely "their" own territory. The border gubernii in the RSFSR were opposed to any changes, and the neighboring hubernii in the UkrSSR were claiming as many economically valuable assets as possible.

The chairman of the Gosplan branch office in Voronezh, D'iakonov, put together a memorandum in which he included every reason he could think of to contest any territorial transfer to Ukraine. First, he began with geological considerations: the current borders—in his view—corresponded to a layer of chalk and phosphate in the region. At the same time as his colleagues in Central and Southeastern Europe were trying to justify new borders with references to geology and climate,

D'iakonov was using similar considerations to support gubernii borders established under Catherine II.[68] He then went on to emphasize how much agricultural methods differed from one another in Voronezh and Kharkiv Gubernii. In doing so, he referred to the number of cattle and population density. Finally, according to D'iakonov, Voronezh's industry was further developed than Kharkiv's. In summarizing all of these economic reasons against any transfer, he felt it necessary to respond to Ukrainian claims based on national-ethnographic principles. In doing so, he tried to simply brush it aside, questioning whether it had any political validity at all: "The basic assumption of UkrGosplan, the ethnographic principle, is only a formality. Taking all of these facts into consideration, this principle cannot and must not have any decisive value."[69]

The Ukrainian side knew all too well about these efforts in Voronezh and allowed its regional administrations to respond to D'iakonov's arguments. Two experts, Rashin and Sliusarev, both members of the administration in Starobil's'k Okruha (Okrug), wrote a memorandum challenging D'iakonov's expertise, arguing that he had linked the uezdy in question with Kharkiv Huberniia, when they were supposed to be attached to Donets'k Huberniia. Thus all of D'iakonov's economic arguments comparing Voronezh with Kharkiv did not apply and were therefore irrelevant.[70] Then they went straight to the core argument, attacking the very assumption that the national-ethnographic principle was "only a formality." They outlined how the Soviet order was expected to function: "All of the policies of the USSR underscore the very significance [of this principle]. We do not have to say much about this. It is sufficient to recall the latest actions around the [delimitation] in Central Asia and the formation of the autonomous Mongolian SSR."[71] In short, Rashin and Sliusarev were arguing that federalism must be more than a façade and must be realized in political practice.

The guberniia executive committee in Voronezh went even farther and organized a demonstration of Ukrainian-speaking functionaries to agitate against any territorial revision. In doing so, the local functionaries mentioned that—even though the majority of the population in the southern part of Voronezh Guberniia was Ukrainian-speaking—Ukrainian schools and Ukrainian newspapers were not at all popular. Most of the local functionaries even stressed that they were *khokhly*, a pejorative designation for Ukrainians.[72] The chairman of the Boguchar Uezd executive committee, one Miroshnichenko, delivered a furious

speech that particularly stood out: "Even though I am a *khokhol* and speak Ukrainian, I underscore that our uezd has no relationship to Ukraine. Surely, I am correct when I declare that the uezd does not want to join Ukraine at all."[73]

In the end, Yegorov's subcommission proved unable to produce a conclusive expert opinion based on the reports, memoranda, and tables it had evaluated. Its members tried to evade accountability. In their final report, they passed responsibility back up to the Cherviakov Commission, concluding, "within the greater framework, political considerations will have to solve this [territorial] issue."[74]

After the exchange of many contradictory reports and expert opinions, the Cherviakov Commission held three decisive sessions at the end of November 1924 where the Ukrainian representatives once more underlined their claims. Instead of reaching an agreement, the rivalry between the sides continued. The tone of the debate deteriorated. Butsenko, who had never concealed his antipathy for the old system of gubernii, declared with verve that these administrative units created under Catherine II should not define current political considerations.[75] State institutions must provide all Ukrainians within the Soviet state with the opportunity to develop their culture. They could do this best within the Ukrainian republic, and thus the southern parts of Briansk, Kursk, and Voronezh Gubernii should be transferred from the RSFSR to the UkrSSR.[76]

Such claims elicited resistance from the other side. Aleksandr Smirnov, people's commissar for agriculture, who had replaced Latsis for one session, sharply criticized his Ukrainian colleagues' statistics and tables: "I warn you, if you search by national criteria for Ukrainians, then you will not find any Ukrainians. We all know this very well, and we do not have to pretend; even in Ukraine, those who speak Ukrainian are a minority. It is a complete fantasy to assume that we can define the borders in these areas only by national criteria."[77]

Konstantin Yegorov now took a clearly anti-Ukrainian stance. In his role as adviser, he joined the three crucial sessions between 26 and 28 November 1924. As he summarized his opinion of the territories in question, he avoided any diplomatic banter and came to a clear recommendation. From a political point of view, he considered a transfer of large parts of Kursk and Voronezh Gubernii to be "not efficient."[78]

Whereas border revisions along the southern part of Briansk Guberniia did not present many difficulties, Cherviakov failed to negotiate an agreement between the two rival camps for the territories under

consideration in Kursk and Voronezh Gubernii.[79] Because the commission consisted of five voting members—the two Ukrainian and two RSFSR representatives plus the Belarusian chairman—Cherviakov would be the deciding voice. Previously, he had argued that Soviet power had to support national minorities and provide an alternative model to the Versailles order in Central Europe. To establish a contrast to Poland, where Ukrainians and Belarusians were allegedly suppressed, it was incumbent on the Soviet Union to enact policy measures that supported its nationalities.[80] He thus used what Terry Martin would later describe as the "Piedmont Principle" as basic reasoning.[81] Choosing to uphold an affirmative national policy toward non-Russians, Cherviakov adopted a large part of the Ukrainian position and voted in favor of a large-scale revision. Although he rejected Ukrainian claims in some cases, such as Sudzha Uezd in the southern part of Kursk Guberniia, he nonetheless promoted them in the overall framework.[82] Among others, the town of Belgorod was to be attached to Ukraine due to its close economic ties and the predominance of Ukrainian-speaking inhabitants in the surrounding area.[83] In all, territories containing more than one and a half million inhabitants were supposed to be transferred from the RSFSR to the UkrSSR.[84]

This was too much for the representatives of the RSFSR. They accused their Ukrainian colleagues of being insatiable and imperialist.[85] They resorted to the full arsenal of party invective to discredit the decision. Their protest was duly noted in the minutes.[86] The RSFSR commission members then promptly submitted an alternative solution, by which only minor parts of Kursk and Voronezh Gubernii would be transferred to Ukraine. According to the RSFSR representatives, only in these smaller areas, either national-ethnographic composition or administrative considerations presented clear grounds for border revision.[87]

Cherviakov had relied on the official korenizatsiia line, but the RSFSR representatives had received unambiguous signals from the state and party leadership. The commission had not been expected to rule in favor of the Ukrainian side by very much. Avel' Yenukidze, secretary of the TsIK and VTsIK, as well as an intimate of Stalin's, had told them straight-out to make concessions only where the interests of the RSFSR were not at risk.[88] For instance, the RSFSR representatives should support the transfer of Putivl' Uezd. Despite its Russian-speaking majority, this entity was surrounded on three sides by Ukrainian territory and had close economic ties to the Ukrainian side.[89] Yenukidze also hinted

Figure 11. Ukrainian borders between 1924 and 1928.

that Ukraine was already powerful enough, and larger territorial transfers in its favor could prove detrimental to the stability of the entire union.[90] It was no coincidence that, from Yenukidze's point of view, the interests of the Soviet Union seemed congruous to those of the RSFSR.

Aleksandr Cherviakov now had to lobby the highest party echelons on behalf of his project. His efforts would be in vain. In a letter to the Politburo, he tried to explain the complexity of his commission's work. He also emphasized that his decision was not an easy one: "The position that I adopted after studying all the materials does not correspond with the position of one or the other side. It is clear that the solutions of the commission are my solutions. They support one side and at the same time encounter opposition from the other one."[91]

Notwithstanding these compelling arguments, the Politburo dismissed the recommendations of the Cherviakov Commission on 10 December 1924.[92] Despite all the catchy party slogans, the Ukrainian republic was not to be promoted. The argument of showcasing Soviet affirmative nationality policies could be used in the debate, but it had hardly any value against criteria based on economy and aspects of governance, as the Politburo's members upheld the claims of the RSFSR representatives. Cherviakov had to accept this second setback and adopted a downsized revision in January 1925.[93] The RSFSR representatives' proposal would serve as a roadmap in determining the new revisions.[94] A large share of the territories that were expected to go to Ukraine remained with the RSFSR. In the end, Ukraine "gained" about 4,000 square kilometers inhabited by approximately 300,000 people.[95] This was far less than the 13,000 square kilometers and 500,000 people it "lost" after the transfer of the territories around Shakhty and Taganrog in the southeast.[96] Butsenko complained that this new border made no sense, as it conformed to neither ethnographic nor economic considerations.[97]

Butsenko nonetheless had to submit to party discipline. In a separate letter, Cherviakov asked Ukrainian First Secretary Emanuïl Kviring to make sure that the commission's Ukrainian representatives received a party directive. If necessary, they would be forced to consent.[98] Although he had struggled so bitterly to prevent this kind of outcome, Butsenko now had to promote the final border revisions publicly, starting with an announcement about the territorial transfers between the UkrSSR and the RSFSR in the party's main newspaper, *Pravda*, on 8 August 1925. There he named all the uezdy and volosti that would soon be transferred. He also portrayed it so that, as in the case of Shakhty and

Taganrog, all of these changes went back to the initiative of the local population. However, Butsenko still managed to add that many Ukrainians were still living in the southern parts of Kursk and Voronezh Gubernii and concluded, "the state border between the UkrSSR and the RSFSR is far from regulated, and the fate of the Ukrainian population in Kursk and Voronezh Gubernii has yet to be determined."[99]

Lara Douds shows in her study *Inside Lenin's Government* the key role petitions from the population played in how the Soviet state functioned. Adopting traditions of paternalistic imperial rule, the government could bypass bureaucratic procedures and respond to local complaints. Mikhail Kalinin, since 1923 chairman of the TsIK and thus the nominal head of state, received the greatest share of such letters.[100] Depending on political utility, leading party and state officials could ignore them or make them a pretext for implementing their own policies.

In political practice, notions of "genuine" public involvement were anathema to Soviet functionaries. During the sessions of the Cherviakov Commission, Poloz had at times based his positions on popular initiatives. Smirnov at one point seized one such occasion to reprove the former *borot'bist* and explain the Soviet functionaries' view of petitions in unvarnished terms: "[Petitions] do not hold any meaning, as we have decided not to ask the population and to revise the borders otherwise. Thus, by relying on petitions, you are not only tactically but also politically wrong."[101] Smirnov was kindly reminding Poloz to stick to the game. This is why all of the politicians and experts involved in border revisions dismissed the idea of plebiscites in contested areas, as the party could hardly control the outcome.

Opportunities for Local Agency

As Butsenko had intimated in his article announcing the border revisions, territorial issues between Ukraine and Russia were not yet regulated with the formal handover of the above-mentioned 4,000 square kilometers in the spring of 1926. The TsIK installed a commission under Saak Ter-Gabrielian to supervise the implementation of this border revision. Here, too, the chairman, an Armenian, was an activist who was perceived to be "neutral" in the matter. Ter-Gabrielian's commission had to adjudicate problems, should it be necessary.[102] Among other things, it had to deal with petitions from different sides for or against a certain boundary.

Villages on the ground were often quite skeptical of the revisions, as they had to deal with the consequences. Rural soviets therefore submitted petitions and tried to mobilize officials within the state bureaucracy and the party apparatus for their cause. There were three possible responses to these apparently genuine initiatives from below. First, if neither republican administration took any interest in the locals' cause, nothing happened at all. Second, state institutions such as the VTsIK and the VUTsVK could react to local objections. In the best (and rarest) case, the RSFSR and the Ukrainian state administrations both agreed with a complaint from the locals. Then a revision was achieved with little ado. Third, when only one republican side supported a petition, a longer negotiation or delay began. However, the intensity of support or opposition could fluctuate. Here I provide examples from each of these three categories. I start with cases that both the Ukrainian and the Russian administrations ignored. Refusal to consider a local initiative was the most widespread outcome.[103] Then I analyze cases where both sides were able to reach agreement easily. Finally, I examine cases where both sides were competing for a solution to their advantage. Whereas I can address the two first scenarios rather briefly, the third scenario requires far more room for analysis.

The administrations of the RSFSR and UkrSSR ignored all petitions from the northern part of the former imperial Chernigov Guberniia. As mentioned at the outset, this guberniia had been divided between the two republics in 1919. Between May and July 1925, about 130 villages from the part that was attached to the RSFSR sent requests to join the UkrSSR. As their wording was in many cases similar or identical, one may assume that local activists had prompted them in some way. These petitions used certain standard phrases like: "We the citizens who sign this petition proclaim our solemn consent to join Chernigov Gub[erniia], as our fathers, grandfathers, and previous generations belonged to the Chernigov region."[104] Most of these petitions referred to the fact the villages north and south of the border had belonged to a Chernigov entity of some kind throughout history. As such categories had no place in Soviet spatial thinking, they went unanswered. These local perceptions fit neither the dominant national, economic, nor administrative framework.

However, if a local initiative addressed national, economic, and administrative issues, then the state bureaucracy lurched into motion. A petition from the village of Znob' corresponds with Soviet expectations in an almost ideal way. Here the Ukrainian as well as the Russian

administrations agreed with the locals' line of argument and adopted it shortly thereafter. The village lay in the southernmost reaches of Briansk Guberniia. Previously, the Cherviakov Commission had decided that Znob' should be attached to Ukraine for administrative reasons, as the Russian village protruded relatively deep into Ukrainian territory.[105] The locals were decidedly against the plan. The chairman of the rural soviet argued that the new border would be disastrous for the village's economy. The main field of activity in Znob' was not the cultivation of grain but forestry. However, the forests where they worked were expected to remain within the RSFSR. Thus there was a real fear of losing access to the villagers' source of income. Moreover, the chairman also underlined that the peasants from Znob' were not Ukrainian at all, and they feared that they would have to pay higher taxes if they joined Ukraine. Finally, he also highlighted that the connection to the next administrative center in the RSFSR, Pocheb, was much better than to the next one in Ukraine, Hlukhiv.[106] The petition was forwarded to Ter-Gabrielian. After studying the details, all of the commission members sided with the petitioners. In the concluding statement, Ter-Gabrielian emphasized that the commission he chaired did not have to follow all decisions of the TsIK to the letter. In cases such as Znob', the border proposed made little sense on the ground and had thus to be changed.[107] Subsequently, the plan to include Znob' in the border revision was dropped.

In the region around Miropol'e/Myropillia, in the southwest area of Kursk Guberniia, the situation was the other way round. According to plans for the envisioned border, the fields, pastures, and forests of seven Ukrainian-speaking villages were to be attached to the UkrSSR, while the villages themselves were expected to remain within the RSFSR. As in Znob', the peasants feared that they might lose access to their source of income, and that neighboring villages in the UkrSSR might claim these fields for their use. In the end, peasants from these seven villages would go without straw. Thus local petitioners feared there might be bloodshed if no feasible solution was found.[108] They repeatedly urged state institutions at different levels to act.[109] First, the commission under Ter-Gabrielian accepted the request from Miropol'e/Myropillia. Then the VTsIK and the VUTsVK each gave their consent.[110] In 1927 the villages were able to change their republican affiliation.[111] Thus an additional territory of 200 square kilometers with a population of about 22,500 people was transferred from the RSFSR to the UkrSSR.[112] Together the examples of Znob' and Miropol'e/Myropillia show that the locals saw republican borders as something that had an immediate

impact on their everyday lives. Here they were worried not so much about national belonging but rather about considerations of providing for their daily subsistence.

In other cases, support for one side or the other was not exceptionally strong—as, for instance, in the cases from Sudzha Volost in the southern part of Kursk Guberniia. Here local initiatives began in late February 1925, when Viacheslav Molotov visited the region. Stalin's right-hand man was on tour along the Russian-Ukrainian border to propagate the new party slogan "Face the village!" During his speech in Sudzha on 20 February 1925, he revealed that Sudzha Volost was expected to remain within the RSFSR. This news mobilized people from the area to direct several petitions to Kharkiv asking that they might nevertheless join Ukraine. For instance, 433 citizens of Zaoleshenka, right next to Sudzha, signed an appeal on 22 February to join the UkrSSR. As in Miropol'e/Myropillia the petitioners emphasized that their settlement was "100 percent Ukrainian," and that they had close economic ties to Sumy and Kharkiv. They also tried to master the party language: "the general assembly asks for the transfer of Zaoleshenka to the UkrSSR to improve economic and administrative ties. It [hereby] relies on LENIN's will regarding national self-determination, which the Twelfth Party Congress of the RKP(b) has [recently] confirmed. [Moreover,] the leaders of the workers and peasants have been proclaiming in the printed press the enhancement of the level of culture among the people of small nationalities."[113]

Even though the residents of Zaoleshenka tried to "speak Bolshevik," the Ukrainian institutions received their petition only halfheartedly.[114] Butsenko sent it together with others from Sudzha Volost to Ter-Gabrielian.[115] There they piled up and received no further attention. Such practices of delay and neglect provide us with hints as to the conditions needed to initiate a border change from below. It seems the petitioners did not so much have to master the dominant party discourse as to show practical interests related to their subsistence, such as forests for Znob' or fields for Miropol'e/Myropillia. If the petitioners could rely "only" on an abstract turn of phrase such as "national self-determination" or "historical connectedness," their chances of being heard by the Ter-Gabrielian Commission, the VTsIK, or the VUTsVK were rather small.

As already mentioned, some cases proved much more complicated because one side was for and the other against a petition. The ones that were the most complex and produced the most paperwork were those

in which petitioners could point to economic concerns, as in Znob' or Miropol'e/Myropillia, but even in settling these, the RSFSR and the UkrSSR would try to revise the existing boundary to their advantage. The settlements of Uspens'ka/Uspenskaia and Milove/Chertkovo in the eastern border area provide the most controversial examples. In both cases, border issues merged with transportation issues.

The republican border established after the transfer of Taganrog and Shakhty in October 1924 separated the village of Uspens'ka on the Ukrainian side from the railway station Uspenskaia on the Russian side.[116] Because Uspenskaia was an important regional railway hub, both republics wanted it for their territory, arguing that their solution was more efficient than the other side's. The Ukrainians referred again to national-ethnographic makeup, while the RSFSR side highlighted the importance of the railway station for the local raion administration. In the end, both could agree that the existing situation was unsatisfactory, but neither was prepared to yield to their rival.[117]

In the deadlock over Uspens'ka/Uspenskaia, the RSFSR even stooped to fraud and unconstitutional actions. In March 1927 the Russian VTsIK presented a petition from Uspens'ka to the All-Union TsIK

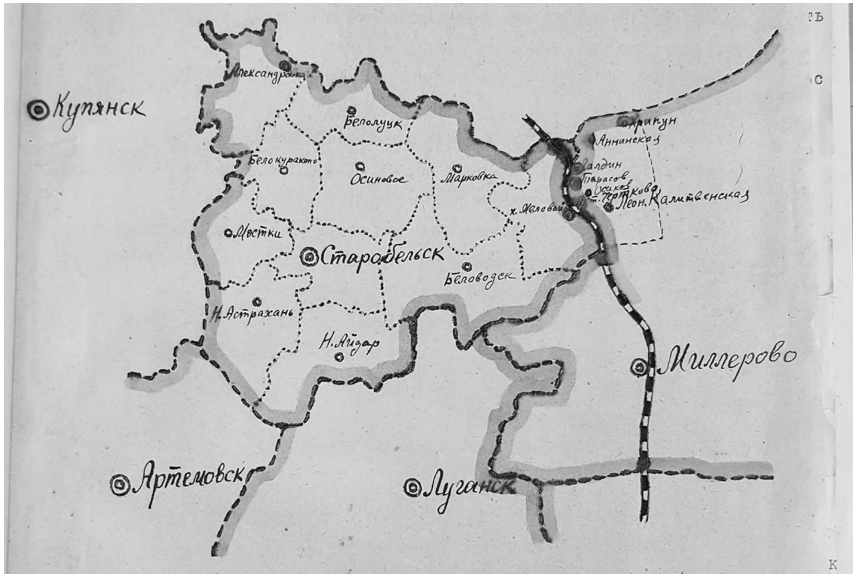

Figure 12. Contemporary map of the border in the region of Milove/Chertkovo, 1926. TsDAVOU, f. 1, op. 2, spr. 1809, ark. 26.

requesting discussion of a possible transfer to the RSFSR. In this petition a resident of Uspens'ka, named P. S. Vertelo, complained that the people of Uspens'ka wanted their village to be in the RSFSR, as their ties to Taganrog were closer than those to Stalino (today Donets'k) in the UkrSSR. Moreover, their village had fields on both sides of the border, and it would be better if the village and the land they used were in the same republic. He went on to state that the Ukrainian authorities had ignored all previously submitted complaints. As a result, the Russian side should take action.[118] Upon learning of this incident, Butsenko was infuriated, as the VTsIK and the TsIK had forgotten to inform the Ukrainian side that the village was now on the upcoming agenda. In a report to the KP(b)U leadership, Butsenko pointed out that Vertelo had no mandate at all, as nobody in Uspens'ka knew about his petition. Then Butsenko tried to undermine Vertelo's reputation by insinuating that he had once been a police sergeant under tsarist rule. Moreover, Butsenko charged that all of the actions taken by the Russian side concerning the matter ran contrary to the Soviet constitution—both sides had to consent to any territorial change. However, he also expressed his fear that the party might again decide in favor of the RSFSR.[119]

This time, Butsenko's fears did not come true, as Soviet state institutions usually observed formalities so long as the party did not interfere. Therefore, representatives of the RSFSR could not go through with their plan. After reconsidering the case, the TsIK sent the issue to the Politburo.[120] The party administration then delayed the Uspens'ka/Uspenskaia case and refused to decide in favor of one side or the other. The boundaries remained where they had been before.

The situation in Uspens'ka/Uspenskaia appeared messy enough, but things were even worse in Milove/Chertkovo, in the northeast border area. As noted above, the border there divided the settlement more or less along the railway tracks with Milove in Ukraine and Chertkovo in the RSFSR. The railway station itself was split between the two republics. On the outskirts of town, the railway tracks crossed the republican border several times. This strange territorial configuration dated back to the imperial guberniia and had provoked bureaucratic discord even before 1917.[121]

After the Soviets came to power in the region and gubernii borders became republican ones, the rivalry between the administrations got worse. The deterioration of the situation here serves as a showcase for the challenges facing Soviet federalism. The railway tracks presented an obstacle. Slepnev, the head of the railway administration in Chertkovo,

complained that it was difficult to remove snow from the tracks in winter, as this had to be coordinated between two administrations. Furthermore, irregularities had arisen, as it was not clear which legal code, Ukrainian or Russian, was to be used for construction at the railway station. Some parts belonged to Ukraine and others to the RSFSR. The railway employees even had to pay different taxes depending on their place of residence. Slepnev thus concluded that this administrative mess could not endure.[122]

All of these inter-republican rivalries converged to create full-fledged administrative chaos at a local slaughterhouse. Both republics claimed this enterprise, which was located right at the border. The slaughterhouse paid taxes to the Ukrainian administration, while the Russian side administered the social security of its seventy-six employees as well as the trade union and the party cells on site.[123] This dualism also created opportunities for corruption. The RSFSR administration reported that purchasing agents from the slaughterhouse inflated prices in order to buy cattle for their own profit, while the company's management looked the other way.[124] In addition, after fire damaged the refrigerated warehouse in May 1922, the two sides had not been able to agree on how to repair it. Thus the enterprise had been forced to suspend operations until September 1924.[125] When the Ukrainian side launched a local Ukrainization campaign, some workers put up stubborn resistance. As the Ukrainian administration conducted all of its correspondence in Ukrainian, it expected responses to be in Ukrainian as well.[126] The employees and the Russian administration on the other side rejected this demand and began to make jokes about the Ukrainian language in public.[127]

The railway station and the slaughterhouse were not the only problems. They were not even the biggest ones. The bazaar mentioned at the beginning of this book posed a logistical challenge and led to a struggle among the authorities for who could collect the taxes and to the incident with the man killed by a steam train.[128] Moreover, in 1924, the harvested crop kept rotting in front of the railway station, as the two sides could not agree on how to process the shipment. Even criminals could profit, as local police forces were officially prohibited to follow a suspicious individual across the republican border.[129]

Even though the Cherviakov Commission never touched the Milove/Chertkovo issue in 1924, the RSFSR as well as the UkrSSR later tried to revise the border.[130] In this case, neither side was willing to give up territory, and from Moscow's perspective, the case looked terribly complex

as well, since one side was going to suffer severe losses no matter the decision.[131] A territorial expert at the TsIK named S. Il'in presented the situation as follows. If Milove were transferred to the RSFSR, Starobil's'k Okruha would lose its only access to the railway and an important source of tax revenue. This was particularly unfortunate because this okruha was already one of the poorest in the UkrSSR and highly dependent on funding from the central administration. If, in contrast, Chertkovo were transferred to Ukraine, the surrounding region of Millerevo would lose an administrative center and a key transportation hub for its agricultural products. Having considered these factors, Il'in concluded that the less harmful solution would be to transfer Milove and all the rail tracks to the RSFSR.[132]

The All-Union TsIK discussed the matter of Milove/Chertkovo in two sessions but could not come to an agreement. As in Uspens'ka/Uspenskaia, Moscow remained neutral.[133] No solution appeared to be the best option. Starobil's'k could keep the tax revenue, and Millerevo retained an important regional center. The complexity of the situation would produce future challenges. Such problematic cases, however, were rather rare.

In establishing the revised borders on site, the politicians and experts involved were well aware of the implications in access to state property and institutions. Local field commissions surveying and demarcating republican borders paid close attention to the situation on the ground so as not to create any complications in the agricultural use of the areas where they were working. They adopted boundaries separating the fields, forests, and pastures of neighboring villages as prospective borders. In principle, they sought to ensure that peasants from a border village in the RSFSR would not have to worry about their fields or forests suddenly being located in the UkrSSR and vice versa.[134]

Local border commissions working on VUTsVK's and VTsIK's behalf even tried to install a mechanism for future border corrections. They had sound economic reasons for this, because in the mid-1920s the Soviet government encouraged measures aimed at land use amelioration (*zemleustroistvo*).[135] This policy foresaw, among other things, the "rectification" and rationalization of scattered holdings of land between neighboring villages. The experts involved expected that in future years fields might be exchanged between border villages. In such cases, the republican border would no longer conform to land use. Hence the local commissions surveying the border decided that every exchange of land

between border villages would be considered a change in the border between two Soviet republics.[136]

On paper, both sides strove to avoid quarrels over field use between border villages, but in some cases, the same patterns as in Milove/Chertkovo and Uspens'ka/Uspenskaia emerged on a smaller scale. The woods known as Borki, located on the border between Chernihiv Okruha and Briansk Guberniia, were one such case. The village of Khoromnoe in the RSFSR claimed this area of about 0.4 square kilometers (374 desiatinas), but the woods were located in the UkrSSR.[137] The people of Khoromnoe had long used the woods and its clearings for grazing their cattle and gathering hay. In 1919, when Chernigov Guberniia was divided between the RSFSR and the UkrSSR, Borki came under Ukrainian administration and was attached to the forests of the village of Yeline without the villagers from Khoromnoe receiving notice. Written grievances from Khoromnoe went straight to the VTsIK, where they were approved and officially forwarded to the VUTsVK.[138]

The two sides proved unable to reach an agreement. The Ukrainian Forest Administration did not consider Khoromnoe's claims on Borki "efficient." They argued that these woods now made up a part of the greater forest zone and they could hardly be separated again.[139] Moreover, the VUTsVK emphasized that Borki was not directly positioned on the republican border. Thus a transfer would create an enclave of RSFSR territory inside the UkrSSR.[140] Avel' Yenukidze, secretary of the TsIK, was willing to agree on the transfer only if there was a consensus on both sides.[141] In the end, due to the resistance from the VUTsVK, Borki had to remain within the UkrSSR, and the RSFSR authorities had to compensate the people of Khoromnoe with a similar forest from the local state fund.[142]

In the case of the villages of Ohybne and Borisovka, the roles were reversed, and the situation was much more complicated. Before 1917 the two villages had been on the border between Khar'kov and Voronezh Gubernii. The peasants of Ohybne in Khar'kov Guberniia had leased about 560 desiatinas (0.6 square kilometers) of cropland for corn and hay from a large estate owner. This cropland was next to their village but lay within Voronezh Guberniia.[143] In 1919 the guberniia borders became inter-republican ones. Then the Voronezh Guberniia Executive Committee redistributed the nationalized fields that the villagers of Ohybne had used until 1920 to Borisovka, a nearby village in the RSFSR.[144] By way of compensation, the Ukrainian land administration offered other fields to the peasants from Ohybne, but these were faraway.

Ohybne's peasants refused to accept such a poor transaction and continued to insist on the fields next to their village.[145]

Relations between the two villages deteriorated dramatically in 1924, when peasants from Ohybne burned cornfields that were under Borisovka's care and severely wounded a policeman guarding the border between the villages.[146] Subsequently, the peasants of Borisovka sent letters and petitions to Moscow complaining about their neighbors.[147] In early 1927 Mikhail Kalinin, head of the All-Union TsIK, intervened and urged the local Ukrainian administration to put an end to such "vigilantism" (*samoupravstvo*).[148] In a note to the VUTsVK the peasants of Ohybne apologized for burning down the fields and beating the policeman. In doing so, however, they also pointed out the unfriendly behavior of their neighbors:

> In 1925, while children were guarding our cattle, about five or six head accidentally found themselves grazing on the fields of the Borisovtsy. . . . A policeman bribed by the Borisovtsy wounded our citizen Mikhail and took the cattle. . . .
>
> Even if we want to keep our cattle on our side, this is hardly possible as the Borisovtsy's land is only two steps from our farmstead [*khutor*]. Our cattle will inevitably go there for pasture. The Borisovtsy's behavior is hostile. If they recognize one of us, they beat him. They do not let us take part in their yearly trade fair.[149]

Thus the peasants of Ohybne appealed to the VUTsVK to lobby for a revision of the border or to provide them with suitable fields on the Ukrainian side. Although I was unable to find out how the Ukrainian authorities finally resolved the matter, the case is revealing with regard to the challenges a republican border could pose. In the worst case, the peasants could lose their very means of subsistence.

The Decline of Korenizatsiia and the Fall of the Centrists in the UkrSSR

Confronted with many unsatisfactory cases, Panas Butsenko, in his capacity as VUTsVK secretary, continued to lobby for a large-scale border revision. After he received the results of the 1926 census, Butsenko kept sending reports to the Politburo of the KP(b)U asking for support. He argued that an honest nationality policy demanded the creation of precise borders between the different Soviet republics because it would act

as a showcase in foreign affairs. How could Soviet officials complain about the harsh treatment of Ukrainians in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, when they failed to meet the needs of Ukrainians living in the RSFSR?[150]

As Stalin emerged as the unchallenged leader of the Soviet Union at the end of the decade, korenizatsiia went into decline throughout the union. In the wake of this development, ideas and petitions for the revision of republican borders were no longer on the political agenda. This became especially clear in February 1929, when Stalin invited Ukrainian writers to the Kremlin to discuss Soviet nationality policies. During this meeting, the Ukrainian writers mentioned the unsatisfactory border between the UkrSSR and the RSFSR, particularly in the east. The party leader first tried to avoid being drawn into the discussion. Nonetheless, when the Ukrainians persisted, Stalin explained: "We have discussed the [border issue] several times; but we've been changing the borders too often. . . . Too often, we change the borders—this makes a bad impression inside and outside our country."[151] Thus the Soviet Union's supreme leader gave an unambiguous signal as to how he wished to proceed in the matter. From his perspective, the revision of borders created unnecessary disputes between the Soviet republics and attracted unwanted attention from abroad. Hence it impeded the construction of socialism and industrialization. Those who called for border revisions in public could be easily accused of "nationalist deviation" and would soon have to fear repression.[152]

Starting with the 1927 campaign against Oleksandr Shums'kyi, the Ukrainian people's commissar for education, the political influence of the centrist faction in the UkrSSR entered into decline.[153] In 1928 Butsenko lost his position as VUTsVK secretary. Many more centrists lost their jobs. Loyal Stalinists began to replace them. Ukrainization slipped to the bottom of the political agenda. In December 1932 the Stalinists launched a full-blown campaign against the centrists, accusing them of being chauvinist nationalists. In the end, Mykola Skrypnyk, Shums'kyi's successor at the Ukrainian Commissariat of Education, was driven to suicide.[154] Many centrists would fall victim to the Great Terror four years later. Mykhailo Poloz was shot in 1937. Panas Butsenko was sent to Vorkuta. After Stalin's death, Butsenko was rehabilitated but did not return to politics.

Other party activists involved in the border talks between the UkrSSR and the RSFSR fared no better. Aleksandr Beloborodov, an ally of Trotsky, lost his position as commissar for internal affairs in 1927

and was shot in 1938. Martin Latsis tried to stay out of internal party struggles. He, too, ultimately fell victim to the Great Terror in 1938. Aleksandr Cherviakov stayed on as chairman of the Belarusian TsIK until 1937, when he was driven to suicide after being denounced as an "enemy of the people." Saak Ter-Gabrielian served for a stint as head of the Armenian government, but he was eventually purged and died in prison in 1937.

As stated in the introduction, an analysis of territorialization always means examining asymmetries in power relations. The complex negotiations and renegotiations of the RSFSR-Ukrainian border after 1920 provide an illuminating example of how functionaries tried to manage the diversity of Soviet space and territorial disputes on the macro, meso, and micro levels. For all their disagreements, Soviet politicians and experts established a territorial order that did not create more problems than it solved for the greater part of the people on the ground. Cases such as Uspens'ka/Uspenskaia, Milove/Chertkovo, or Borisovka/Ohybne were exceptions, not the rule.

Initially, Moscow's institutionalization of korenizatsiia, the rise of the "centrist" faction in the KP(b)U, and the revisions of the border between the RSFSR and the BSSR in the spring of 1924 encouraged planning for a large-scale border revision in favor of Ukraine. However, in the Belarusian case, the territorial revisions were not primarily attempts to showcase affirmative nationality policies but rather an effort to create an economically and administratively sustainable entity in the west. The RSFSR-UkrSSR negotiations that followed soon after the revision of the Belarusian border had started were not open to public debate. Territorial experts such as Konstantin Yegorov had considerable agency during the search for solutions. Exigencies of governance were often left unspoken, but they played a decisive role. The two major setbacks experienced by the Ukrainians in 1924—the loss of the territories around Tahanrih and Shakhty as well as the RKP(b) Politburo's overruling of the Cherviakov Commission's decisions—were the most striking examples. The Piedmont Principle could be used as an argument during the negotiations, but it did not prove to be decisive for the outcome.

Later, Stalin's emergence as the country's uncontested leader ushered in the decline of national communism throughout the Soviet Union. This applied to the "centrist" faction of the KP(b)U in Kharkiv as well. After the Skrypnyk affair in 1932–1933, Ukrainian politicians understood that they were putting their lives at risk if they said anything

that could be construed as too nationalist in content. This would have certainly included any further claims on the border with the RSFSR.

From the micro perspective, implementation of the Russian-Ukrainian border followed its own rationale. As Di Fiore, Haslinger, and Gibson have already shown, land property or land use were crucial for border making on the ground.[155] In the Soviet frame a prospective boundary was not supposed to separate a village from its fields, pastures, and forests. In cases where an intended republican border did cut off villages from their fields and forests, initiatives launched by aggrieved peasants stood a good chance of being heard by leading state institutions. But when the Russian and Ukrainian sides failed to reach a consensus in considering the merits of a local initiative, borders were left as they were, as was the case in Uspens'ka/Uspenskaia and in Milove/Chertkovo.

As they demarcated the Russian-Ukrainian border, the surveyor commissions in the field even tried to establish mechanisms to facilitate future land amelioration efforts: if a field passed between border villages, the result was expected to lead automatically to a revision of the border. The authorities, however, did not always follow this ideal. In the case of the Borki woods or the villages of Ohybne and Borisovka, the same patterns emerged as in Uspens'ka/Uspenskaia and Milove/Chertkovo, albeit at the micro level.

Delineating borders is never straightforward, as power asymmetries translate into geography. Taking border negotiations between the RSFSR and the UkrSSR as a starting point, we can see that korenizatsiia was to a certain extent a clever marketing trick to promote Soviet power in non-Russian regions. When it seemed that a potential large-scale border revision in favor of the UkrSSR might boost Ukraine's strength or rile Moscow's power base within the RSFSR, the party leadership retreated from commitments previously made. Party leaders were not going to allow the game to slip beyond their grasp. Even though Moscow tended to favor claims submitted by the RSFSR, the Ukrainian authorities were able to achieve at least some concessions as in the case of Miropol'e/Myropillia.

The bordering process offered Soviet activists plenty of opportunities to perform state power. They hence enabled the discussion and solution of local territorial conflicts within the scope of bureaucratic processes. At the end of the 1920s, the Soviet state had taken roots in the margins.