

Villains, Profiteers, and ‘Robin Hoods’: Banditry in the North-Eastern Regions of the Second Polish Republic in the 1920s

BY

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By the end of 1923, the man known as Józef Mucha-Michalski, or Ataman Mucha, could boast a repertoire that included armed robbery, theft, and murder in addition to party crashing, helping the poor, and regular dining at the most exclusive restaurants in Wilno. One day he was narrowly escaping the police in Galicja, and the next day he was blackmailing local government officials in Oszmiana. His reputation of irritating state institutions and helping and terrorizing locals, all while publicly embarrassing local government officials spread throughout the north-eastern provinces of the Polish Second Republic.

Despite attempts by Polish authorities to track, find, and put an end to Mucha’s trouble-making activity, he was never officially captured. The character of Mucha simultaneously juxtaposed the image of a villain, profiteer, and ‘Robin Hood’ through his actions, both real and alleged, and through his description by the state and local media. Even when reporting his more devious acts, the media resorted to comedy and humour, while vilifying the state. Furthermore, his popularity transcended national and generational gaps, while stories and legends of him lived on well beyond the 1920s.

Mucha can be added to the list of characters known as ‘bandits’, whose multiple personalities and representations continue to complicate categorization used by scholars. Nevertheless, his story – however real or fantastical- found a place and audience in the borderland region of eastern Poland. As such, studying myths and anecdotes, as reflections of society, is crucial for studying cases of banditry.¹

The case of Mucha is but one example of a bandit figure who thrived in the post-First World War Period in the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic. The signing of the Treaty of Riga in 1921 officially consolidated the borders between

¹ This article chooses to use the term ‘banditism’ as this was the official term relegated to particular acts committed in these territories under the Second Polish Republic. In doing so, it does not attempt to undermine groups that were more ideologically and politically motivated or organized.

the Soviet and Polish states. Subsequent wars between Lithuanians, Poles, and Ukrainians would fine-tune official demarcations by the mid 1920s. Nevertheless, the official, diplomatic negotiation of borders far from clarified the situation for people at the local level. A study by James Scott of the Zomia region in Southeast Asia offers an appropriate framework through which to better understand the situation on the ground. As Scott argues, the Zomia was an area that essentially operated as an enclave community. Inhabitants of the region had little regard for official rule and administration, interacting with official authorities only when necessary (Scott 2009, 329). Scott's exploration of the Zomia parallels that of the *kresy*, or borderland region. At the local level, every-day people were trying to survive in the newly-created Second Polish Republic, which suffered from a lack of rule of law in addition to a decaying economy. This left a vacuum for discontent by locals, who distant from both Moscow and Warsaw, increasingly lost trust in official authorities who seemed uninterested in helping.

The politically and economically unstable atmosphere following the First World War was fertile ground for bandit-related activities, as incompetent governmental forces failed to effectively track and penalize those guilty of such crimes. Bandit related crimes, which were categorized as theft, armed robbery, destruction of property, and murder, peaked between 1922 and 1923. Subsequently, the local opinion of state or occupying forces and institutions became increasingly negative, as reflected in the local press and Polish government reports, while bandits offered a source of comedy.

This article discusses the dissemination and prevalence of banditry from the early to mid-1920s in the north-eastern region of the Second Republic of Poland, primarily in the provinces of Wilno, Białystok, Nowogródek, and Polesie.² Collectively, individuals who chose the bandit-partisan life embody the historiographical foci that have enticed scholars studying the *kresy*. They frequently moved between borders, interacted with locals of various national and ethnic backgrounds, as well as with state institutions – whether it was the police, army, or civil administration. They were often former soldiers who experienced violence as a result of war, and frequently engaged in such acts during their raids. As such, this category of individual serves as a fulcrum for various crucial historiographical tropes; focusing on them provides a lens through which to better understand larger questions regarding the chronologies of war.

This article will firstly offer a historical background regarding the area in question as a means of contextualizing the later analytical portion. It will then move on to discuss the historiography of banditry in the borderland region, which

² This article uses the terminology and spelling of locations as it officially appeared during the Second Polish Republic. Most of the subject area today is part of the Republic of Belarus, mainly in the Hrodna, Brest, and smaller portions of the Minsk and Viciebsk provinces.

has been largely overshadowed by partisan literature covering the Second World War in Belarus. This will be followed by a brief description focusing on proponents and critics of Eric Hobsbawm's analytical framework that has been utilized to study banditry the world over. Having examined the historical and theoretical background, the focus will shift to banditism, its relationship to the state, and bandits' identities. It will then highlight one infamous example, Ataman Mucha, as a case study of how locals perceived bandits. Using material from archives in Maladečna, Grodno, and Minsk, as well as local papers from the early 1920s taken from the Academy of Sciences Library in Minsk, this paper will use bandits as a lens to flesh out a perspective that can contribute to our understanding of this region. Furthermore, with a focus on the post-war period, it seeks to question the 'beginning' and 'ends' of war and bring attention to the nuances periodization may ignore.

Historiography

Studies of the borderland region have focused on refugees, state-building efforts, and the re-emergence of nationalism, to name a few tropes within the historiography. Some scholars have used the term 'shatter-zones' to better examine the geopolitical dimensions of this region. More specifically, Omer Bartov and Eric Weitz suggest that because these borderlands are distantly situated from a central point of power, they become 'constructs of the political imaginary and products of ideological fantasies' (Bartov and Weitz 2013, 1-2). As such, the borderland region has been at the centre of studies of war and violence.³ This focus has been used to tease out ethnic, national, and political repression, as governing or occupying states ostracized local residents. It has offered a top-bottom schematic through which to understand certain issues, particularly the relationship between the 'occupier' and the 'occupied'.

Scholarship and interpretative narratives of bandits and partisans have been largely coloured, if not tainted, by regimes that used such individuals as political tools. This forms part of a larger debate regarding the partisans of the Great Patriotic War, but the earlier interwar period receives less attention. Most of the scholarly information that does exist rests on the shoulders of a few Belarusian scholars, who mainly discuss the reaction of Soviet and Polish authorities to the dissemination of bandit-related activity. The other issue that garners attention, also by Belarusian scholars, is the general exacerbation of bandit-related activity after the failed Sluck Uprising in November 1920, discussed in a later section. In Belarusian archives, individuals active in the western regions of Belarus are categorized as Soviet partisans who were ideologically in tangent with the Bolsheviks.

³ For examples of such literature, see: Alexander Prusin, *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870-1992*; Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place*; J. Böhler, W. Borodziej, and J. von Puttkamer (eds), *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe's First World War*; Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism 1906-1931*.

During the Soviet period, historians described them as schooled in communist ideology and always traveling or acting with a political agent present, who would teach them proper Bolshevik ideology to abide by (Poluian and Poluian 1962, 67). These 'partisans' are perceived to be 'bandits' in Polish sources. The same terminological swap occurs when individuals stray from the Bolshevik line and are then described as bandits by Soviet authorities. In her work, Valiancina Kužmič proposes the term 'illegal armed formations' as a more appropriate way of categorizing these individuals, which is derived from a longer list of terminological labels including 'bandits', 'partisans', 'insurgents', and 'sabotage units or detachments' (Kužmič 2009, 19-20).

Banditism as an Analytical Framework

Endemic to the developing understanding and study of bandits is Eric Hobsbawm's work, *Primitive Rebels* (1959), and more pertinent here, *Bandits* (1969). The latter discusses *social bandits* and defines them as 'peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within the peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported' (Hobsbawm 1981, 17).⁴ Allen Isaacman underscores two important contributions of Hobsbawm's work to our understanding of bandits.

The first includes the synthesis of an analytical framework that can be used to delineate different individuals, who were historically labelled as 'criminals' by the state (Isaacman 1977, 2). Secondly, Hobsbawm's discussion stresses the universality of banditism, which has only been demonstrated by continuous multi-geographic studies that incorporate Hobsbawm's tenets. Nevertheless, as much as his definition offers some nuance in terminology, it avoids specificity, allowing social banditry to be a rather malleable analytical lens. Furthermore, since Hobsbawm's publication, scholars have demonstrated that figures perceived to be social bandits under the latter's definition were far from flat characters, but in fact complex individuals with conflicting repertoires and descriptions. As such, terms such as criminals, thugs, crooks, heroes, brigands, and hooligans continue to be murky and unclear.

In his work on the 19th century Lithuanian Bandit Tadas Blinda, Tomas Balkelis expands Hobsbawm's notion of 'national liberation bandits', in order to tease out how national myths were created and disseminated in peasant-based communities by patriotic elites, through their use of bandit stories. He further highlights that this

⁴ In his work, Hobsbawm focuses on three categories of social bandits: the *noble robber*; the *avengers*, and the *haiduk*. Furthermore, he focuses on non-urban settings and delineates social bandits from underworld gangs and from 'free booters'.

process was particularly prescient in ‘peasant-based and non-dominant East European societies’ as ‘the process of nation-making followed the lines of social conflict’ (Balkelis 2008, 114). The work is another example of a particular case drawing from a specific element of Hobsbawm’s earlier work. In this case, the relationship between bandit narratives and national myth-making is highlighted. However, in the context of interwar northeastern Poland, where national-awareness was low, the correlation is not quite as strong. Illiteracy, and a lack of understanding of nationality or ethnicity, led many people to associate themselves with their local communities and, hence, saw themselves as ‘locals’, or *tutejszy* (Rudling 2015, 171).

Criticism of Hobsbawm’s work has cautioned against his romanticizing of bandits and his use of popular folklore, myths, and ballads. Anton Blok discourages readers and researchers from glorifying social bandits. His work explores how such individuals were oftentimes self-serving and, as a whole, actually inhibited the solidification of peasantry as a class, because the bandit life offered an escape and opportunity for social advancement (Blok 1972, 496-497). This notion is accentuated by Peter Singelmann in his work on the *cangaceiro* in north-eastern Brazil. In addition to impeding the fortification of the peasantry as a strong and powerful class, Singelmann notes that the *cangaceiro* actually delineates itself as a category from social bandits because of its straddling relationship between the nobility and peasantry (Singelmann 1975, 59-83). Historians focusing on Latin America have pointed out one big flaw in Hobsbawm’s work: the ‘special relationship’ between the peasant and bandit, which many claim is historically absent in this part of the world (Slatta 2004, 29). In fact, scholars point to the fact that bandits actually catered more to elite interests than they did to the peasants (Slatta 2004, 30).

The issue of sources is an interesting and important one. While scholars have been critical of Hobsbawm’s utilization of non-archival or substantiated sources, the reality is that accurate biographical information on some of the most notorious bandits is murky, at best. Tomas Balkelis notes this in his discussion of the Lithuanian bandit Tadas Blinda when attempting to provide historical context for this individual’s real life. Furthermore, even when government or official reports are available, they are often ridden with negative descriptions of the rebels attempting to ‘strip them of political legitimacy, and reduce their popular support’ (Slatta 2004, 27).

Any debate about bandits involves some sort of criticism of Hobsbawm’s work or a utilization of the Hobsbawm-Blok paradigm, which allows scholars to tease out important elements from both and apply them to particular cases. Despite the continued debate and criticism of Hobsbawm’s work, now published almost fifty years ago, his framework continues to be foundational for scholars working on this topic.

Historical Context

To better explore the spread of banditry and such activity in the early 1920s, a historical context involving both war and policies of the Second Polish Republic is necessary. The experience of war, including the First World War as well as subsequent wars between Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Bolsheviks, shaped the space through shifting borders and massive movements of people (whether voluntary or forced) including remnants of national or state armies and refugees. This historical context seeks to set the stage for better understanding post-war bandit activity. As such, it highlights elements that contributed to the later dissemination of banditism, by discussing movements of people, armed formations, and Polish rule over its eastern territories.

Both the German and Russian military occupations played a role in the mass relocation of civilians – whether voluntary or forced. The Russian army participated in these mass deportations, initially with alleged enemies, including Germans and Jews (Prusin 2010, 54). In the Spring of 1915, with the growing strength of the German and Austrian offensives, the Russians decided to retreat, practicing a scorched earth policy to limit potential material that could be used by the enemy. With this retreat came rumours of the atrocities that Germans would commit against locals who remained, prompting many to migrate eastward. Most of the evacuees were of Orthodox faith and lived in the regions of Grodno, Wilno, and Minsk. Exact figures of refugees are unclear, but the number varies between one and two million.⁵

By the fall of 1915, the war front moved toward the Dzvinsk-Pastavy-Baranavičy-Pinsk line as the Germans continued to push eastward, culminating in a concentration of about 2.5 million soldiers on both sides of the front line (Mironowicz 1999, 26). The regions of Wilno, Grodno, and Białystok, among others, became part of the German-governed region called *Ober Ost*. The German military occupation proved to be, in many ways, more open and equal than its predecessor. Newspapers and official decrees were published in national languages, as were identification cards. However, these cultural, educational, and linguistic opportunities were matched with heavy exploitation of local labour and resources, used to support the German army (Prusin 2010, 61). Under the Germans, a further 1,300,000 refugees were evacuated in 1917, from the Ober Ost region to Russia and Ukraine (Vesialkoŭski 1996, 91-97). As a result of these exploitive measures, resistance to the Germans crystallized. One manifestation of this process was an increase in guerrilla warfare, typically organized by Russians and locals in cooperation. The further deteriorating economic situation led to more desertions and a proliferation of armed groups. Some of these units became powerful and opted to raid and kill not only Germans, but locals as well (Prusin 2010, 62).

⁵ Eugeniusz Mironowicz estimates the figure to be around one million, based on the difference in population numbers taken from population figures in Russia, which increased by one million between 1916 and 1918. Jury Vesialkoŭski opts for a number closer to two million.

Aside from desertions, movement of people, and the worsening economic situation, one incident that must be mentioned is the Sluck Uprising of November of 1920, which contributed to the further dissemination of bandit activity in the western Belarusian regions. Sluck played an important role in the history of Belarusian nationalism and Belarusian military formations. The region itself maintained the strongest awareness of Belarusian identity, which intensified during the 1917 revolution with the creation of a Belarusian National Committee.⁶ Towards the end of the First World War, with the retreat of the Germans westwards, Sluck was occupied by both the Bolsheviks in December 1918 and later by the Poles in June 1919 (Vesialkoŭski 1996, 268). In October 1920, negotiations began between the Poles and Bolsheviks, leading to a demarcation line in Belarus. As a result, on 12 October 1920, the Sluck region became part of Bolshevik territory, sparking an anti-Bolshevik uprising.

A Sluck Brigade, organized into two regiments, was organized and the first armed outburst came on the 26 to 27 November 1920, concluding in a victory for Sluck. There were approximately four thousand participating armed soldiers, later joined by more Red Army deserters (Mironowicz 1996, 51). Despite the initial success and euphoria, the participants were only able to fend off the Bolsheviks for about a month, due to a diminished supply of materials and ammunition. Many of these soldiers fled to the West, hoping to seek help from the Poles, but were subsequently caught and imprisoned, as Polish authorities did not want to sour their peace negotiations with the Bolsheviks.⁷ Those that remained in Sluck were arrested by the Bolsheviks, the majority of whom were sent to the Gulag where they did not survive. Still, there were those who escaped, both from the Poles and Bolsheviks, and continued to fight. Some joined smaller armed groups in the forests, one of these being the *Zialony Dub* group,⁸ while others joined larger units, such as the Belarusian People's Republic anti-Polish organized armed formations under Vaclav Lastoŭski in Kaunas. These groups will be discussed in more detail later.

With the conclusion of the First World War came the collapse of three major empires, leaving a power vacuum in the borderland regions. As both German and Russian occupational forces retreated from the region, a space was created which was open and free, and in which 'multiple protagonists were able to make their own rules of warfare' (Prusin 2010, 73).

⁶ The Belarusian National Committee in Sluck preceded the official 25 March 1918 declaration of the Belarusian People's Republic in Minsk. Paviel Žaŭryd was the leader of the committee, which also maintained a newspaper called *Rodny Krai*.

⁷ The Sluck uprising participants, totaling approximately 1500 people, were held by Polish forces and subsequently sent to a prison in Daragusk and held there until May 1921.

⁸ *Zialony Dub* was an anti-Bolshevik armed group, composed of Red Army deserters, operating mainly in the Pinsk region. For more information, see: Nina Stužynskaja, *Biellaruś Miaciežnaja: z historyi ūzbrojenaha antysavieckaha supracivu ū 1920-ja hh*, 2012.

Polish Occupation Politics

At the conclusion of the Polish-Bolshevik War with the signing of the Treaty of Riga on 18 March 1921, the north-eastern region of the Second Republic of Poland (1919-1939) was organized into the Polish provinces (*województwa*) of Wilno, Białystok, Nowogródek, and Polesie.⁹ These provinces were inhabited mostly by non-Poles and more specifically by Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Jews (Cichoracki 2012, 17). Despite the existence of a 1921 census, realistic population figures, particularly in the eastern provinces, are difficult to ascertain due to the fact that officials artificially elevated the number of Poles in the area to justify territorial inclusion into Poland (Żarnowski 1973, 372).¹⁰ Despite this, one set of statistics found in Janusz Żarnowski's work based on the 1921 census offers some insight into the native languages spoken by the inhabitants.

In the Wilno province 60 percent claimed Polish as their mother tongue, in Nowogródek 53 percent of the population spoke Polish, in Białystok 67 percent, and in Polesie only 14 percent.¹¹ While linguistic inclinations and usage are not indicative of how people perceived their nationality, it still offers some sort of landscape for better understanding the diversity of the region. A less contentious data pool comes from a 1931 census, which gave a population figure of 31,916,000 for the entire republic, out of which Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Jews made up approximately 25 percent (Żarnowski 1973, 374).¹² While these figures are dated after this article's chronological focus, they offer a more reliable statistic, often used by scholars wanting to get a more accurate picture of the region's ethnic landscape.

Officially, the March 1921 constitution promised the sanctity of property, freedom, and life to all residents in the Second Polish Republic, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, religion, or sex. Freedom of the press was also guaranteed, irrespective of language or nationality (Wróbel 2010, 132). In reality, however, Polish policies vis-à-vis its newly acquired eastern territories treated the region as a colonial entity. These policies of the Second Polish Republic would only compound already-existing struggles experienced by locals as a result of war. Abuses and exploitation of locals began prior to the official signing of the Treaty of Riga. Reports from Polish government and administrative officials repeatedly highlighted the abuses experienced by locals at the hands of Polish soldiers. A

⁹ Officially, only Nowogródek, Polesie, Wilno (and Wołyn) were part of the eastern territories; however, parts of Białystok, especially in the Grodno and Suwałki counties, also recorded many cases of bandit-related activity.

¹⁰ The 1921 census reported a total population of 25,694,700 out of which approximately 15% were Ukrainian, 8% were Jews, 4% were Belarusians, and 0.1% were 'tutejszy'.

¹¹ The predominant number of those living in Polesie, 63 %, indicated they spoke 'tutejszy'.

¹² In addition to these categories in the acquired eastern provinces, according to the 1931 census there was an approximate one million 'Tutejszy' in the Polesie region. Other studies from Landau, Tomaszewski and Krysiński offer much smaller numbers for this category.

report by a government informant in November 1920 stated that not only Jews and Belarusians, but also Poles were very discouraged by Polish soldiers and some were even terrorized by them. The informant highlighted cases of theft, alcoholism, and 'wild behaviour' by Polish officers (Mironowicz 2007, 29). In another report from January 1921, a border control representative observed that locals were apathetic to both Bolshevik and Polish troops, who confiscated their milk, butter, cheese, meat, and bread. Many locals were even forced to join the army through kidnapping (Mironowicz 2007, 29).

The newly re-created Polish state suffered from a series of incapable coalition governments, unable to put together a reliable policy vis-à-vis the state's national minorities. The consistent drive focused on maintaining borders and assimilating Slavic minorities (Rudling 2015, 167). After the conclusion of the Polish-Bolshevik war, *polonization* efforts commenced in a more administrative way. The policy was an attempt to assimilate Poland's eastern minorities, primarily Belarusians and Ukrainians. One effect of this was the liquidation of non-Polish schools, as well as cultural and pedagogical institutes, and the confiscation of non-Polish press (Mironowicz 1999, 85).¹³

Land and power remained in the hands of wealthier Poles, as around 37 per cent of farmland in the north-eastern Polish provinces was owned by Polish landowners, and many Polish war veterans, or *osadnicy*, received land as compensation for their military service (Rudling 2015, 170). There was a shortage of basic goods which remained consistent during the war and was later exacerbated during Władysław Grabski's¹⁴ economic reforms, which included strict savings, increased taxation, and the sale of state enterprises (Wróbel 2010, 139).¹⁵ In the north-eastern provinces, this was compounded by an existing social structure, putting Polish elites at the top of the hierarchy. Scholars have indicated that most members of the Polish nobility, or *szlachta*, were not actually financially better off or wealthier than non-Poles. What differentiated this aristocratic class from others were historical roots in rank, culture, or class (Żarnowski 1973, 186-187).¹⁶ Regardless of the economic realities of this class, to peasants and non-Poles they were seen negatively and blamed for exploiting locals.

¹³ *Polonization* practices were not part of an official parliamentary process, but a systematic effort enacted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Military Affairs,

¹⁴ Władysław Grabski (1874-1938): Prime Minister of Poland in 1920 and from 1923 to 1925. He is associated with the *polonization* drive, along with others such as Leopold Skulski, Władysław Studnicki, and Grabski's brother, Stanisław Grabski who was the minister of religion and education in 1923 and 1925-1926.

¹⁵ Grabski's policies were implemented in an already-existing unstable political and economic system. In 1920, there were six different currencies circulating in Poland, as well as nine varying fiscal systems.

¹⁶ Many years prior to the First World War, there was actually a natural process of *de-polonization* amongst this class and many had been orthodox or even Tatars. The years immediately preceding the war witnessed a *re-polonization* process.

One of the reasons for the intensification of assimilation efforts by Polish officials was fear that Soviet Russia would attempt to utilize the minorities in the eastern territories against Poland. This fear was shared by Stanisław Downarowicz, the provincial governor of Polesie. His proposed assimilation plan highlighted the fact that most of the minorities were peasants – passive, poorly-educated and not unified by a strong political awareness. Therefore, it was crucial to separate these national groups – namely Belarusians from Ukrainians- in order to integrate them better. Furthermore, what was required from the Polish government was not political support, but rather financial and economic assistance (Mironowicz 2007, 36-37).

The combination of war-time experiences and the first years of *polonization* efforts by the Second Polish Republic set the stage for banditry. Years of exploitative and abusive occupation under German, Russian, and now Polish rule conditioned locals to distrust government and administrative officials. Nestled along the borders between Lithuania, Poland, and Soviet Russia, this peripheral region maintained a safe distance from larger centres of power such as Warsaw and Moscow and were more concerned with their local communities and livelihoods. Attempts to control, tax, and dictate a particular way of life were seen as a threat and would continue to cause friction between locals in the borderland region and the state.

Order in the Wild East: Banditism as a State Weapon

Banditism proved to be a serious issue for both Polish and Soviet authorities. With murky borders, the aftermath of several wars, and lack of economic and political stability, movement of people between frontiers became much more fluid, despite the signing of the Treaty of Riga (Kowalski 1998, 139). Between 1919 and 1924, around 700,000 former refugees returned to the newly created Second Polish Republic (Poluian and Poluian 1962, 41). According to other historians, figures may have been higher, constituting between 25 and 35 percent of the population in the newly acquired eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic (Sorokin 1970, 17). Between 1922 and 1923, the regions of Nowogródek, Polesie, and Wilno witnessed anywhere from 650 to 1,400 bandit-related crimes (Śleszyński 2005, 41-42 and Paciorowski, May 2014).

With swamps, thick forests, and lakes covering much of the north-eastern territories of interwar Poland, the area was highly conducive to bandit-related activity, where victims and perpetrators could easily hide and escape from official anti-bandit units or police forces. Heightened cases of banditry in the borderland region often occurred tangentially with wars or during periods of tensions between Poland and its neighbouring states – Lithuania and Soviet Russia – and continued after war was officially over. There were two geographical points in this region

from which bandit activity emanated in the immediate post-First World War period. The Polish-Lithuanian War (1919-1920) inspired Belarusian nationalists to organize Belarusian armed formations and organize operations.

Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski himself received 40 million marks as a loan in order to organize anti-Polish operations (Śleszyński 2005, 10). These units were to officially represent the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR), but realistically were subordinate to the Lithuanian Army. Four armed subgroups were organized in the counties of Wilno, Oszmiana, Brasław, and Grodno. One of the most feared of these armed groups was led by Jan Hryciuk (pseud. 'Chort') who, during one operation on the night of 27 April 1923, murdered two police officers in the town of Kleszczele, along with the owner of the local restaurant and the latter's mother (Śleszyński 2005, 12).

Another infamous fighter in this area was Viačaslaŭ Razumovič, otherwise known as Ataman Chmara. He was the son of a priest in Grodno, had formerly fought in the tsarist army, and later received permission to be a trader and bring goods from central to eastern Poland. According to his memoirs, Razumovič was officially part of a Belarusian insurgent group, but was not convinced by Belarusian national aspirations. Rather, it seems that he wanted to use Belarusian organizations as a platform against Polish occupational forces, whether or not units were uniformly 'Belarusian' in identity (Nacyjanaŭny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś f. 242п op. 2 d. 442, 13).

Officially, the BNR boasted around 12,000 Belarusian men fighting in partisan units or involved in covert activity. Most of these were peasants, with little to no experience in war and without a strong political orientation. Politicized individuals fighting for an independent Belarus were few and far between (Śleszyński 2005, 13). After the invasion of Wilno by Polish troops and following the signing of a treaty with Lithuania which diplomatically demarcated a border on 15 March 1923, the Lithuanians officially pulled back their support for Belarusian, anti-Polish operations (Śleszyński 2005, 14).

The second geographical arena for banditry was along the Polish-Soviet border, and in contrast to the former place of action, this area was ridden with bandit activity well into the end of 1925 and beginning of 1926. Many of those involved in banditry, similarly to in the Polish-Lithuanian region, were former soldiers. Soviet authorities attempted to utilize this unstable political and economic situation, and these bandits, in order to foster discontent amongst the population in Eastern Poland (Nacyjanaŭny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś f. 242p, op. 2, d. 399, 5-6). It was hoped that the newly acquired citizens residing in the borderland regions would become ever more dissatisfied with the ruling Polish regime and be more open to revolutionary change and the propagation of a communist wave through

Poland. Soviet authorities oftentimes hired former German and Polish legionaries for propaganda purposes (Vesialkoŭski 1996, 138). In tangent with Soviet partisan dispatches, leaflets and brochures were disseminated in towns, outlining the evils of the Polish state (Archiwum Akt Nowych Syg. 1278/11, 44).

The official GPU (*Gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*) headquarters in charge of organizing partisan activity were located in Minsk, Moscow, and Kharkiv. The latter comprised three departments: propaganda, operational, and informational. Besides organization at the more official level, Soviet authorities often helped and allowed criminals and unofficial affiliates to easily cross the border into Soviet territory after a raid or incident. Once across the border, it was impossible for Polish authorities to track and apprehend these individuals. In other cases, they recruited or blackmailed individuals to join Soviet partisan groups, especially Polish workers who had crossed the border in search of a job (Zonał'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Molodechno f. 5, op. 1, d. 60, 3-15). Toward the end of the mid-1920s, however, these same individuals were pillaging villages on both sides of the border.

The Polish government also sent diversionary forces and sometimes even hired individuals on a contractual basis to carry out raids and operations against its eastern neighbour. In the first half of 1921, there were more than 180 such acts perpetrated in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) (Kuźmič 2008, 20). Furthermore, former soldiers of Bulak-Balachovič's army later participated in these Polish-sponsored anti-Soviet campaigns. To combat banditry on its soil, Polish officials dispatched battalions to various hot-spots, increased border security, and relied, albeit unsuccessfully, on intelligence from locals. A special division was created to monitor bandit activity along the border, called the *Korpus Obrony Pograniczny*. The BSSR created its own institution to combat anti-Soviet activity on its soil.

Between May and November of 1921, 360 people were shot by Soviet officials, while 311 were incarcerated as a result of their participation or support of 'insurgent-bandits' (Kuźmič 2008, 21). In the three years following, around one thousand individuals received a similar fate in the BSSR. Another frequent method of trying to prevent banditism was targeting Red Army soldiers with anti-bandit propaganda, encouraging them to stay on fighting, as well as suggesting serious repercussions for their families should they resort to that lifestyle (Nacyjanałny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś f. 35, o. 1, f. 183, 34). Following this, those in charge of units in the borderland region were ordered to pursue bandits into swamps. They were also encouraged to break up into smaller groups of 10-15 in order to better track perpetrators (Nacyjanałny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś f. 35, o. 1, d. 187, 4-10). By the mid-1920s, the Bolsheviks were setting up anti-bandit headquarters

in the areas of Slustk, Breść, and Słonim in order to react and prevent such attacks more efficiently (Nacyjanałny Archiũ Respubliki Bielaruś f. 35, o. 1, f. 188, 22). In Poland, the punishment for membership to such a group was incarceration for no less than eight years, while destruction of the railway or religious and state property could potentially result in a death sentence (Kuzmič 2008, 23).

There were, of course, bandit-related cases and bandit groups beyond the north-eastern provinces of interwar Poland. One of the most organized was the anti-Soviet 'Zialiony Dub' partisan band, instigated after the failed Sluck Uprising, which operated in the BSSR well into the late 1920s. Participants in this group included around five thousand Red Army deserters, as well as members of Bulak-Balachovič's self-proclaimed Belarusian army. Some of those individuals crossing into the BSSR from Poland joined the Zialiony Dub at one point or another (Nacyjanałny Archiũ Respubliki Bielaruś f. 4π, o. 1, d. 16871, 34).¹⁷ Equally, many from the BSSR fled to Poland in order to avoid repercussions by the Soviet state for their participation in anti-Bolshevik armed resistance. While not the focus of this article, keeping in mind the existence of other instances of armed insurgency – and with it, frequent movement of people – depicts a more contextualized landscape of banditism in the borderland region.

Victims or Avengers? Who Were the Bandits

Hobsbawm addresses the similarities of individuals involved in bandit activity across time and space. While he offers three categories under the larger umbrella of social banditry, the participants' backgrounds are relatively consistent, as are the general environments in which social banditry flourishes. State administrative inefficiency and decentralization cater well to banditry, as this involves remoteness from the central place of power. Those who choose the bandit life usually come from a rural environment, or are men who are not integrated into mainstream society and have been forced out to the margins. This would include, for example, former soldiers and criminals. Some have been victims of injustice or violence and seek vengeful retribution. For others, the bandit-life is more economically and financially safe, seeing as they have no jobs to go back to (Hobsbawm 1985, 60-63).

Narratives of banditry in the north-eastern provinces fit relatively well with Hobsbawm's descriptions. Most of these men were in their early to mid 20s, although there are a few examples of older men joining groups, in their mid to late 40s (Zonal'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Molodechno f. 5, o. 1, d. 60, 1-15). Many of

¹⁷ The most notable figurehead was Ataman Dziarhač (Viačaslaũ Adamovič), who engaged in anti-Bolshevik activity as late as 1929.

them were former soldiers, mostly from the Polish, Tsarist, or Red Armies, as well as criminals escaping incarceration or sentencing. Some even wore their uniforms while engaging in mischievous activity.

One relatively well-known bandit in the Lida county, Bolesław Żyliński (who used the pseudonym Michał Hajdukiewicz), was a former soldier in the Polish army. During the time when the Bolsheviks occupied Lida in 1920, he hid in the forest with some horses. After their departure, he allegedly tried to return to his unit but was denied because he had lost his paperwork. He returned home to Lida, but after failing to find a job he joined a few other men and began to steal horses, which they would sell in another town. Whenever he was caught by officials or military personnel, he would bribe them with money and was let go. In one case he even gave out 850 tsarist rubles. After doing this, officials would fire twice in the air, giving him the sign to run away (*Dziaržaŭny archiŭ Hrodzienskaj voblastci* f. 200, v. 1, s. 111, 18-21).

Particular groups garnered more attention due to a well-known nickname for leaders in charge of bands. The label 'Ataman' indicated the leader of a particular group, usually followed by a pseudonym.¹⁸ The number of individuals participating in an act of banditry could be as few as a handful or up to several hundred. Most of them operated on a seasonal schedule, choosing the bandit-partisan life during the warm months of the year and then returning home to their families and home villages in the winter. The most common cases of banditry included home invasions, robberies both in homes and on trains, and murder. Murder was usually a consequence of robbery or looting, although targeted assassinations did exist and were usually carried out against wealthier Poles or Polish government officials. Some instances involved over a hundred partisans essentially taking over an entire town in the middle of the night. With these larger and more coordinated attacks, structured leadership and hierarchy were common. In such a case, the larger group would divide into smaller units, simultaneously targeting the local police, post office, train station, and wealthier inhabitants - usually the 'pans', or Polish aristocrats.

It is the fluidity between personal and bandit life that is noteworthy in the territory in question. There are cases of men engaging in raids and, instead of crossing into Soviet territory for safety, deciding to go home to their wives, or even taking naps in the forest to rest (*Nacyjonałny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś* f. 35, o. 1, f. 188, 32). In reaction to the assassination of a *sejm*, or parliament, representative in February of 1922, along with his wife and three children, *Vilenskoe utro* described the bandits as having been found enjoying some milk on the side of the road and smoking

¹⁸ The term ataman first appears in the 13th century, indicating the leader of a Caucus tribe. The term 'ata-man' has been posited to mean father (*otets*) of the people.

Gelma cigarettes (*Vilenskoe utro*, 19 February 1922, 3). Typically, local reports of banditry did not villainize bandits and instead focused on the embarrassment of local officials or aristocrats. One report in Polesie highlighted the fact that the bandits, while raiding a train car, removed many people's clothing, leaving them only in their undergarments. Alongside many merchants and traders, the mayor was also traveling in the car. In this case there were three casualties, as these individuals had refused to give up their money. It took an hour for the police to arrive after the incident (*Nacyjanałny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś* f. 242π, o. 2, d. 442, 25-27.)

While some reports sought to further highlight the humiliation of government or wealthy officials, other examples in the press demonstrate the frustration and low expectations of locals for their government. In June 1925, after an armed robbery, *Vilenskoe utro* reported that it was the incompetence and corruption of Polish forces that was the problem, as it allowed for the bandits to acquire the weapons used to carry out their attacks (*Vilenskoe utro*, 5 June 1925, 3). Ordinary locals were also victims of theft, robbery, and even murder at the hands of bandits. On the night of the 26 March 1925, near the river Niemnie in Bielica, a 17-year old boy was murdered in the forest when getting wood for his family. His brother, Antoni, and father, Aleksander, both gave testimonies, but the boy's murderers were never apprehended by the police (*Dziaržaŭny archiŭ Hrodzienskaj voblasti* f. 200, v. 1, s. 35, 1-15). Such examples evoke Blok's reminder to avoid glorifying bandits; they also highlight the lack of protection locals felt from their governing forces.

Polish authorities were not the only ones derided in this way. The same newspaper poked fun at the Soviet authorities for their plan to infiltrate Polish territory with bandits, as these bandits were now robbing Soviet citizens and causing equal chaos on both sides of the border (*Vilenskoe utro*, 25 June 1925, 4). After repeated instances of this, Soviet authorities began organizing and dispatching anti-bandit units to the border and tried to dissuade locals from helping them (*Nacyjanałny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś* f. 35, o. 1, d. 183, 34). A trend emerged in which papers reported a bandit incident and then issued statements stressing that, as per usual, army and police forces had failed to alleviate the situation (*Krynica*, 1 March 1925, 3).

These examples illustrate both Hobsbawm and Blok's ideas, namely, that the focus on bandits as an expression of peasant sentiment is an interesting one, but it is a relationship that should not be elevated or glorified. People's distrust of the state was twofold – due to both the repression against them and the ruling government's inability to protect them from crime. Thus, bandits become not strictly good or bad. They are also not political, but merely an anti-government entity and at times a manifestation of the people's frustrations.

Ataman Mucha as an Allegorical Figure

While both petty and serious crimes were seemingly ubiquitous in these regions in the early 1920s, one image became especially pervasive – that of Ataman Mucha. Although stories of his alleged acts of terror and charity were repeated and immortalized, there is little hard evidence concerning the individual himself. Valiancin Panamaroŭ has claimed that Mucha was a pseudonym for a Soviet partisan by the name of Arloŭski¹⁹ (Panamaroŭ 1983, 22). In the archival collection of the Communist Party of West Belarus in Minsk, Arloŭski and Mucha are two separate individuals, labelled as Soviet partisans of the 1920s (Nacyjanaŭny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś f. 242p, o. 1, d. 599, 237-239). Other scholars have posited that Mucha was the name of an anti-Polish bandit group, and not a specific individual. One historian describes Mucha as merely a cryptic name utilized by multiple partisan leaders in West Belarus, borrowed from an officer who deserted the Polish Army (Kandybovič 2000, 147).

The most detailed biographical account of the alleged Mucha comes from one Soviet partisan, Stanislav Alekseevich Vaupshasov,²⁰ who claims that Mucha was in fact a real individual. According to Vaupshasov's autobiographical account, Mucha-Michalski's real name was Šabloŭski, and he had deserted his officer post in the Polish Army. He was found by Arloŭski hiding in the forest and was taken in as a member of their Soviet partisan group. Vaupshasov notes that Mucha was a huge asset to the band. He was disciplined due to his military training, and furthermore, he spoke Polish well, which allowed them to carry out operations more efficiently. Most of the time, he merely used his language skill to instruct locals or train passengers on what exactly to do – essentially, stay calm and hand over their valuables (Vaupshasov 1965, 16). Furthermore, Arloŭski hoped a Polish officer joining a Soviet partisan band would worry the Polish government, as stories of Mucha and his background would further validate local opinions of the government. In order to catalyse this fear, Arloŭski and other members of the group, including Vaupshasov himself, decided to use Mucha's name when perpetrating acts collectively or even separately.

The Poles became concerned about Mucha in 1922, and in May of that year, an investigation began into his background. The local state police in Będzina was

¹⁹ Kiryl Prakofjevič Arloŭski (1895 – 1968) was born in Myškavičy (Mahilioŭ region, BSSR). He served as a non-commissioned officer during the First World War, and then ordered to create a partisan an anti-German partisan unit. His efforts then shifted to an anti-Polish partisan unit. He later worked for the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) from 1925 to 1937 and was later involved in anti-Franco missions during the Spanish Civil War. During the Great Patriotic War, he led the Falcon partisan unit, active in the Baranovichy oblast. He was subsequently awarded many honors for his service.

²⁰ Stanislav Alekseevich Vaupshasov (1899-1976) was born in Gruzdžiai, present-day Lithuania. In 1918 he volunteered for the Red Army and in the 1920s was active in the anti-Polish, Soviet partisan movement. He was later active in the Civil War in Spain, within the anti-Franco armed resistance. During the Great Patriotic War, he worked in the cheka and established relations with the partisan movement and was later active in it. He was subsequently awarded with many honors for his service.

ordered to investigate his family in Jawoźnik. By this time, they were aware that he went by another name – Michałski - and wanted to know if there had been any correspondence between him and his parents. In the meantime, police units were to arrest him on accounts of being a ‘dangerous bandit’, having killed a few people, and for having deserted the Polish army. He was reported to be 24 years old (as of 24 May 1922) and had joined the Polish army on 12 November 1918 as part of the 6th Mounted Rifles Regiment, stationed in Lwów. He was described as a man of medium height with a round face, dark-blond hair, and blue eyes. The report stressed that, if found and caught, Mucha was to be escorted by heavily armed guards into the nearest police station (Dziaržaŭny archiŭ Hrodzienskaj voblastci f. 679, v. 1, s. 3, 46-47).

While the biographical lacuna in Mucha’s life leaves us with a murky narrative, it is the myths, stories, and legends regarding him that have proved to be powerful and significant. The largely peasant environment, governed distantly by the state, created an atmosphere that was conducive to banditism. However, the oral stories, myths, and legends surrounding Mucha transcended the local population and his mysterious whereabouts synthesized a figure that everyone could relate to and admire. Hobsbawm makes this argument and stresses that the appeal that bandits have has always gone beyond their native environment (Hobsbawm 1985, 131). In the case of Mucha, the appeal was one that did not only transcend geographical spaces within the borderlands, but also people’s national and ethnic backgrounds. Papers of various political and socio-economic perspectives mentioned Mucha in an awestruck, if not positive light.

The stories surrounding Mucha lauded him for the near-impossible tasks that he was able to pull off, while successfully escaping repercussions. *Vilenskoe slovo* stated that

... even the police cannot catch him, because in Galicja they are not taught how to catch this Eskimo from the Lithuanian forests. Perhaps it is because they only use sticky paper, which usually works for a variety of flies that fly around in a room. But this particular fly is not like that. In the meantime, Mucha is healthy and merry all throughout the *kresy* and continues to gain popularity in his Belovezha nest. (Nacyjanałny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś f. 242p, o. 2, d. 442, 33).

The most frequently reported good deed by Mucha was redistribution of monetary funds to locals from the pockets of local officials and wealthy residents. *Vilenskoe utro* reported that Mucha sent letters to local government officials in Oszmiana, as well as to the head of police and a local millionaire, demanding a sum of 35 million Polish marks to be delivered for redistribution to local people (Nacyjanałny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś f. 242p, o. 2, d. 442, 39-40). The purpose

was to alleviate the locals of the heavy taxes they had to pay to the Polish government. In another operation, on 19 January 1923 in Czuczewicze, Mucha and his 40-man crew successfully stole 40 million marks from the bank, along with police officers' uniforms, and escaped unscathed. The police were then embarrassingly forced to seek help from the neighbouring town, walking in their undergarments.

In another anecdote, Mucha's actions are less heroic. After having successfully raided a town, Mucha and his men wanted to scare the local priest. They placed a backpack on him and told him to stay still, because it was filled with grenades. The priest remained in an uncomfortable position for hours before he was found, only to discover that the backpack had been filled with potatoes (Śleszyński 2005, 26). The report, however, does not mention Mucha's crew, but rather focuses on the poor priest, whose 'faithful' followers had forgotten him for several hours, forcing him to stand so long.

Besides accounts of robberies and humiliation of local officials, narratives of his charming personality were equally popular. *Rzeczpospolita* reported that

this *kresowy* Rinaldo-Rinaldini²¹ usually travels with a group of 10 to 12 men and skirts around the border area. All his ambushes are similar in nature. He catches a party of people just about to sit down for dinner, but before they can eat, Mucha enters the dining room. He asks the individuals to sit and to remain calm and unafraid, for he does not intend to cause anyone any harm. Since many of these people are usually women, the well-mannered Mucha introduces himself with a graceful smile. Once he takes the adequate amount of money and valuables, he then asks for a friendly cup of tea, after which he kisses his hosts' hands and thanks them with a bow. Soon after, the well-behaved young man disappears, eluding the police. Two weeks later he appears where they least expect him (Stepek and Hoffman-Krystyańczyk 1923, 194).

Polish authorities were not blind to Mucha's popularity. In an instructional rulebook for police forces, the authors included a section on how to deal with bandits. Mucha's name comes up with a description of his immense popularity with the locals, and especially young boys, who admire him and inform him of everything that goes on (Stepek and Hoffman-Krystyańczyk 1923, 195). No official resolution as to how to deal with bandits is provided. Furthermore, Mucha's reach went beyond the youth. *Słowo* reported:

²¹ Rinaldo Rinaldini is a literary figure in a 1797 novel by Christian August Vulpius entitled, *Rinaldo Rinaldini, der Räuberhauptmann*. He was known as the 'bandit of bandits'. The popular novel inspired theatrical performances and even the production of a German silent-film in 1927, directed by Max Obal and Rudolf Dworsky. There was even a Franco-German television series inspired by Rinaldini in 1968, entitled *La kermesse des brigands*.

The fact that a major thief, who grew up among Belarusian peasants, does not have any peasant qualities, makes him more likeable to the inhabitants of Aŭguscinaŭ, Nadniomansk, Belastok, Ružansk, Bielavieža, Naliboki, and Paliessk. He plays with our authorities, jokes with the police, behaves like a gentleman, and from time to time he lunches at the Varšavianka in Vilnius. All of this increases his influence amongst Belarusian peasants (*Nacyjanaŭny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś* f. 242p, o. 2, d. 442, 33).

Kurier Polski wrote an article entitled ‘Ataman Mucha – a warning’. The article discusses, in detail, the chaos committed by Mucha, but it then reports that, even with his busy schedule, he managed to pay taxes in Navahrudak. By the end of the piece, the author admits that Mucha is likeable to Polish peasants, because they relate to him more than they do to their own police, whom they perceive as foreigners (*Nacyjanaŭny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruś* f. 242p, o. 2, d. 442, 35-36).

Looking at these excerpts and snippets from local papers offers entertaining anecdotes and perceptions of bandits by locals. Beyond providing us with an idea of these sentiments in the north-eastern Polish territory during the 1920s, this narrative offers us a window into the post-war lives of everyday people. Through these stories and opinions, we see a population trying to overcome economic struggles, while also being indifferent or hostile to post-war political restructuring. The state, whether Lithuania, Poland, or Soviet Russia, seem to be seen as a collective entity and more importantly, continuously taking advantage of local inhabitants. In this world of chaos and uncertainty, tales of those disrupting state-building efforts were welcomed. Nevertheless, Mucha’s story highlights the fact that the likeability of these bandit-partisans were not uni-dimensional, or merely anti-state in nature. Mucha’s sophistication and charm are admired just as much as his sabotage of railways and humiliation of local government officials. Through the representation of Mucha, we see a local distaste for government institutions, but also desire for entertainment and comic relief. Historiographically, this perspective also dismantles categories and labels such as ‘anti-Polish’ or ‘Soviet’, or ‘anti-Soviet’, as we see these lines as murky and unclear. In many ways, Mucha – the man, the myth, and the memory – serves as an allegory of locality and identity at this time, which is not fixed within any ethnic or national mould.

Mucha’s identity combined an element of relatability, as well as admiration, and became an image that would retain its appeal beyond the 1920s. Hobsbawm notes that:

...The bandits belonged to remembered history, as distinct from the official history of books. They are part of the history which is not so much a record of events and those who shaped them, as of the

symbols of the theoretically controllable but actually uncontrolled factors which determine the world of the poor: of just kings and men who bring justice to the people. That is why the bandit legend still has power to move us. (Hobsbawm 1985, 133).

It is this glimpse into the 'world of the poor' that can offer us a better understanding of history from below, which in the multi-ethnic and fluid region of West Belarus, cannot be explained strictly through archival documents and facts. It is a world that goes beyond neat categorization or classification and thus necessitates the use of an alternative frame through which to untangle the intricate elements of its history.

The Decline of Banditism

After the diplomatic settlement of the borders of Eastern Poland, security on the frontier tightened. It became increasingly hard to escape repercussions, both in Poland and in Soviet Russia. The fate of these bandits went in several directions. Many of them were captured and faced repercussions. Those engaged in anti-Soviet campaigns, including those after the failed Sluck uprising, were either caught in the 1920s, or in some cases, managed to live in the BSSR unnoticed. One such group, led by former Bulak-Balachovič soldiers Iosif Zinievič and Ihar Piańkoŭski, worked on anti-Soviet operations and managed to remain in the BSSR until 1937 and 1938, when their group was dissolved (Nacyjanałny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielaruš f. 4п, o. 1, d. 1687, 32-36). Those that had allegedly been anti-Polish partisans sought refuge and lived for a time in the BSSR. Their lives would later be jeopardized in the 1930s, during the purges and repression that sent many to labour camps or to be executed. The argument was that, even though they had fought in service of the Soviet state, they had been exposed to bourgeois, Polish capitalist ways, and hence posed a danger to the regime. A few luckier individuals became partisans in the following Second World War, Arloŭski and Vaupshasov being two of them, both receiving the Hero of the Soviet Union honour.

As for Mucha, his story seems to end just as mysteriously as his life was. In Maladečna, there is a record of a Michal Sukhov claiming to be Mucha. Sukhov and his friend were both arrested and given a death sentence; however, only the friend's death certificate exists (Zonal'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Molodechno f. 111, o. 2, d. 195, 10). Using Mucha's name was not unusual and in fact, some Belarusian nationalist fighters would later use it for their personal pseudonyms during the Second World War.

Jerzy Paciorekowski offers another anecdote from Mucha's fate. After a train ambush and robbery on 4 November 1923, a combined police effort from the areas

of Baranavičy, Niasviž, and Luniniec managed to track part of Mucha's crew. As can be predicted, the Lithuanian Eskimo was not one of those apprehended. He presumably fled to Soviet Russia after which there is no recorded evidence of his existence nor any concrete, verified sighting.

Concluding Thoughts

Since the publication of Hobsbawm's work on social banditry, his analytical model has been used and deconstructed, adapting to particular cases in global contexts. As scholars focus on different regions of their particular cases to either confirm or reject tenets of Hobsbawm's work, what is clear is that it still serves as a foundational basis from which more questions can be formulated. While his work and framework can be utilized universally, each case is universally chiral. Each region experiences a particular history that shapes society, including peasants, allowing for different types of 'bandits' to exist. Concepts of Hobsbawm and Blok's theories offer a starting point; however, they are not meant to be complete explanations or categorizations for every case that exists.

In its discussion of banditry and the narrative of Ataman Mucha in the north-eastern interwar Polish regions, this article does not completely embrace, nor refute Hobsbawm's model. It utilizes bandits to explore a region that in the 1920s was largely apolitical, one that experienced multiple cruel occupational regimes, and then struggled in a period of post-war economic chaos and instability. Bandit life offered a means of survival for some, despite efforts by the Polish and Soviet state to politicize and utilize these groups for their goals. While some armed groups may have been more ideologically inclined, they were not perceived this way by locals. Furthermore, despite atrocities committed by bandits, the state was blamed for its inability to defend its citizens.

Looking at the history of the region, in addition to post-war banditry and its perception, what is apparent is that the region continued to be destabilized, even after the war. Furthermore, 'war' continued to exist, as did the struggle for survival. The bandit and his representation in local papers was not a characteristic of pre-political protest, nor of a uniform peasant resistance, but a manifestation of anti-government sentiments, resulting from the frustrations of locals who, perhaps, sought a life in an enclave, distant from occupational centres of power.



FIGURE 1: Józef Mucha-Michalski (? - ?)
Photograph of the alleged Mucha, identified as a soviet partisan, in the National Archives
of the Republic of Belarus (NARB f. 242p, v. 1, s. 599, p. 237)



FIGURE 2: Kiryl Prakofjevič Arloŭski, 1895-1968
(NARB f. 242p, v. 1, s. 599, p. 239)



FIGURE 3: Stanislav Vaupshasov, 1899-1976
(NARB f. 242p, v. 1, s. 599, p. 227)



FIGURE 4: Niasviž, Belarus
Memorial to Polish police officers, who fell victim to a bandit ambush on 30 March 1926
(From personal collection)

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