

Slutsk in 1920: Entangled Fighters, Locals, and Conflicts

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From November 27, 1920 to the end of December 1920, the district of Slutsk and surrounding areas, presently located in Belarus, witnessed a series of armed confrontations between local forces and the Red Army. The armed formations that sprung up around Slutsk were composed of regular soldiers—both local and from various national and imperial armies—and of Belarusian activists. As the insurgents planned and prepared for the insurrection, there were larger diplomatic and geopolitical events taking place. The Second Polish Republic was negotiating a peace treaty with the Bolsheviks and established a border, placing Slutsk just on the Soviet side. More broadly, Europe was recovering from a devastating war that had disastrous repercussions in this region. Though geographically isolated in their activity, the insurgents were intertwined with larger events underway. Just a few weeks after the start of the insurrection, the Red Army quashed most of the resistance, forcing many fighters to flee to Poland or continue fighting in smaller partisan groups.

Though the actual fighting in Slutsk lasted less than one month, the events are celebrated in Belarus and among pockets of Belarusian émigrés around the world. To this day, yearly commemorations take place in November and December in the city of Slutsk, and in other places across Europe and North America, in honor of the sacrifices made by the “heroes” who fought for Belarus. In a commemorative speech made thirty-six years after the insurrection, a surviving participant living in Toronto, Canada stressed that Slutsk was part of a longer and continuing Belarusian “armed struggle” that began with the 1863 uprising of Kastus’ Kalinouski, through Ignacy Hryniavetski, who assassinated Russian Tsar Alexander II.¹ These interpretations also inflate the

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1. “36-yia uhodki Slutskaha paustan’nia,” *Belaruski holas*, January 29, 1957, 2.

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importance of the insurrection by arguing that it was a reflection of a strong sense of Belarusian nationalism among the insurgents, who were fighting the “occupying regimes of Moscow and Warsaw.”² Such narratives stress that the events in Slutsk show that there was a strong basis for the potential existence of an independent Belarusian state at this time. More recently, these commemorations have included the production of short films, gatherings of people with the Belarusian white-red-white flag, and public lectures and discussions.³ Though the current regime in Belarus does not officially ban these commemorations, these events are heavily monitored and controlled by the state.⁴

What makes existing interpretations dominant is the lack of critical and scholarly research on the topic. One of the goals of this work is to detangle the 1920 events in Slutsk from existing nationalist interpretations. Whereas the latter discourse attempts to highlight the exceptionalism of the insurrection to promote its importance, this paper seeks to bring Slutsk into existing conversations about the continuation of conflict and war in the postwar period. Examining peripheral areas of empires and states, such as Slutsk, reveals how multiple types of conflicts occurred simultaneously and, in many ways, overlapped and fueled each other. When analyzed as a case study, it becomes clear that this area, far removed from any center of power, became a critical site that witnessed important encounters: between the periphery and the center, between different ethnic and national groups, between states, between different fighters and ideologies. Slutsk became a crucial site of many clashes but also an enclave that the state and other combatants struggled to control.⁵

Scholarly Debates and Analytical Approach

Over the last one hundred years, the Slutsk insurrection has been referred to in various ways: as an anti-Bolshevik uprising, an armed attempt at creating a Belarusian independent state, a decentralized armed insurrection, a rebellion supported by foreign agents, and even as an armed skirmish along the Soviet-Polish border.⁶ Soviet interpretations minimized the conflict, noting that it

2. “U hadavinu paustan’nia Sluchchyny,” *Belaruski holas*, November 1963, 1.

3. For some examples, see: “Patryioty adznachyli heroiaŭ na sluchchyn’ e,” *Narodnaia peramoha*, November 27, 2016, at peramoha.org/artykuly/patryjoty-adznaczyli-dzien-hierojau-na-sluczczynie (no longer available); “Pershaia vialikaia bitva za nezalezhnasts Belarusi–Slutski zbrojny chyn,” *Belsat*, November 27, 2015, belsat.eu/news/pershaya-vyalikaya-bitva-za-nezalezhnasts-belarusi-slutski-zbrojny-chyn/ (accessed November 13, 2021); “Belarusy ūzhadvaŭuts Slutski zbrojny chyn- khots Slutsi [sic] chyn zakonchyŭsia parazaŭ, to ion mae ahromnae znachenn’e dlia natsyional’naŭ sviadomastsi belarusauŭ,” *Pol’skae radyio*, 21 November 2016; www.radyjo.net/4/92/Artykul/280909 (no longer available).

4. In 2013, during a planned screening of the film, “The 40-day Peasant’s Republic,” audience members were interrogated by Belarusian state police and the film was prohibited from being shown. “Militsiia razognala sobrane v chest’ Dnia geroev,” *Viasna*, November 25, 2013 <https://spring96.org/ru/news/67381> (accessed November 30, 2021).

5. The sociology of isolated regions and their inhabitants is discussed extensively in the work of James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 2009).

6. I choose to use the term “insurrection” as it offers the broadest interpretation and does not limit the scope or type of conflict that occurred in Slutsk.

was largely spurred by foreign agents and undertaken by dissatisfied kulaks who were angered over the Bolsheviks' redistribution of land.⁷ Alternatively, participants in the insurrection and proponents of Belarusian nationalism, independent of Soviet rule, underscored the freedom-fighter elements of the insurrection.⁸ At the heart of academic and popular discussions about Slutsk is a debate as to what extent the participants of the insurrection were devoted to the Belarusian cause and how the events in Slutsk fit within the longer trajectory of Belarusian history.⁹

Going beyond these existing analytical frames, this paper situates the events in Slutsk with other ongoing scholarship focused on the continuation of conflict after the official conclusion of war. The series of centennial anniversaries of the First World War, Russian revolutions, and border wars in central and eastern Europe have boasted increased publications with new analytical lenses to understand these events. Scholarly interpretations of WWI have notably challenged the perception of the event as merely an inevitable culmination of nineteenth century problems but rather as a more nuanced intersection between increased appeals for national self-determination, a desire for social equality, and competing interests driven by modernization.¹⁰ Studies on the Russian revolutions in the last few years have also explored alternative interpretations. This scholarship has increasingly looked at different geographical regions, peripheries, and local areas in the former Russian empire, in part treating the revolution as part of a larger process of decolonization.¹¹ Collectively, recent interest in the aftermath of WWI and the Russian revolutions has shown that armed conflict and violence continued well after the signing of treaties, particularly in the form of paramilitarism, warlordism, and banditry.¹² The violence had as much to do with the religious, ethnonational,

7. Aleksei Khokhlov, *Krakh antisovetskoho banditizma v Belorussii v 1918–1925 godakh* (Minsk, 1981), 14, 19–20.

8. Dz'mitry Kasmovich, *Za vol'nuiu i suvèrènnuiu Belarus'* (Vilnius, 2006); P. Dzeravenski, "Uspaminy," *Bèlaruski Rèsystans: Chasopis naïnoùshaï historyi Bearusi*, no. 1 (2005).

9. Two scholars that have discussed the insurrection in more detail include historians Nina Stuzhynskaia and Aleh Latyshonak, who have written about anti-Soviet groups and Belarusian armed formation in the 1920s. See: Nina Stuzhynskaia, *Belarus' miatsezhnaia: Z historyi Źzbroenaha antysavetskaha supratsivu Ź 20-ia hh. XX stakhoddzia* (Minsk, 2012); Oleg Łatyszonek, *Białoruskie formacje wojskowe: 1917–1923* (Białystok, 1995).

10. Jochen Böehler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford, 2018), 18.

11. See: Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford, 2014); Jonathan D. Smele, *The "Russian" Civil Wars, 1916–1926: Ten Years that Shook the World* (New York, 2015); Laura Engelstein, *Russia in Flames: War, Revolution, Civil War 1914–1921* (New York, 2018).

12. See, for example: Jochen Böehler, Ota Konrád, and Rudolf Kučera, *In the Shadow of the Great War: Physical Violence in East-Central Europe, 1917–1923* (New York, 2021); Dmítar Tasić, *Paramilitarism in the Balkans: The Cases of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Albania, 1917–1924* (Oxford, 2020); Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York, 2016); Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford, 2012); Jochen Böehler, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Joachim von Puttkamer, eds, *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe's First World War* (Munich, 2014); Stanley G. Payne, *Civil War in Europe, 1905–1949* (New York,

and linguistic heterogeneity of this region as it did with the brutalization of war that conditioned locals' experiences.¹³

A significant portion of the discussion on the post-WWI period has centered on defining and categorizing the conflicts that ensued. Whether one sees this period as a larger European Civil War, or several occurring simultaneously, it is clear that local conflicts were very much instigated by larger processes, just as much as larger wars never fully ended due to local turbulence. Historian Robert Gerwarth has broadly categorized the conflicts that arose into three categories: interstate wars, civil wars, as well as social and national revolutions.¹⁴ In many regions including Ireland, the Middle East, central, eastern, and southeastern Europe, the postwar period witnessed some versions of the three forms of conflicts and in some cases, more than one type.

Furthermore, even within the categories of "interstate" and "civil" war, there are different variations and expressions of such conflicts, none of which are mutually exclusive. Interstate wars came as an extension of WWI and occurred particularly in the "shatter-zones" of the fallen empires. The emerging Second Polish Republic alone fought multiple wars with its neighbors, most of which also became new states after WWI. Civil wars in the region in question resulted primarily from problems with dynastic succession, national liberation, or manifested as a struggle to impose the status quo. Both interstate and civil wars were further catalyzed by national and social revolutions, resulting from WWI but also sparked by political instability and weakness of states in the immediate postwar period.¹⁵

In Slutsk, what emerged was a convergence of these forms of conflict that shaped each other. In the aftermath of the Russian revolutions, Belarusian activists were motivated to push for competing national projects, varying in vision and practice. These activists included literary figures, politicians, educators, and soldiers. Ideas of Belarusian nationalism or identity were, however, limited to a small group of individuals.¹⁶ The majority of locals in Slutsk, and in the region more broadly, did not consider themselves to be "Belarusian." Rather, locals, who were mostly peasants, identified

2011); Enzo Traverso, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914–1945* (London, 2017); Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York, 2006).

13. Piotr Wróbel, "The Seeds of Violence. The Brutalization of an East European Region, 1917–1921," *Journal of Modern European History* 1, no. 1, special issue, *Violence and Society after the First World War* (2003): 125; Jochen Böhrer, "Enduring Violence: The Postwar Struggles in East-Central Europe, 1917–1921," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1, special issue, *The Limits of Demobilization* (January 2015): 62.

14. Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (New York, 2016), 9–10.

15. Stanley G. Payne, *Civil War in Europe, 1905–1949* (New York, 2011), 1–3.

16. Much of what is available about the Slutsk insurrection comes from more infamous Belarusian participants whose writings include memoirs in addition to proclamations, newspaper articles, and correspondence. Though they offer some hindsight observations into the events of 1920, they are mostly reflections of a disgruntled Belarusian elite that saw a lost opportunity. Alternately, the voices of those who formed the majority of the fighters are missing. This research does not dismiss the writings in existence but examines them critically, in addition to surveying other sources that have not been used before.

with their locality (*tutejšy or tutejszy*). Following WWI, war between the Bolsheviks and Poles broke out. Once again, locals were exposed to the fighting between the two states in addition to armed struggle between other national formations, green partisan groups, warlords, and criminal bands.¹⁷ This fighting and competition for power and resources between smaller insurgent groups continued well after the Polish-Bolshevik War officially concluded in 1921. Soldiers joined partisan groups in order to survive and oftentimes deserted, remobilized, and fought for other armed formations. Altogether, Slutsk became a site of emerging and conflicting ethno-national tensions, socio-economic and material competition, and power vacuums, instigated by the effects of wars, collapse of empires, and the rise of new states.¹⁸

The Effects of Revolution and War on Slutsk

Slutsk was one of the most economically and culturally developed regions of present-day Belarus prior to WWI. Following the second partition of Poland in 1793, the area became part of the Russian Empire, located in the Minsk Governorate as the Slutsk *uezd*, with Slutsk as the capital city. Demographically, Slutsk experienced a large increase in its population at the turn of the twentieth century, primarily from an influx of people in surrounding villages. It had one of the first schools in the region, founded as early as 1630.¹⁹ Slutsk was also home to a very vibrant Jewish community.²⁰ By 1920, the district consisted of 71.1 percent Belarusians, 15.8 percent Jews, 10.6 percent Poles, and 2.5 percent other groups.²¹ With the dismantling of empires, multiple military

17. For more on the Polish borderlands and proliferation of multiple forms of fighting groups, see: Jochen Böehler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford, 2018).

18. Many other parts of the continent shared similar elements with Slutsk. In the former Russian empire, counterrevolutionary reactions arose in Tambov, western Siberia, and parts of the Volga. In central Europe, conflicts sprouted in Germany, Austria, and Hungary. Nicolas Werth, “La Société russe en guerre,” in Bruno Cabanes and Édouard Husson, eds., *Les Sociétés en guerre 1911–1946* (Paris, 2003), 123; Robert Gerwarth, “The Central European Counter-Revolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary After the Great War,” *Past and Present*, no. 200 (August 2008): 175–209; Joshua Sanborn, “The Genesis of Russian Warlordism: Violence and Governance during the First World War and the Civil War,” *Contemporary European History* 19, no. 3 (2010): 197.

19. As compared to the 7,064 residents in 1861, by 1897 there were 14,349 individuals residing in Slutsk. A.P. Gritskevich, *Slutsk: Istoriko-ekonomicheskii ocherk* (Minsk, 1970), 41; Iury Vesialkoŭski, *Belarus’ u Pershaï Sus’vetnaï vaïne: Histarychny narys* (London, 1996), 267–68.

20. For a work on Jewish life in Slutsk, see: Samson Nachmani, *Pinkas Slutsk u-venoteha* (New York, 1962). For a broader overlook of Jewish life on Belarusian territory prior to the Russian revolutions and WWI, see: Iakov Shul’man, *Goroda i liudi evreïškoï diaspori v Vostochnoi Evrope do nachala XX veka. Belarussii—Vitebsk, Gomeľ, Pinsk, Polotsk, Slutsk* (Moscow, 2004).

21. This figure come from the research of Edward Maliszewski, who worked on behalf of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the time. Archiwum Akt Nowych (henceforth AAN) Sygn. 2/515/0/4/160, p. 52.

occupations, and border wars, the area witnessed large movements of refugees and soldiers, altering the demographic landscape.²²

Heightened political activity in Slutsk, and present-day Belarusian territory in general, came in 1905 with the emergence of Belarusian nationalist ideas and the increased popularity of socialist parties.²³ After the 1905 Russian Revolution, the western borderland region of the Russian empire witnessed a thaw in restrictions, as the state eased cultural and educational limitations.²⁴ Years later, Belarusian activists recalled this moment and noted that the 1905 Revolution was a significant stepping-stone for the development of Belarusian nationalism, especially in the realm of literature.²⁵ Further propelling this progression were the 1917 Russian revolutions, as Belarusian activists saw the collapse of the tsarist empire as liberating.²⁶ In the second half of December 1917, an All-Belarusian Congress was organized in Minsk, attended by 1782 representatives of various political and cultural organizations.²⁷ One individual present at the Congress, and future participant in the Slutsk insurrection, recalled, “since the moment of the 1917 Revolution, the Belarusian issue increasingly spread, not in a matter of years, but with every week. . . after this Revolution, this movement became freer, and this Belarusian work developed not in one way, but spread in different directions and almost all over Belarus.”²⁸ Referring to the 1917 February Revolution, another future insurrection participant, Todar Daniliuk, expressed that “From the first days of the

22. For an extensive study on the issue of refugees during and after WWI, see: Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War One* (Bloomington, 1999).

23. A few years prior to the 1905 revolution, in 1902, the Belarusian Revolutionary Hramada was formed, later renamed the Belarusian Socialist Hramada after 1905. Its program pushed for a more autonomous Belarus and a fight against class struggle. Some Hramada members had a more intimate connection with the 1905 Revolution, as they had studied in St. Petersburg and had been directly impacted by the events. Centralny Archiwum Wojskowy (hereafter CAW) Sygn. VIII.804.17.32, p. 3; Gritskevich, *Slutsk: istoriko-ekonomicheskii ocherk*, 38–42; Aleh Hardzenka, *Belaruskaia Tsentral'naia Rada BTsR: Stvaren'ne, dzeinasts, zaniapad, 1943–1995* (Minsk, 2016), 412.

24. Alexander V. Prusin, *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992* (New York, 2010), 34–35.

25. The Belarusian papers, *Nasha dolia* (1906) and *Nasha niva* (1906–1915), were founded as a means to popularize the Belarusian language. AAN Sygn. 2/2015/0/7, p. 6; Per Anders Rudling, “The Beginnings of Modern Belarus: Identity, Nation, and Politics in a European Borderland,” *The Journal of Belarusian Studies* 7, no. 3 (2015), 116.

26. In March 1917, the Slutsk Soviet was formed, composed of workers and soldiers. Included, at least initially, were Socialist Revolutionaries, Bundists, and Mensheviks. The predominant party in present-day Belarusian territory were Socialist Revolutionaries, whose land reform program was popular among peasants. When news of the October Revolution reached the Slutsk Rada, the non-Bolshevik members left. By 1918, however, Bolshevik influence was halted with incoming Polish forces into Slutsk. Gritskevich, *Slutsk: Istoriko-ekonomicheskii ocherk*, 47–53.

27. Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas (hereafter LCVA) f. 361, ap. 2, b. 10, p. 9.

28. Iurka Listapad, “Uz' bilisia na svoi shliakh, 1921 h,” in Uladzimer Liakhoŭski, Uladzimer Mikhniuk and Aliaksandra Hes', eds. *Slutski zbroiny chyn 1920- u dokumentakh i ūspaminakh* (Minsk, 2006), 156.

Revolution, national self-awareness amongst Belarusians widened with the speed of an electric spark.”²⁹

The apogee in the push for Belarusian statehood came with the creation of the Belarusian People’s Republic (*Belaruskaia Narodnaia Rėspublika*, BNR) on March 25, 1918.³⁰ The decision to create the BNR came from the All-Belarusian Congress in Minsk; the leadership of the BNR included individuals from diverse political backgrounds and views.³¹ Moreover, the declaration for the BNR placed the struggle of the Belarusian nation in the context of war, revolution, and violence:

A year ago, the Belarusian people together with the Russian people overturned the Russian tsarist yoke, with the Belarusians pressuring the hardest, and our land was plunged into the fires of war, which completely demolished Belarusian towns and villages. Now we, the Rada of the Belarusian People’s Republic, rid ourselves of the last yoke of dependence, which the Russian tsars took through rape. . . From this point forward, the Belarusian People’s Republic declares itself an independent and free nation.³²

The importance of the BNR at the time of its creation is debatable because it occurred during the German military occupation of Belarus. The Germans allowed for the BNR to operate solely as a cultural, educational, and linguistic body—not one that would exercise any form of power over the German military command.³³ Though the BNR held little political power, it would

29. Natsyianal’ny Arkhiū Rėspubliki Belarus’ (hereafter NARB) f. 383, v. 1, s. 2, p. 64.

30. Minsk, the site where the declaration was made, found itself occupied by the German military at the time, known as *Ober Ost*. The German military occupation of Belarusian territory lasted from 1916 to 1918. The Germans exploited Belarusian territory and the people living there for economic and military purposes, using natural resources for the army and people as forced labor. They also heavily monitored the population and limited its movement. The Germans also sought to temper any strong national sentiments, particularly those of Poles, in order to limit resistance to the occupation. See Christian Westerhoff, “‘A Kind of Siberia’: German Labour and Occupation Policies in Poland and Lithuania during the First World War,” *First World War Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 55; Klaus Richter, “‘Go with the Hare’s Ticket’ Mobility and Territorial Policies in Ober Ost (1915–1918),” *First World War Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): 155; Lizaveta Kasmach, “Forgotten Occupation: Germans and Belarusians in the Lands of Ober Ost (1915–1917),” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 58, no. 4 (October 2016): 322–323. For more information on *Ober Ost*, see: A. Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg: Der Fall Ober Ost 1915–1917* (Weisbaden, 1993) and Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (New York, 2000).

31. The majority were members of the Belarusian Socialist Hramada, but others came from the Socialist Revolutionaries, the Jewish Bund, and Poale Zion. Individuals, depending on their views, disagreed on several aspects of the BNR’s policies. The most divisive was the independence declaration, which was disputed by nearly half of the members. Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906–1931* (Pittsburgh, 2015), 82.

32. “3-ia Ustaūnaia hramata Rady Belaruskae Narodnae Rėspubliki, 1918, 25 sakavika,” in I.N. Kuznetsov and V.G. Mazets eds., *Istoriia Belarusi v dokumentakh i materialakh* (Minsk, 2000), 303.

33. Eventually, once the Red Army took over the region, the BNR leadership evacuated. It continues to exist in exile today. The BNR adopted important symbols including the “Pahonia,” which is a historic coat of arms taken from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania featuring an armed horseman. The BNR also adopted the white-red-white flag. Dorota

retain symbolic importance for some Slutsk insurgents, many of whom were members of the BNR.³⁴ This linkage between the BNR and Slutsk insurrection served as the foundation of nationalist discourse that highlighted the Belarusian freedom-fighter narrative of the events in 1920. Moreover, many BNR members who participated in the insurrection and lived for decades afterward were the primary drivers of this interpretation. In contrast, more critical examinations of Slutsk diminish the importance of the BNR.³⁵

In addition to the emergence of Belarusian political groups, local manifestations of Belarusian identity in the Slutsk district came in the form of educational, cultural, and youth organizations. A Belarusian National Committee (*Belaruski Natsyianal'ny Kamitët Sluchchyny*) opened with the goals of “expanding national sentiments among Belarusians and helping in their spiritual and material lives.”³⁶ To achieve these tasks, the committee sought to develop Belarusian literature, build more Belarusian schools, and help the homeless and poorer residents of Slutsk.³⁷ Another local organization, called *Paparats'-kvetka* (firn flower), was a youth group whose mission was to push for the development of Belarusian culture and prepare its members to be “conscious” citizens, who could offer their services to Belarus in the future.³⁸ These organizations did not advocate violence as a means to further the Belarusian cause but mainly employed cultural and linguistic means of promoting their goals.

The increase in Belarusian cultural activity was noted by Polish authorities stationed in the Slutsk area in the summer of 1920. They noted what they called a spike in the “subversive activity of Belarusian activists.”³⁹ Pamphlets and newspapers also circulated more frequently. Discussions in the press highlighted linguistic differences between the Belarusian language and Russian and Polish. Newspaper articles also discussed Belarusian culture and history as distinct from that of its neighbors, to counter the idea that the Belarusian was a slight variation of its bigger Russian brother.⁴⁰

Michaluk and Per Anders Rudling, “From the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Belarusian Democratic Republic: The Idea of Belarusian Statehood during the German Occupation of Belarusian Lands, 1915–1919,” *The Journal of Belarusian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2014): 17.

34. By the time the insurrection occurred, however, there was a split in the BNR between the Supreme Rada and People's Rada between 1919 and 1920. It was the latter that openly supported forces active in the Slutsk insurrection. However, this distinction is not typically made in popular memory when discussing the BNR's role with the insurrection. For purposes of simplicity, I use BNR generally when discussing the insurrection. See Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 109–110, 114.

35. Uladzimir Liakhoŭski, “Sluchaki zmahalisia, a dzieiachy BNR siadzieli, iak myshy pad venikam,” *Novy chas*, November 28, 2014, novychas.by/poviaz/uladzimir_ljachouski_slucaki (no longer available).

36. “Chasovy statut: Belaruskaha Natsyianal'naha Kamitëtu Sluchchyny, listapad-s'nezhan' 1919h,” *Slutski zbroïny chyn 1920*, 27.

37. *Ibid.*

38. “Slutskaho Belaruskaho kul'turna-pras'vetnaho hurtka ‘Paparats'-ketka,’” *Slutski zbroïny chyn 1920*, 26.

39. AAN Sygn. 2/55/0/5/319 p. 34–35.

40. Newspaper clipping in *Homan*, no. 91 (183), November 13, 1917, LCVA f. 666, ap. 1, b. 190, p. 63–64.

Collectively, the Russian revolutions, WWI, border wars, and the dissolution of empires certainly fomented Belarusian nationalism. However, this process involved only a minority of the total population of ethnic Belarusians, such as members of the BNR or other activists who left documentation of their activity.⁴¹ Because of this reality, it is difficult to gauge the prevalence of Belarusian self-awareness beyond those involved in political and cultural organizations. Reports from local Poles sometimes complain about “agitators,” also described as “leftists” or of “orthodox” faith, who wanted to promote Belarusian culture and education.⁴² There is also some indication from a series of reports from the Polish 4th Army in December 1920 that the Belarusian “movement” was developing in the region, but what exactly that meant, or the extent of this process, is unknown.⁴³

Whereas the prevalence of Belarusian nationalism at the local level may be difficult to assess, everyday experiences of war are not. The Slutsk district, like other areas of central and eastern Europe and the former Russian empire, was affected by war, moving armies, multiple circulating currencies, administrative chaos, scorched-earth policies, and the subsequent spread of diseases and lack of sufficient supplies.⁴⁴ A report from a Polish inspector surveying the Slutsk region in 1920 noted several complaints by the local population. Some of these included inconsistent acceptance of currency, which inhibited them from buying supplies, as well as the inability to stop the spread of diseases, particularly typhus and syphilis.⁴⁵ In a July report of the same year, the problem with diseases reached a mortality rate of ten people daily in the Slutsk county, resulting from a lack of physicians and only one hospital in operation. In conclusion, the report noted that “there is no home, where death is not a guest.”⁴⁶

The Insurrection

Amidst the ongoing processes affecting the Slutsk region and its inhabitants, the spark for the insurrection came with the beginning of the Polish-Bolshevik negotiations in October 1920, which included territorial re-arrangements separating Belarusian territory primarily between the emerging Soviet state and the Second Polish Republic. The attending delegations agreed on a border, according to which the Slutsk district would fall just within Soviet territory. This agreement was made in spite of the fact that Poland could have pushed

41. For a more in-depth study of the revolutionary and war effects on the development of Belarusian nationhood and statehood, see: Lizaveta Kasmach, “The Road to the First Belarusian State: Nation-Building in the Context of the First World War and Revolution,” (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2016).

42. AAN Sygn. 2/55/0/5/319 p. 41–42.

43. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.170, p. 44.

44. For example, when Poland gained independence in 1918, there were a total of six different currencies circulating, three legal codes operating, and four command languages being used. Julia Eichenberg, “Consent, Coercion and Endurance in Eastern Europe,” in Jochen Böhrer, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Joachim von Puttkamer, eds., *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe’s First World War* (Munich, 2014), 252.

45. AAN Sygn. 2/55/0/5/319 p. 12–13.

46. AAN Sygn. 2/55/0/3/319 p. 31–32.

for the inclusion of Slutsk into its own state due to its military advantage at that point during the war. The Polish negotiating delegation decided against taking the area, noting that additional borderland territory, where the majority of the population was not ethnically Polish, could develop into a hub for anti-Polish activity. This inclusion, it was argued, could be dangerous for Poland and could also be weaponized by the Soviet state to destabilize Poland's eastern region.⁴⁷

The negotiations took place between the Polish and Bolshevik delegations and, with the exception of a Ukrainian delegation, the treaty discussions excluded any other minority representative body.⁴⁸ A group of Belarusian representatives did arrive in Riga with the goal of acquiring some federative status for Belarusians as part of Poland. They were denied access to the negotiating table, however.⁴⁹ The preliminary agreement between the Poles and Bolsheviks was signed on October 12, 1920 and ratified several months later.⁵⁰

This border demarcation prompted a reaction from a number of Belarusian activists. Political elites in the Slutsk district met and were joined by others who traveled from other cities, such as Wilno, Kaunas, and Grodno. These individuals collectively formed the Belarusian Slutsk Congress and elected a governing body called the Slutsk Rada.⁵¹ There was a total of 107 delegates in the Congress, including local activists in Slutsk and those who traveled from other parts of the borderland region.⁵² Some individuals were intellectuals who actively wrote for Belarusian newspapers, some were Belarusian language teachers, and others were soldiers who had fought for various armies during WWI and subsequent border wars. Todar Daniliuk, for example, was stationed in Grodno as a soldier in the Polish Army and later travelled to Slutsk to participate in the insurrection.⁵³ Another participant, Radaslaŭ Astroŭski, was a native of Slutsk and taught Belarusian in a school there.⁵⁴ Though not uniform in their politics or backgrounds, the delegates who met in the Congress rejected the provisional terms of the Polish-Bolshevik negotiations.⁵⁵

47. The delegation that went to Riga consisted mainly of those who supported a more ethnationally homogenous state. Stanisław Dąbrowski, "The Peace Treaty of Riga," *The Polish Review* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1960): 10–12.

48. AAN Sygn 2/322/0/6739, p. 11.

49. AAN Sygn. 2/390/0/6/47, p. 27.

50. For a comprehensive examination of the Treaty of Riga, see: Jerzy Borzęcki, *The Soviet-Polish Peace of 1921 and the Creation of Interwar Europe* (New Haven, 2008).

51. The Belarusian Socialist-Revolutionaries dominated the Rada, after which members of the Belarusian People's Committee also played an important role.

52. "Ukhvala Belaruskaha z'ezdu Sluchchyny," *Slutski zbroiny chyn 1920- u dokumentakh i ūspaminakh*, 63.

53. For more on Belarusian soldiers fighting under different national armies, see: Aleh Latyshonak, *Zhaŭnery BNR* (Smolensk, 2014); Jerzy Grzybowski, *Białorusini w Polskich regularnych formacjach wojskowych w latach 1918–1945* (Warsaw, 2006).

54. NARB f. 383, v. 1, s. 8, p. 1–6; Aliaksei Kabychkin, "Slutskae paŭstan'ne, 1953," *Slutski zbroiny chyn 1920- u dokumentakh i ūspaminakh*, 204–5.

55. The movement and reaction of numerous Belarusian figures reveals there was some sort of premeditation for the insurrection that would come a month later. This feature is important, as it challenges the assumption that the events in Slutsk resemble spontaneous, peasant insurrections. Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,"

In the second half of November 1920, the Rada published a “Slutsk Action” plan, outlining its intentions. The two goals of the “Slutsk Action” included: “the liberation of Belarus” and “achieving Belarusian independence,” which was explained in parenthesis as “indivisibility through a federation with Poland, by joining up more closely with Central Lithuania.”⁵⁶ The goals listed in the plan used terminology that certainly reflected the Wilsonian rhetoric of the time, yet it was vague and unclear about what these Belarusians wanted. The plan did not state who Belarusians sought “liberation” from and admits needing Polish support through a federation. The inclusion of “Central Lithuania” could have been a proxy to elevate Belarusian agency within such a federation.

Soon after the publication of the “Slutsk Action,” the Rada announced a call for mobilization and on November 16, 1920, it created the Slutsk Brigade.⁵⁷ The Brigade was composed of two regiments (the First Slutsk and Second Hrozaŭski Regiments), and each of which had three battalions.⁵⁸ Sources, however, do not agree on the number of soldiers in the Brigade. Even testimonies between two members of the Slutsk Rada also differ, one claiming there were 4000 fighters, whereas another gives a number of 12,000.⁵⁹ A report from the Polish Army noted there were 7000 “Belarusian partisans” in the area; however, only 700 were armed with rifles.⁶⁰ Though some insurgents were motivated by the Riga border demarcations, many more joined the Brigade to seek food and other necessities.⁶¹

Indeed, one of the Brigade’s major sources of aid was the 2nd Division of the Polish 4th Army, which was stationed in the area when the Brigade was created. The Rada communicated persistently with the Poles, asking them to

in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York, 1988), 46.

56. Central Lithuania, also referred to as the “Republic of Central Lithuania,” was a non-recognized, short-lived republic that lasted from 1920 to 1922. It was essentially Polish-supported territory and a buffer to Lithuania. After questionable elections in early 1922, Poland annexed the area. “‘Slutskaia aktsyia.’ Plian-kanspékt narady belaruskikh natsyianal’nykh pradstaŭnikoŭ z pol’skimi ‘krésavymi’ dzeiachami pa abmerkavan’ni sumesnykh dzeian’niaŭ suprats’ balshavikoŭ,” *Slutski zbroŭny chyn 1920- u dakumentakh i ŭspaminakh*, 67.

57. Some notable leaders of the insurgency included: Uladzimer Prakulevich, Vasil’ Rusak, Paŭliuk Zhauryd, Iul’ian Sasnoŭski, Iurka Listapad, and Siarheĭ Busel. In total there were seventeen individuals in charge, chosen by the Rada. Kabychkin, “Slutskae paŭstan’ne, (z uspaminaŭ udzel’nika), 1953,” 203.

58. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.238, p. 5; Kabychkin, “Slovy-ŭspaminny pra Slutskae paŭstan’ne, 26 listapada 1955h.,” 207; Listapad, “Uz’bilisia na svoi shliakh, 1921 h.,” 161.

59. Anton Sokal-Kutyloŭski and Aliakseĭ Kabychkin give the figure of 4000 men; whereas Vasil’ Rusak notes 12,000. Kabychkin, “Slutskae paŭstan’ne, (z uspaminaŭ udzel’nika), 1953,” 203; Vasil’ Rusak, “Dumki ab Slutskim Paustan’ni,” *Slutski zbroŭny chyn 1920-u dakumentakh i ŭspaminakh*, 173.

60. A more recent article, published in a Polish-sponsored newspaper that supports the opposition in Belarus, gave 10,000 as the number of fighters involved in the insurrection. CAW Sygn., 1.311.4.170, p. 4–5; Halina Abakunchyk, “Na sluchchyne adznachyli 99-yia ŭhodki zbrojnyh chynu,” *Belsat*, December 1, 2019, belsat.eu/in-focus/na-sluchchyne-adznachyli-99-yia-ugodki-zbrojnaga-chynu/ (accessed November 19, 2021).

61. Nina Stuzhynskaia, *Belarus’ miatsezhnaia: Z historyi ŭzbroenaha antysavetskaha supratsivu ŭ 20-ia hh. XX stakhoddzia* (Minsk, 2012), 15.

remain in Slutsk as long as possible in order to delay the coming of Bolshevik troops.⁶² The Rada leadership was hoping to have more time to prepare; namely to collect arms and supplies, recruit men, and train fighters. The Poles complied and also clandestinely provided the Slutsk Brigade with rifles, grenades, and military instructors to train soldiers, and in doing so, undermined the provisional Riga agreements with the Bolsheviks.⁶³

Eventually though, the Polish Army did evacuate the district, between November 24 and 26, 1920, after which the Bolsheviks entered and occupied Slutsk by November 29. Between the Polish and Red Armies, there was a fifteen kilometer-wide neutral zone where the Slutsk Brigade and the Rada leaders subsequently moved to, temporarily evading Bolshevik forces.⁶⁴ There, the Rada settled in the town of Semezhava, approximately forty kilometers west of Slutsk. It set up training schools, a hospital, and a military tribunal.⁶⁵ Moreover, the Brigade fighters and Rada representatives shared their new space with approximately 15,000 displaced individuals who were trying to cross into Poland.⁶⁶ This agglomeration of people made the scramble for resources much more competitive.

Members of the BNR and other Belarusian activists rarely mention locals, with whom they shared a space and on whom they depended for support. However, reports from the Polish Army do make consistent observations and note the situation on the ground. These observations came from military attachés sent to Slutsk, as part of a broader effort on behalf of Polish authorities to assess the situation in their eastern borderland region. Reports described the various operating fighting groups in the region, the successes and shortcomings of the Polish Army and border patrol, and on the mood of the population.⁶⁷ Information about Slutsk appeared in its own category, titled “The Belarusian Army.” Later when the Slutsk Brigade disintegrated, information

62. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.238, p. 15, 28.

63. Polish support for the insurrection was used in Soviet historiography not only to demonstrate foreign involvement in the “mutiny,” but also to undermine any Belarusian element in the insurrection and diminish the involvement of the BNR. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.238, p. 5; Anatol’ Hrytskevich, *Vakol “slutskaha paŭstannia”: Barats’ba z kontrrévaliutsyiaŭ u Belarusi ŭ aposhni peryiad hramadzianskaŭ vaŭny* (Minsk, 1987), 5.

64. Part of the debates surrounding terminology regarding Slutsk, comes from this moment, when the Rada and fighters moved into and operated from a neutral zone. Historian Uladzimir Liakhoŭski makes the case that an “uprising” occurs in opposition to an occupying force in an occupied zone. This definition disqualifies the events in Slutsk from being called an uprising, because they officially took place in a neutral zone. He opts for the phrase “armed insurrection” (*Slutski zbroŭny chyn*). “Uladzimir Liakhoŭski: Sluchaki zmahalisia, a dzieiachy BNR siadzeli, jak myshy pad venikam.” *Novy chas*, November 28, 2014, at novychas.by/poviaz/uladzimir_ljachouski_slucaki (accessed November 13, 2021).

65. Kabychkin, “Slutskae paŭstan’ne (z uspaminaŭ udzel’nika), 1953,” 203.

66. Oleg Łatyszzonek, *Białoruskie formacje wojskowe: 1917–1923* (Białystok, 1995), 200.

67. Using primary documents from the Polish Army to analyze local experiences, however, presents obvious limitations and issues. The perspective is skewed to reveal the Polish military’s mindset both in the content of the reports and in the language used to describe what is going on. Nevertheless, in an effort to get some sense of what was happening on the ground, these documents can be critically examined to offer insight.

on armed activity appeared under “the neutral zone” or “other activity.”⁶⁸ Overall, the reports reveal that locals varied in their opinion of the occupying troops and insurgents. Some wanted the Polish Army to remain in the area and support the Slutsk fighters.⁶⁹ Other letters, however noted that there were “anti-Polish” sentiments among locals. The most persistent grievance expressed by locals against all fighting groups involved grain requisitioning. One report from December 3, 1920 noted that: “Belarusian locals, located in the territory abandoned by the Polish Army [neutral zone], are overall ill-disposed toward Poles. They destroy massive [grain] requisitions when they are being transported [out of the area].”⁷⁰

Similarly, local anti-Bolshevik sentiments also stemmed from forced grain requisitioning. As the Red Army entered the neutral zone after the Poles had evacuated, locals complained of theft by those soldiers. A report from December 7, 1920, under the “neutral zone” heading noted:

The Bolsheviks continue to carry out requisitions and are robbing locals in the neutral zone. In the villages of Bukowicze, Ostrów, and Podsadzka. . .they carry out mandatory requisitions of cattle and fur. According to the testimony of a runaway resident of the town of Bobownia, one night a Bolshevik unit with the strength of one hundred men attacked the village of Bobownia. After this looting, the same unit headed toward the village of Wyni [sic].⁷¹

Locals also complained about the Bolsheviks’ punishment of real and alleged insurrection participants and of forcibly conscripting young men into the Red Army. A few of these documents noted that Belarusian nationalism was spreading, yet more consistent observation by Polish officials suggested that locals were more anti-Bolshevik, rather than self-identified Belarusians.⁷²

The assessments made by Polish authorities on the ground offer a complex picture of the locals in the region, which also reflected the composition of the Slutsk fighters. The vast majority of the insurgents were locals from the Slutsk region but also from other places who had been displaced during the time of the insurrection. By the end of 1920, the experience of soldiers in the region not only included the physical fighting, but also work in labor brigades, exposure to propaganda, forced conscription into various fighting units, and captivity. Around eight and a half million soldiers were captured during WWI, the vast majority of which were fighting on the Eastern Front. Here, most of those captured were soldiers of the Russian Army in German camps.⁷³ There were also many individuals in Slutsk who had previously served in the

68. The majority of the documents used for this article exploring the Polish 4th Army’s observations, come from the collection “Dowództwo 4 Armii” located in the Military Archives in Poland (*Centralny Archiwum Wojskowy*).

69. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.238, p. 28.

70. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.170, p. 39.

71. *Ibid.*, 43.

72. *Ibid.*, 51.

73. Heather Jones, “A Missing Paradigm? Military Captivity and the Prisoner of War, 1914–18,” in Matthew Stibbe ed., *Captivity, Forced Labour and Forced Migration in Europe during the First World War* (London and New York, 2009), p. 20–21.

Polish Army and likely experienced some form of captivity and labor work.⁷⁴ Upon release, or in some cases escape, many soldiers joined other armies or armed groups in order to garner at least some benefits. Red Army soldiers who deserted, for example, were accepted into the ranks of the Slutsk battalions. However, this decision was not necessarily voluntary. In his personal papers, Belarusian activist Vasil' Rusak noted that the Slutsk Rada warned local Red Army soldiers that if they did not join the Slutsk fighters, they would be captured and kept in camps.⁷⁵ Though many fighters mobilized into the Slutsk Brigade, either voluntarily or forcibly, there were also soldiers of different backgrounds who remained in hiding. One report revealed that former soldiers and deserters of various armies, were: "hiding in forests, afraid to reside in their own towns and jeopardize their families with the punishment of complete [grain] requisitioning. The youth runs away to avoid mobilization. Those that run away form units in the forest, comprising some several hundred people. Only the lack of more weapons prevents them from openly engaging in battle with the Bolsheviks."⁷⁶ With the exchange and movement of soldiers, so too did weapons, pamphlets, contraband, and diseases circulate among different armed units.

It was under these conditions that fighting between the Red Army and Slutsk forces began at the end of November 1920. Initially, the Brigade boasted some military victories against the Bolsheviks. Such earlier successes can be partially attributed to aid received from the Polish Army. These initial prospects, however, were soon soured by a combination of problems at the Slutsk Brigade leadership level, as well as general conditions at the front. The biggest issue stemmed from a lack of sufficient weapons. During the height of the fighting, a report by the Polish Army from the beginning of December 1920 noted that: "The formations find complete support from the locals, who keep them alive and keep them informed, as well as hide them when necessary. The only obstacle standing in the way of this movement is the lack of ammunition and weapons."⁷⁷ This shortcoming is also acknowledged by Vasil' Rusak. In his recollections, he noted that the Belarusian members of the uprising did not have enough weapons and uniforms and therefore, could not successfully face the Bolsheviks and were forced to frequently retreat.⁷⁸ Another major setback for the Slutsk forces came when the commander of the First Slutsk Regiment, Captain Chaïka, was found to be a spy for the Bolsheviks. He was apprehended by the Slutsk Rada and sentenced for his crime but managed to escape.⁷⁹

74. The experiences of POWs depended on who captured them: those in the hands of the Austro-Hungarian army tended to have a more sedentary confinement, whereas those held by Russia could work as forced laborers in agriculture, in cultural institutions, or even be sent to small towns to conduct small jobs. Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front* (London, 2002), 89–92.

75. NARB f. 459, v. 1, s. 5, p. 110pp–12.

76. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.170, p. 67.

77. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.170, p. 5, 9.

78. NARB f. 459, v. 1, s. 5, p. 12.

79. Kabychkin, "Slutskae paŭstan'ne, (z uspaminaŭ udzel'nika), 1953," 203.

The information Chaïka provided to the Red Army led to a successful Bolshevik offensive on December 3, 1920. This attack resulted in another victory for the Bolsheviks three days later, after which many of the Slutsk fighters fled to Poland.⁸⁰ Building on their momentum, the Bolsheviks sent more soldiers to completely defeat the Slutsk Brigade. An account by Aliaksei Kabychkin, a participant in the insurrection, recalled that the Bolsheviks even began recruiting Latvian, Chinese, and other foreigners to fight against the Slutsk Brigade.⁸¹ This information is not corroborated, but if true would add an interesting dynamic to the fighting, paralleling similar trends in other parts of the continent.⁸²

Further contributing to the defeat of the Slutsk insurgents was the mood of both locals and soldiers further soured by the dire conditions of war and postwar shortages. Little could be done to garner support for the Slutsk fighters, much less the Belarusian cause, when locals were more concerned about their livelihoods, acquiring food, and dealing with devastation and displacement.⁸³ Similar to other neighboring regions affected by war, civilians became increasingly less preoccupied with the actual fighting between combatants and, instead, were more concerned with the behavior exhibited by such individuals.⁸⁴ Like in other armies, soldiers in the Slutsk Brigade began increasing forced grain requisitions, frustrating locals even more.⁸⁵ Though initial local support may have been there when the Rada and Brigade first moved to Semezhava, it eventually dissipated. When the forces and Rada were forced to move to the neighboring town of Podczycach, there was even less support, and they were unable to operate. They relocated, this time to Hrycewicze, where typhus began to spread and could not be contained due to a lack of medical services.⁸⁶

After a series of defeats, the Slutsk Brigade disintegrated into smaller armed groups.⁸⁷ Some joined General Stanisław Bułak-Bałachowicz's army—a notorious warlord and self-proclaimed leader of a short-lived Belarusian state—while others fought in smaller partisan groups.⁸⁸ The most resilient of

80. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.170, p. 8–9.

81. Kabychkin, “Slutskae paŭstan’ne (z uspaminaŭ udzel’nika), 1953,” 204.

82. Matthew Stibbe, “Introduction Captivity, Forced Labour and Forced Migration during the First World War,” in Matthew Stibbe ed., *Captivity, Forced Labour and Forced Migration in Europe during the First World War* (London and New York, 2009), 2.

83. Nina Stuzhynskaia, *Belarus’ miatsezhnaia: z historyi ūzbroenaha antysavetskaha supratsivu ū 20-ja hh. XX stakhoddzia* (Minsk, 2012.), 15.

84. Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland*, 152.

85. Łatyszonek, *Białoruskie formacje wojskowe*, 204.

86. *Ibid.*, 205.

87. One report sent to the Second Unit of the Polish 4th Army in early January 1921 estimated that there were approximately ten thousand insurgents spread out in the Slutsk, Minsk, and Siniavki regions. CAW, Sygn. I.303.4.2538, p. 97.

88. Stanisław Bułak-Bałachowicz was known for having flexible ethno-national identities, proclaiming himself to be a Russian, a Pole, and a Belarusian at various times. He had ties to the BNR, however, it is difficult to say how loyal he was to this group. In November 1920, he declared the creation of an independent Belarus, with headquarters in Mozyr, whose three official languages were Belarusian, Polish, and Yiddish. His army was notoriously chaotic and violent toward locals. Though he declared his army to be “Belarusian,” only about one-sixth of these fighters were Belarusian. CAW Sygn.

these was a group of around 400 soldiers, mainly from the Second Hrozaŭski regiment of the Slutsk Brigade, who remobilized into another group known as *Zialony dub*, or the Green Oak partisans.⁸⁹ *Zialony dub* was under the command of Viachaslaŭ Adamovich (junior), also known as Ataman Dziarhach, and grew to include as many as five thousand fighters, mainly active in the Palesie region of present-day Belarus.⁹⁰ The *Zialony dub* fighters also received aid from the Polish Army, particularly weapons and medical supplies.⁹¹ Some of them continued to be active in the region as late as the mid-1920s.⁹²

Soon after the insurrection fizzled out, a report sent to the 2nd Division of the Polish 4th Army in early January 1921 estimated that there were approximately ten thousand insurgents spread out in the Slutsk, Minsk, and Siniavki regions.⁹³ By the end of that month, however, most of these fighters fled the area and crossed over into Poland, in order to evade capture by the Bolsheviks. In Poland, the fighters of the Slutsk insurrection, as well as other partisan groups, were subsequently disarmed and placed in camps, in accordance with Treaty of Riga arrangements.⁹⁴ The majority of these fighters were held in a camp called Daragusk on the Bug until May 1921.⁹⁵ Of these fighters, some returned to what became Soviet Belarus, where a few years later they would be arrested and charged with participating in bourgeois, anti-Soviet activity.⁹⁶ Others, especially BNR

I.311.4.238, p 52–54; Listapad, “Uz’bilisia na svoi shliakh, 1921 h.,” 165; Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 115.

89. Iurka Kharytonchyk, “Z uspaminaŭ slutskaha paŭstanta, 1960 h.,” *Slutski zbroiny chyn 1920- u dakuméntakh i ūspaminakh*, 212.

90. Adamovich was born in 1890, in present-day Lithuania, and was educated in St. Petersburg and Kovno. He was mobilized to fight in the tsarist army during WWI and was active in Belarusian circles. He worked as a contributor to Belarusian newspapers and began putting together training courses for the Belarusian Military Commission in 1920. By the end of that year, he started organizing armed groups around Babruisk and Slutsk, which would form the core of *Zialony dub*. CAW, Sygn. I.311.4.170, p. 98; Nina Stuzhyńska, “Antysowiecka konspiracja i partyzantka Zielonego Dębu na terenie Białorusi w latach 1919–1925,” in *Europa Nieprowincjonalna*, ed. R. Jasiewicz (Warsaw, 1999), 859–66; Joanna Gierowska-Kałamur, “The biographies of leading Belarusian activist in the light of information gathered by the Polish Governmental Commission for the City of Vilnius,” *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 51, no. 2 (2016): 44.

91. Though the group clandestinely received help from the Poles, they were not all pro-Polish, as noted by Adamovich himself in some correspondence. Eventually, the Polish Army discovered that the group was requesting considerably more supplies than it needed and was selling excess material on the black market. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.193, p. 8–9; Ales’ Pashkevich, “Ataman Dziargach: Neviadomyia staronki biiahrafii, tsi da historyi palitychnaha avanutryzmu ū belaruskim natsyianal’nym rukhu,” *Berastseŭski khranohraf* 4 (2004): 314–34.

92. For an extensive study on *Zialony dub* and other partisan groups active in the region, see Nina Stuzhynskaia, *Belarus’ Miatsezhnaia: Z historyi ūzbroenaha antysavetskaha supratsivu ū 1920-ia hh* (Minsk, 2012).

93. CAW Sygn. I.303.4.2538, p. 97.

94. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.135, p. 29.

95. CAW Sygn. I.311.4.135, p. 27; Anton Sokal-Kutyloŭski, “Mae ūspaminy ab Slutskim zbroinym zmahani z bal’shavikami ū 1920 hodze,” *Slutski zbroiny chyn 1920- u dakuméntakh i ūspaminakh*, 186–87.

96. These men were arrested for engaging in anti-Soviet armed activity and given sentences of ten years. Many of them were sent to Karaganda, Salaŭka, Kalyma, and

members, lived in Poland or in Lithuania and continued to be active in Belarusian affairs.

The Slutsk insurrection did not occur in isolation from the other preceding and ongoing conflicts during the time. The experiences of locals and fighters—who were not mutually exclusive—more than anything else exemplify these simultaneous conflicts. Though internal dynamics of the Belarusian leadership and more tactical elements of the insurrection were certainly important factors, other things played a role and nuanced the events. Examining the experiences of locals reveals how they simultaneously distrusted and supported multiple parties, as well as how they reacted to the fighting and occupying armed groups. They eventually became unsympathetic to any combatants and resisted any “foreign” domination or presence in the area. Moreover, regardless of how much Belarusian leaders sought to create a loyal and effective armed force, many of those fighting in the Brigade had been mobilized from other armies and some remobilized into others later, largely motivated by material needs.

The Myths of Slutsk Emerge

Although the physical conflict tied to the Slutsk insurrection may have ceased by the spring of 1921, the symbolic aspect of the struggle certainly did not. Over the years, the narratives about the events in Slutsk in 1920 were shaped and dominated by former participants and Belarusian nationalists, who crafted a specific narrative about the “uprising.” A year after the insurrection, a meeting was held in Prague, attended by insurrection participants and other leading Belarusian figures. The group published its “Resolution on the Slutsk Uprising” and noted that the insurrection had been both an anti-Russian and anti-Polish struggle, in the name of an independent Belarus.⁹⁷ This proclamation was made despite that fact that the Slutsk Rada and soldiers received help from the Polish 4th Army.⁹⁸

Similar frustrations were also presented in a speech delivered in Prague in the 1930s to a group of individuals of various nationalities. Here, the activists discussed the insurrection as part of them being denied a Belarusian state, whereas neighboring nations had achieved statehood after WWI. Specifically addressing Poles, Ukrainians, and Latvians, Vasil’ Rusak proclaimed:

The Great Russian Revolution liberated the peoples of Russia from the yoke of tsarist autocracy and to each of them gave the opportunity to create your own lives. It was not long ago that you were slaves: your language, schools, faith, customs, your entire culture, citizenship, and economy were persecuted. . . The Belarusian working people come to you with a question: do you remember your recent past and don’t you think you have changed from being oppressed to being the oppressors? You Ukrainians want to expand your

Belamorski Kanal, where the lives of many Slutsk fighters ended. Sokal-Kutyloŭski, “Mae ŭspaminy ab Slutskim zbroïnym zmahani z bal’shavikami ŭ1920 hodze,” 187.

97. *Ibid.*, 207.

98. *Ibid.*

borders at the expense of the Belarusian districts. . . You Lithuanians. . . and your imperialists are ready to capture the entire north-western part of Belarus. You, Poles, utilize the fact that Belarus, together with Lithuania, was once a part of your land and its servants. . .⁹⁹

On another occasion, Belarusian activists expressed their sentiments in a letter to the Secretary General of the League of Nations. The writers of the statement noted that

The Belarusian People's Republic, as a democratic government with equal rights for all, was a joy welcomed by the entire Belarusian population. Above all, the Belarusian People's Republic is supported by the majority and main portion of the Belarusian peasantry. . . We see proof of what has been stated with the well-known Slutsk uprising, during which Belarusian peasants, on their own initiative, took up arms and for a month and a half engaged in an uneven war on two fronts—against Russian and Polish imperialism. It is for the declaration of November 29, 1920. . . that the Belarusian nation spilled its blood and gave its life.¹⁰⁰

Here, the commitment of locals was overemphasized to bolster and justify the Belarusian cause and to attempt to show the legitimacy of the insurrection.

The stories of the Slutsk insurgents were revitalized more intensely during the Second World War, particularly during the German occupation of Belarus from 1941 to 1944. The elevation and commemoration of the Slutsk insurrection and its fighters were intended to motivate soldiers fighting for and collaborating with the Germans as part of the Belarusian auxiliary police and other armed groups. A front-page article for the paper *Holas wioski* (Voice of the Village), noted that, “Now, we remember the Slutsk insurgents, we bow our heads toward their graves, we are proud of these people, because with their blood they inserted this glorious chapter into the history of our nation. It is why the memory of them will never dim among our nation. It will last eternally, so long as our nation lives.”¹⁰¹

Former participants in the insurrection were invited to give motivational speeches to soldiers. Todar Daniliuk, the former soldier who travelled from Grodno to Slutsk in 1920 and fought in the Brigade, was invited to give lectures to new recruits. On December 15, 1944 in Berlin, Daniliuk addressed a group of soldiers:

Today marks twenty-four years since the outbreak of the Slutsk Uprising and we now confront similar obligations, though not identical. I am happy to share with all of you, and especially the younger generation, warm anecdotes that I treasure in my memory today. . . Most of the [Slutsk] officers are no longer alive, or fell under Bolshevik hands and died or are still alive in some concentration camp. . .¹⁰²

Daniliuk then continued to recount his experience as a Belarusian soldier, and especially of his time in the Slutsk Brigade. At other times, Belarusian

99. NARB f. 459, v. 1, s. 5, p. 14.

100. LCVA f. 361, ap. 2, b. 10, p. 10.

101. “Slutskae Paŭstan’ne,” *Holas wioski* no. 3 (109), 21 January 1944, p. 1.

102. NARB f. 383, v. 1, s. 2, p. 64, 67.

collaborators described German-sponsored Belarusian armed groups during WWII as a continuation of the units that had fought in the Slutsk insurrection in November and December 1920. In one lecture in the spring of 1944, Radaslaŭ Astroŭski, noted that the “Slutsk spirit” lived among the soldiers.¹⁰³

After WWII, Belarusian activists and émigrés around the world continued to commemorate the insurrection. These celebrations included former participants, collaborators during WWII, and those opposed to the Soviet regime. The majority of these individuals resided in western Europe, North America, Australia, and to a lesser extent in South America. *Belaruski holas*, a Belarusian émigré paper based in Toronto, published an article on the Slutsk insurrection nearly every year. Commemorations included a church service, along with a festival-like celebration during which prominent members of the Belarusian community in Toronto gave a lecture on Slutsk that extended into a discussion about Belarusian history. Newspaper articles also stressed that the Slutsk insurrection was just one example of how Belarusians fought to be “independent and live their autonomous lives, without the Polish white and Russian red oppressors.”¹⁰⁴ Belarusian activists also began writing their memoirs and volumes of recollections related to the events in Slutsk:

“The Slutsk uprising,” recalled Aliakseï Kabychkin in 1953, “physically ended with the enemy’s victory over our Fatherland. Nevertheless, the movement of the Slutsk insurgents has great meaning in the history of the Belarusian national movement, because this uprising was the first of its kind, organized at the national level—an armed struggle for the liberation of all of Belarus.”¹⁰⁵

Kabychkin’s writing parallels that of other prominent Belarusians. In the progressing years following the insurrection, the manner of commemoration focused less on the actual events in Slutsk but rather on the importance and value of Belarusian history, culture, and identity. Celebrations of the Slutsk insurrection became an opportunity and a space for which to talk about larger issues pertaining to Belarusian affairs, both in the country and outside of Belarus proper.

In November and December of each year, the Slutsk armed insurrection receives some public attention as groups of Belarusians gather in the town to remember the event. Belarusian émigrés in western European cities and in North America organize commemorations. The narrative has been dominated by the insurrection’s ties to the Belarusian People’s Republic and to the development of Belarusian nationalism. Though it is referred to by some as a failed attempt to create an independent Belarus, there is little salience to this interpretation. Slutsk’s exposure to years of war and military occupation by different regimes conditioned locals to be wary of any regime or fighting force. Locals were tired of war, mainly indifferent to a nationalist cause, and eventually equally as hostile to any source of authority. When examining Belarusian

103. NARB f. 383, v. 1, s. 11, p. 3.

104. “Belaruskiia Vaïskoŭtsy i partysantsy belaruskiia patrioty!” *Belaruski holas* (November 1960), 1.

105. Kabychkin, “Slutskae paŭstan’ne (z uspaminaŭ udzel’nika), 1953,” 204.

activists, there seems to have been little cohesion or uniformity as to what Belarusian independence would look like, or what Belarusian nationalism was. Defining “belarusianness” came mostly by positioning this identity in contrast to others, particularly against Russians and Poles. Furthermore, because of the frequent turnover of armies and partisan groups, the remobilization of soldiers was a feature of armed activity in the area. Many soldiers became part of the Slutsk Brigade, having previous fighting experience elsewhere, and later maybe having joined another group.

In the context of east European, Soviet, and even Belarusian history, the Slutsk insurrection is a small and mostly unknown incident. Nevertheless, it is possible that there were many “Slutsk” scattered all over the region. The periphery became, not the last area to be subdued or conquered, but a space witnessing the culmination, and even continuation, of long-lasting, powerful tensions and entanglements.