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**EUGENICS ON THE PERIPHERY:
OR WHY A ‘BELARUSIAN EUGENIC PROJECT’
DID NOT COME TRUE (1918–44)**

Abstract

The interwar period was characterized by the active development of national eugenics projects in Europe. A number of factors contributed to the interest in eugenics and the desire to implement them: the making of new states and consolidation of nations in East Central Europe, the need to overcome the legacy of the Great War and deal with social problems (for example, venereal diseases and prostitution), and the development of scientific and international academic contacts. Belarusian debates on eugenics took place mostly on the periphery of the more developed discourses – those in Russia, Poland, and, later on, in Germany. The Russian scholars in the larger university centres contributed to the development of the Soviet eugenics project, which gained the support of the Soviet authorities. In the first decade of their rule, the Bolsheviks were not against debates on eugenics about how to improve the ‘nature of man’. The Soviet eugenics project, which focused on studying problems of heredity, genetics, and genealogy, was stopped when the authorities placed rigid ideological controls over science. In Soviet Belarus, no academic circle appeared that engaged in the debates on eugenics. The development of the eugenics movement in Poland was closely linked to the formation of the newly established Polish state. After the Great War, the Polish eugenics movement made attempts to integrate itself into the public life of the country. Polish medical doctors contributed to the development of the eugenics movement. During the Second World War, a group of Belarusian nationalists tried to formulate a basis for a Belarusian racial eugenics project, following the main ideas of Nazi ‘racial hygiene’.

Keywords: eugenics, health care, family policy, Nazi crimes, racial hygiene, sterilization, propaganda, biology, psychiatry, abortion

I
INTRODUCTION

In January 1921, a local newspaper published an article about the upcoming meeting of a scientific section of the Mogilev medical trade

union. One topic was devoted to eugenics and its role in science. Eugenics was characterized as “a new trend in the science of medicine that could improve human nature”. The report promised to be of great interest to the audience.¹ However, it is unknown how the city’s medical community received this lecture. Earlier, the same newspaper had reported briefly that a lecture on abortion provoked lively debates, which ended unexpectedly because the electricity was suddenly cut off.² These short articles by an unknown author testify to scholarly interest among the medical community of the city of Mogilev [in Belarusian: Магілёў] in debates on eugenics. However, it is difficult to say exactly who the lecturer was, i.e. whether he was a local or a visiting physician. It is also unclear what groups of medical experts (for example, gynaecologists or psychiatrists) took part in the meeting and were actually interested in eugenic practices.

It is necessary to admit that references to debates on eugenics in Soviet Belarus (officially: the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, or BSSR) in the interwar period are very rare. At first glance, one might have the mistaken idea that eugenics did not manage to gain any adherents in Belarus, and that there was no basis for any eugenics movement at all. The republic lacked an institutional centre for eugenics, and all the experts worked in other Soviet republics, above all in Russia and Ukraine. However, Russian, Soviet, and Polish eugenics projects, as well as Nazi ideas of *Rassenhygiene* [racial hygiene], had an impact on debates on eugenics and influenced some groups in Belarus.

The case of Belarus is interesting because of the particular historical development of this former western border area of the Russian Empire. The territory of the present-day Republic of Belarus was divided between the Soviet republics and the Polish state. Until 1924, the above-mentioned city of Mogilev belonged to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). This industrial city with a rich Jewish community located in eastern Belarus was the centre of the former Mogilev province (guberniya) of the Russian Empire. In Soviet Belarus, the city was known for its large psychiatric hospital, established before 1914 in the suburb Pechersk.

In the 1920s, eugenics was tolerated in the Soviet Union. However, in the next decade, it was fiercely attacked for political and ideological

¹ ‘Po Mogilevu. Sredi vrachei’, *Sokha i molot* (Mogilev), 15 (22 Jan. 1921), 4.

² *Ibidem*, 7 (19 Jan. 1921), 2.

reasons. In September 1939, Soviet troops entered eastern Poland, where a eugenics movement had developed unhindered in the interwar years. Between 1941 and 1944, these territories were occupied by the Third Reich. The Nazi regime implemented an exterminatory policy dictated by the theory of *Rassenhygiene* and a forced euthanasia program (the so-called *Aktion T4*).³ In Minsk (Novinki) and Mogilev (Pechersk), members of *Einsatzgruppe B* exterminated mentally ill patients of the local psychiatric hospitals in 1941. These people (whose names still, on the whole, remain unknown, as the lists of patients were not preserved) became the first victims of the Nazis' experiments with new techniques of industrial murder (e.g. killing with explosives and gas chambers) that were discussed during Heinrich Himmler's visit to Minsk in 1941.⁴

In the turbulent era of the interwar period, certain groups among the local population were ready to accept and popularize eugenic ideas and theories. However, an independent Belarusian eugenics project was not established, despite attempts by some Belarusian collaborators to discuss it publicly during the Nazi occupation.

In this paper, the term 'eugenics' denotes different eugenics-oriented ideas and debates circulating in Belarus. Scholars agree that eugenics includes a variety of social movements, ways of thinking and policies. In the pre-war and interwar periods, adherents of eugenics were interested in factors affecting inheritance as well as means of improving hereditary characteristics. Alongside 'positive' eugenics, ideas of 'negative' eugenics gained supporters in various countries across the globe. They were attracted by the idea of 'controlling' the reproduction of certain groups of people by means of sterilization, abortion, etc. Nazi crimes (euthanasia, sterilization, and experiments on human beings) discredited eugenics once and for all.⁵ One can

³ See Maïke Rotzoll et al. (eds.), *Die nationalsozialistische 'Euthanasie'-Aktion 'T4' und ihre Opfer: Geschichte und ethische Konsequenzen für die Gegenwart* (Paderborn, 2010).

⁴ See Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg, 1998); Wolfgang Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weissrussland* (Paderborn, 2006); Ulrike Winkler and Gerrit Hohendorf, "Nun ist Mogiljow frei von Verrückten". Die Ermordung der PsychiatriepatientInnen in Mogilew 1941/42', in Babette Quinkert, Philipp Rauh and Ulrike Winkler (eds.), *Krieg und Psychiatrie 1914–1950, Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen, 2010), 75–103; Peter Longenrich, *Heinrich Himmler: A Life* (Oxford, 2012).

⁵ See Paul Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials: From Medical War Crimes to Informed Consent* (New York, 2005).

argue about the reasons for the popularity of the eugenics movement in different countries. Eugenics programmes were heavily dependent on the national context and eugenics projects in neighbouring European countries differed significantly.⁶

The current historiography of eugenics is very rich. Historians have undertaken comparative studies of eugenics movements in different countries, including Russia and the Soviet Union.⁷ Russian historians have written on eugenic ideas in the Soviet Union, the role of eugenics in Soviet science, and its relationship with genetics, genealogy, and other areas.⁸ Researchers have studied the history of the eugenics movement in interwar Poland and debates on questions of race, abortion, and sterilization, and analysed eugenics programmes.⁹ By contrast, in Belarusian historiography, eugenics has not yet been studied. In the country where the Nazis used brutal methods against different groups of the local population (Jews, Roma, and mentally ill people), the spread of eugenic ideas in the pre-war period and the role of Belarusian collaborationists popularizing eugenic ideas have not attracted the attention of researchers. The German-Belarusian project *Kranken- und Behindertenmorde in Weißrussland 1941–1944* [The extermination of mentally ill and disabled people in Belarus in 1941–4] on Nazi crimes in the Belarusian territories was the first to initiate discussion on this topic.¹⁰

⁶ Marius Turda and Paul Weindling, 'Eugenics, Race and Nation in Central and Southeast Europe 1900–1940: A Historiographic Overview', in *idem* (eds.), *'Blood and Homeland': Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900–1940* (Budapest, 2007), 1–20.

⁷ Mark Adams, 'Eugenics in Russia. 1900–1940', in *idem* (ed.), *The Wellborn Science. Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil and Russia* (New York and Oxford, 1990), 153–216; Loren Graham, 'Science and Values. The Eugenics Movement in Germany and Russia in the 1920's', *American Historical Review*, lxxxii, 5 (1977), 1133–64.

⁸ Evgenii Pchelov, *Rodoslovnaya genial'nosti: iz istorii otechestvennoi nauki 1920-kh gg.* (Moskva, 2008); Vasilii Babkov, *Zarya genetiki cheloveka. Russkoe evgenicheskoe dvizhenie i nachalo genetiki cheloveka* (Moskva, 2008).

⁹ Maciej Górny, *Wielka wojna profesorów: nauki o człowieku (1912–1923)* (Warszawa, 2014); Magdalena Gawin and Kamila Uzarczyk (eds.), *Eugenika – biopolityka – państwo: z historii europejskich ruchów eugenicznych w pierwszej połowie XX w.* (Warszawa, 2010); Michał Musielak, *Sterylicacja ludzi ze względów eugenicznych w Stanach Zjednoczonych, Niemczech i w Polsce (1899–1945)* (Poznań, 2008).

¹⁰ Andrei Zamoiski, 'Eugenik und "Rassenhygiene" im weißrussisch-sowjetisch-polnisch-deutschen Spannungsfeld', in Alexander Friedman and Rainer Hudemann (eds.), *Diskriminiert – vernichtet – vergessen. Behinderte in der Sowjetunion, unter*

This article attempts to explain why, in the Belarusian case, eugenics projects did not manage to win many adherents and no eugenics movement was established. It studies how eugenics movements in the Soviet Union and Poland affected Belarusians in the interwar period, what eugenic ideas attracted people and appeared in debates, and what topics and problems eugenicists in the Belarusian lands focused on. Also of interest are the eugenic ideas of Belarusian collaborators, who attempted to indoctrinate young people during the Nazi occupation.

II

AN 'UNBORN' BELARUSIAN POLITICAL EUGENIC PROJECT?

In the Russian Empire, eugenic ideas were discussed within academic communities. Yet, a eugenics movement did not appear before the Great War.¹¹ It is difficult to define exactly when eugenics and eugenics-related ideas reached the western provinces of the Russian Empire, in particular the Minsk, Mogilev, and Grodno guberniyas. The main obstacle was the lack of higher educational and research institutions where supporters of new trends in science such as eugenics could cluster together. Potential adherents included physicians, who had access to professional literature published abroad. Literature on human heredity and degradation could circulate among medical doctors, who took part in the abstinence movement and fought sexually transmitted diseases and prostitution. However, even members of the Minsk Medical Society did not pay much attention to the questions of heredity and degradation, focusing mainly on problems of sanitary work, dermatology, surgery, etc.¹²

The Russian revolutions of 1917, the collapse of the Russian Empire, and the re-establishment of scholarly contacts cut during

nationalsozialistischer Okkupation und im Ostblock 1917–1991 (Stuttgart, 2016), 341–53.

¹¹ Björn Felder, 'Rasovaya gigiena v Rossii, Evgenii Alekseevich Shepilevskii (1857–1920) i zarozhdenie evgeniki v Rossiiskoi imperii', *Istoriko-biologicheskie issledovaniya*, iv, 2 (2012), 39–60.

¹² Natsyyanal'ny historychny arkhiv Belarusi [National Historical Archives of Belarus], f. [fond] 502, op. [opis' – series] 1, d. [delo – folder] 62, l. [list – page] 3, Moisei Polyak, 'Brief review of the 50 years activity of the Minsk Medical Society (1867–1917)'.

the Great War all helped initiate a new period of scientific development that included theories on improving human nature. According to Paul Weindling, eugenics was a crucial factor in the transformative processes of democratization and national self-determination that emerged in the wake of the Great War. Debates on eugenics paralleled the emergence of nationalist movements, with activists stressing biological, ethnic, or racial identities.¹³ In the Baltic region, one can see how eugenics could enter the political and social agenda in the nation states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia that emerged on the ruins of the Russian Empire. In each republic, distinct national eugenics movements were established.¹⁴ The First World War and resulting political transformations fostered an interest in ‘race issues’ (i.e. the ‘racial purity’ of the nation) in the region, which Polish and Ukrainian scholars discussed.¹⁵

In Belarus, some political activists connected to the Belarusian national movement were involved in debates on eugenics, especially on degeneration. For example, the programme of *Belaruskaya Khryst-siyananskaya Demakratyya* (BKhD) [Belarusian Christian Democracy], published in Minsk in 1920, focused on the questions of a healthy marriage, family, and social morality. Christian Democrats were opposed to marriages with the mentally ill and abortions. Their programme reflected the position of the Catholic Church in supporting a healthy family.¹⁶ After the capture of Minsk by the Bolsheviks in 1920, BKhD activities were banned. Under the Soviet regime, no other political and ideological alternatives were tolerated. Within their national policy, the Bolsheviks fostered the construction of

¹³ Paul Weindling, ‘Race, Eugenics and National Identity in the Eastern Baltic: From Racial Surveys to Racial States’, in Björn Felder and Paul Weindling (eds.), *Baltic Eugenics. Bio-Politics, Race and Nation in Interwar Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 1918–1940* (Amsterdam and New York, 2013), 33.

¹⁴ Ken Kalling, ‘The Application of Eugenics in Estonia 1918–1940’, in Felder and Weindling (eds.), *Baltic Eugenics*, 49–82; Vladimirs Kuznecovs, ‘Latvian Psychiatry and Medical Legislation of the 1930s and the German Sterilisation Law’, *ibidem*, 147–68; Björn Felder and Arūnas Germanavičius, ‘Eugenics against State and Church: Juozas Blažys (1890–1939), Eugenics, Abortion and Psychiatry in Interwar Lithuania 1918–1940’, *ibidem*, 202–32.

¹⁵ Maciej Górny, ‘World War One and National Characterology in East-Central Europe’, *ibidem*, 246.

¹⁶ Adam Stankevich, *Z Bogam da Belarusi. Zbor tvorav* (Vilnius, 2008), 514.

a new Belarusian national identity.¹⁷ The Belarusians received their own Soviet republic and a network of Belarusian institutions; schools were established as part of the policy of so-called 'Belarusization'.¹⁸ In 1921, a new Belarusian State University was founded in Minsk to produce national cadres for the republic. Leading experts in different fields of research were invited to Soviet Belarus. There was no place for a discussion of a 'Belarusian race' on the Belarusian elites' agenda: it did not fit this multi-national region, where Belarusians, Russians, Poles, and Jews lived together. At the end of the 1920s, a change in nationality policy took place and the Soviet regime began its campaign against so-called 'national democrats'. Many Belarusian intellectuals were accused of counterrevolutionary activities, mainly in spreading Belarusian nationalism within research and educational institutions, schools, etc. Over the next decade, many representatives of the Belarusian intelligentsia suffered greatly at the hands of the Soviet regime.¹⁹

III THE CITY OF MOGILEV AS A POTENTIAL CENTRE OF EUGENICS?

As we have seen, Mogilev was a city where at least some medical doctors showed an interest in eugenics. Medical doctors and *zemstvo* activists (who worked on the elected district councils in pre-revolutionary Russia) were free to develop an interest in modern ideas from the West. They took part in campaigns against tuberculosis, alcoholism, and sexually transmitted diseases. The Mogilev *zemstvo* worked with an expert greatly interested in eugenics issues. At the turn of 1917–18, a local psychiatrist, Eugenii Kopystinskiĭ (1879–1967), prepared a report on the reorganization of psychiatric institutions in the Mogilev province, which was published as

¹⁷ Per Anders Rudling, *Rise and Fall of Belarusian nationalism. 1906–1930* (Pittsburgh, 2015), 163.

¹⁸ More detailed, see Nicholas Vakar, *Belorussia: the Making of a Nation. A Case Study* (Cambridge, 1956); Helena Głogowska, *Białoruś 1914–1929: kultura pod presją polityki* (Białystok, 1996).

¹⁹ See Eugeniusz Mironowicz, *Białoruś* (Warszawa, 2007); Rastsislav Platonav, *Byelarus' u mizhvayenny pyeryiad: Staronki palitychnay historyi v svyatlye archiwnykh krynits* (Minsk, 2001); Tat'yana Prots'ko, *Stanovlenie Sovetskoĭ Totalitarnoĭ Sistemy v Belarusi (1917–1941 gg.)* (Minsk, 2002).

a brochure by the Mogilev *zemstvo*. Kopystynskii was born in Biała Podlaska in Lublin province and studied at Moscow University. Here, he had been a student of the famous Russian scholar Vladimir Bekhterev (1857–1927), a director of the Psychoneurological Institute in St. Petersburg. Being familiar with eugenic theories, Kopystynskii discussed the negative consequences of breeding between mentally ill and non-mentally ill people. Speaking against the ‘degeneration of the population’, he proposed carrying out broad educational work among the population of the province with the help of clubs, theatre, concerts, and cinema.²⁰ There is no information on how the local authorities reacted to this proposition. It is obvious that during the period of political unrest in this region Kopystynskii’s suggestions could not be realized. Why he finally left the city of Mogilev is still unknown. His departure was probably closely related to his political activity in the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (the SRs).²¹ During the 1917 Revolution, he played an active role in the political life of the city of Mogilev; he took part in the elections to the city council.²² After the Bolsheviks started to suppress their political opponents, including the SRs, he decided to change his place of residence. The psychiatrist’s further activities were linked to the Kiev medical institute and a psychiatric hospital. We do not know whether he stayed in contact with experts in eugenics such as Oleksiï Krontovskii (1855–1933), founder of *Byuro z vyvchennya spadkovosti lyudyiny* [The Bureau for Studies in Human Heredity] in Kiev.²³ Kopystynskii abandoned the topic which had previously inspired him. Later, he became author of a textbook on psychiatry in Ukrainian, published in 1929.²⁴ In the mid-1930s, he visited and examined psychiatric hospitals in

²⁰ Evgenii Kopystynskii, *Zadachi Mogilevskogo Gubernskogo Zemstva v oblasti organizatsii psikhiatricheskoi pomoshchi naseleniyu Mogilevskoi gubernii v Belorussii* (Mogilev, 1918), 23.

²¹ See Elizabeth White, *The socialist alternative to Bolshevik Russia: the Socialist Revolutionary Party, 1921–1939* (London and New York, 2011).

²² Aleksei Vorob’ev, ‘Deyatel’nost’ éserovskikh organizatsii na territorii Belarusi vesnoi-letom 1917 goda’, *Vestnik Mahilyovskaga dzyarzhavnaga universyteta imja A. Kulyashova*, 4 (2000), 30.

²³ Oleksiï Romanets’, ‘Yevgenika v 20-h rokakh XX st. v Ukraïni’, *Nauka ta naukoznavstvo*, 3 (2010), 75.

²⁴ Yevgen Kopystynskii [Evgenii Kopystynskii], *Nervovi ta psikhichni khvorobi: Pidruchnik dlya profesiiynykh medychnykh shkyl seredn’ogo dopomizhnogo medpersonalu* (Kyiv and Kharkiv, 1929).

Transcaucasia.²⁵ In 1945, his testimony on the Nazis crimes against mentally ill patients in Kiev were used in the Nuremberg Trials.²⁶

How deeply eugenic theories reached Soviet peripheries such as Mogilev remains an open question. There is no doubt that the city’s medical community was in the orbit of the Russian scholarly centres of Moscow and Petrograd. The geographical proximity to both cities played a role. Revolutionary changes after 1917 facilitated a growing interest in eugenics, and ideas on creating a ‘new Man’ were discussed actively, not only by medical scholars, but also by other groups of Soviet intellectuals such as writers.²⁷ The early 1920s were a period of rapid development for the eugenics movement in Russia, above all in Moscow and Petrograd. Under Soviet rule, eugenics managed to be quickly institutionalized as a scientific discipline with its own periodicals, specialized societies, and research facilities.²⁸ This was a continuation of a longer tradition of Russian and Russophone eugenics. One of the founders of Soviet eugenics, Russian scholar Nikolaï Kol’tsov (1872–1940), set up the Institute of Experimental Biology in Moscow in 1917. Later, in 1920, a eugenics section was established within it. This outstanding biologist became the head of the Russian Eugenics Society (REO).²⁹ The People’s Commissioner of Health Nikolaï Semashko (1874–1949) expressed a lively interest in research in this direction. The REO published the *Russkii Evgenicheskiï Zhurnal* (REZh) [the Russian Eugenics Journal]. The editorial board invited experts to publish their work in the field of eugenics.³⁰ Another centre of eugenics was set up in Petrograd, where

²⁵ Personal papers of Kopystinskiï are preserved in Derzhavnyi arkhiv mista Kieva [State Archive of the City of Kiev], Fond P-1534; ‘Evgeniï Avgustovich Kopystinskiï: Nekrolog’, *Zhurnal Nevrologii i Psikhiiatrii imeni S. S. Korsakova*, lxxviii (1968), 156–7.

²⁶ Natal’ya Lebedeva (ed.), *Nyurnbergskii protsess. Prestupleniya protiv chelovechnosti*, v (Moskva, 1991), 239.

²⁷ Yvonne Howell, ‘Eugenics, Rejuvenation, and Bulgakov’s Journey into the Heart of Dogness’, *Slavic and East European Journal*, xxii, 4 (1978), 494–508.

²⁸ Nikolaï Kremetsov, ‘From “Beastly Philosophy” to Medical Genetics: Eugenics in Russia and the Soviet Union’, *Annals of Science*, lxxviii, 1 (2011), 64.

²⁹ Nikolaï Kol’tsov, *Kak izuchayutsya zhiznennye yavleniya* (Moskva, 1928), 41 ff.; Boris Astaurov and Pëtr Rokitskiï, *Nikolaï Konstantinovich Kol’tsov, 1872–1940* (Moskva, 1975), 100.

³⁰ Some documents related to the REO activities are preserved in the archival fond A-2307 (the Chief Administration of Scientific and Museum Administrations

the movement was grouped around the head of the Department of Genetics at the Petrograd University, Yuriĭ Filipchenko (1882–1930). In March 1921, he founded the Bureau of Eugenics that published materials such *Izvestiya Byuro po Evgenike* [News of the Bureau of Eugenics].³¹ As of 1923, eugenics societies were established in Kiev, Odessa, and Saratov. They were affiliated with the REO and remained within it until it closed at the end of the decade.

Soviet eugenics combined research and educational activities, mainly focusing on the study of heredity, genetics, and genealogy. A diverse group of people were involved in debates on eugenics. Among them were psychiatrists, hygienists, venereologists, biologists, anthropologists, demographers, and geneticists.³² Many Soviet physicians were sympathetic to eugenics. According to Nikolai Kremontsov, for many medical doctors (psychiatrists and neurologists) who dealt with chronic diseases, eugenics offered a new research methodology within their own professional interests.³³ In Mogilev, this interest in eugenics in 1921 was probably linked to the activity of the local psychiatric hospital, the biggest in the region and later in the Belarusian SSR. However, there is no information on the activity of local psychiatrists in public debates on eugenics (for example, in publications in the Soviet press, *REZh*, etc.).

Alongside discussions on the “improvement of human nature”, Soviet scholars, medical doctors, and representatives of various state-run public health institutions focused on the social determinants of health, social hygiene, prevention of illness, and the wellbeing of mothers and infants. The creation of a ‘new Man with a healthy body and pure mind’ was actively propagated by the first proletarian state.³⁴ The development of physical training and sports activities were vigorously popularized in the Soviet Union from the 1920s. Researchers and public health institutions targeted the wellbeing of mothers and

of the Peoples Commissariat of Education of the RSFSR ‘Glavnauka’) in Gosudarstvennyiĭ arkhiv Rossiĭskoi Federatsii [The State Archives of the Russian Federation, hereinafter: GARF].

³¹ Yuriĭ Filipchenko, *Chto takoe evgenika* (Petrograd, 1921), 29.

³² Adams, ‘Eugenics in Russia’, 169.

³³ Kremontsov, ‘From “Beastly Philosophy”’, 67.

³⁴ David Hoffmann, ‘Bodies of Knowledge: Physical Culture and the New Soviet Man’, in Igal Halfin (ed.), *Language and revolution: making modern political identities* (London and Portland, OR, 2002), 231.

infants for political and social policy reasons. Special departments called *Okhrana Materinstva i Mladenchenstva (Okhmatmlad)* [Departments for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy] were established in order to monitor such activities.³⁵

In the Belorussian SSR, as well as in other republics, the *Narodnyi Komissariat Zdravookhraneniya (Narkomzdrav)* [the People's Commissariat of Health] had to deal with practical questions on how to improve the health care system and general sanitary situation in the republic. The People's Commissar of Health of the Belorussian SSR, Mikhail Barsukov (1890–1974), publicly criticized the unsatisfactory hygiene conditions in the republic, especially in the peasants' and workers' families.³⁶ It was an urgent necessity to propagate sanitary norms among the population and to force people and various institutions (schools and kindergartens) to observe elementary sanitary standards. An active struggle against sexually transmitted diseases was undertaken in the Soviet republics. The focus was on combating venereal diseases among the national minorities of the Soviet peripheries, for example in Siberia.³⁷

The decline in interest in eugenics was closely related to the political situation in the Soviet Union. Theories of eugenics came in for criticism in the middle of the 1920s. From the end of the decade, the attacks on eugenics intensified when the Soviet authorities placed science under their ideological control. The Russian Eugenics Society ceased its activity. Scholars such as Professor Nikolai Kol'tsov were subjected to oppression. At the end of the 1920s, the Soviet press portrayed him and his colleagues not only as "odd or strange people", but also as "class enemies, who managed to occupy positions in Soviet academic institutions".³⁸

³⁵ See Sarah Ashwin (ed.), *Gender, state, and society in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia* (London and New York, 2000); Mary Buckley, *Women and ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor, 1989).

³⁶ Mikhail Barsukov, 'Achova zdarowya i kul'tura', *Belaruskaya Medychnaya Dumka*, 2–4 (1929), 4–7.

³⁷ Vsevolod Bashkuev, 'Soviet Eugenics and National Minorities: Eradication of Syphilis in Buriat-Mongolia as an Element of Social Modernisation of a Frontier Region 1923–1928', in Felder and Weindling (eds.), *Baltic Eugenics*, 262–86.

³⁸ Arkhiv Rossijskoj Akademii Nauk [Archives of the Russian Academy of Science, hereinafter: ARAN], f. 450, op. 4, d. 11, l. 2–4, Nikolai Kol'tsov, 'Letter of to the Narkomzdrav on publications in the Soviet newspapers (24 April, 1929)'.

IV
EUGENIC DEBATES: FOCUSING ON HEREDITY
AND 'HEALTHY' MARRIAGE

The question of a healthy family engaged supporters of eugenics in all countries. They underlined the great importance of advisory work with young couples. In the USSR, medical doctors paid serious attention to the negative impact of sexually transmitted diseases on heredity. A rise in such diseases in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was the result of a period of war and economic problems, as well as the crisis of the health care system during the Great War. In the Soviet republics, the risk of diseases for the family was discussed by health departments and popularized by sanitary propaganda.³⁹ Brochures about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases were written in a manner accessible for ordinary readers and published in large print runs.⁴⁰ In 1924, the All-Soviet Congress of venereologists passed a resolution on medical control stating that men and women should be aware of the health status of their partners before getting married. In May 1925, the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) and the Narkomzdrav of the RSFSR sent an instruction to local civilian registry offices (ZAGS) obliging them to require a statement from newlyweds that they had already been informed about the health status of their partner. Additionally, civilian registry offices had to tell them about the responsibility for transmitting venereal diseases according to the Soviet criminal code.⁴¹ However, there were no preparatory measures taken for this, and the practice became a pure formality. In Belarus, the need for premarital examinations was discussed in the mass media as well. *Krest'yanskaya Gazeta* [The Peasants' Newspaper] received a letter written by a village council activist from Vitebsk district, who discussed the idea that diseases such as syphilis were a serious threat not only to a young family, but also to other members of a community. Another potential danger was generated by the unhealthy children of such couples. According to his information, their village council provided a premarital examination, but in

³⁹ Lev Fridland, *Za zakrytoĭ dver'yu. Zapiski vracha venerologa* (Leningrad, 1927), 4–5.

⁴⁰ B. Evgen'ev, *Venericheskie bolezni i ich posledstviya* (Petrograd, 1923).

⁴¹ Pavel Lyublinskii, 'Brak i evgenika (O kontrole nad zdorov'em lits, vstupayushchikh v brak)', *Russkii Evgenicheskiĭ zhurnal* [hereinafter: *REZh*], v. 2 (1927), 82–3.

other places more attention to a ‘healthy marriage’ was needed.⁴² The letter demonstrated that some citizens without access to specialized medical or eugenics literature formulated the same questions as adherents of eugenics. With the help of the Soviet press, they tried to bring to the public their ideas about the dangers of social diseases.

In 1927, a new version of the Code of Laws on Marriage and the Family was released in the Belarusian SSR (a year later than in Soviet Russia). The code placed restrictions on marriage for medical reasons, in particular for the mentally ill. People with these illnesses could not officially register their marriage.⁴³ This measure corresponded to the pre-revolutionary marriage regulations.⁴⁴ Newlyweds were obliged to declare that they were both aware of each other’s health status, particularly with regard to tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases, and mental illnesses. The Soviet eugenicist and psychiatrist Tikhon Yudin (1879–1948) considered it to be an insufficient eugenic measure, since a couple might not know about a disease, especially in rural areas, where there was a limited number of medical doctors able to provide the corresponding medical certificates. The onus lay on the two spouses, who had to provide information on hereditary diseases in their families.⁴⁵

In the 1930s, the marriage legislation in Nazi Germany attracted the attention of Soviet authors, who reported on the prohibition of marriages between Jews and non-Jews.⁴⁶ Soviet scholars, such as the Minsk philosopher Semën Vol’fson (1894–1941), compared the family policy in Nazi Germany and the development of a socialist family in the Soviet Union. He argued that the ‘capitalist family’ was going through a deep crisis.⁴⁷ By contrast, according to Soviet propaganda,

⁴² Andreï Voronov, ‘Nuzhen meditsinskii osmotr’, *Krest’yanskaya gazeta* (31 Aug. 1925), 5.

⁴³ *Sobranie Zakonov BSSR. Kodeks Zakonov o Sem’e, Brake i Opeke* (Minsk, 1927), Article 27; Pavel Gidulyanov, *Kodeks Zakonov o Sem’e, Brake i Opeke. S postateïnym kommentariem* (Leningrad, 1927), 34.

⁴⁴ Sergeï Grigorovskii (ed.), *Sbornik tserkovnykh i grazhdanskikh zakonov o brake i razvode, uzakonenie, usnovlenie i vnebrachnye deti* (Sankt Peterburg, 1907), 120–4.

⁴⁵ Tikhon Yudin, *Evgenika. Uchenie ob uluchshenii prirodnykh svoïstv cheloveka* (Moskva, 1928), 265.

⁴⁶ Alexander Friedmann, *Deutschlandbilder in der weißrussischen sowjetischen Gesellschaft 1919–1941. Propaganda und Erfahrungen* (Stuttgart, 2011), 179.

⁴⁷ Semën Vol’fson, *Kul’tura i ideologiia zagnivayushchego kapitalizma* (Moskva and Leningrad, 1935), 124; *idem*, *Sem’ya i brak v ikh istoricheskom razvitii* (Moskva,

the basis of a Soviet family was “friendship between spouses, common ideological and political views, cultural interests, mutual respect, etc.”⁴⁸ It is necessary to mention that after 1936 a new programme to maintain the institution of the Soviet family was undertaken. This policy was closely linked to the Soviet Union’s huge demographic losses from collectivization and industrialization, mass repressions, and famine.⁴⁹ Soviet propaganda actively demonstrated the state’s new attitude to family priorities: according to new regulations agreed by the Soviet Constitution in 1936, divorces were limited and abortions were practically banned. By promoting a healthy family, the Soviet authorities sought to hide the real demographic picture in the country, which was experiencing a decrease in marriages and increase in the number of abortions.⁵⁰

V

SOVIET EUGENICS IN THE 1930S: ‘OUT OF LAW’

In the 1930s, the term ‘eugenics’ acquired a negative connotation in Soviet propaganda.⁵¹ Soviet propagandists paid great attention to ‘racial hygiene’ policies in Germany, especially the Nuremberg laws.⁵² Special attention was also given to debates on sterilization. The attitude of Soviet eugenicists to negative eugenics was extremely critical. Only the Soviet anthropologist Mikhail Volotskoï (1893–1944) accepted the feasibility of eugenic sterilization in some cases.⁵³ The Soviet press often mentioned that sterilization was in use in the USA and Nazi Germany as a punishment for certain crimes. According to Soviet propagandists, the law on sterilizing the mentally

1937); Andrei Zamoiski, ‘Professor Semën Vol’fson – sluga i zhertva stalinskoï filosofii’, *Rozprawy z Dziejów Oświaty*, 1 (2013), 183.

⁴⁸ ‘Ab komunistychnay marali. Adkaz na pytanneye’, *Zvyazda*, 60 (6942) (12 March, 1941), 4.

⁴⁹ Valentina Zhiromskaya, *Demograficheskaya istoriya Rossii v 1930-e gg. Vzgljad v neizvestnoe* (Moskva, 2001), 218–19.

⁵⁰ Aleksandr Livshin *et al.* (eds.), *Sovetskaya povsednevnost’ i massovoe soznanie 1939–1945* (Moskva, 2003), 248–9.

⁵¹ ‘Lzheuchenym ne mesto v Akademii Nauk’, *Pravda*, 11 (7696) (11 Jan. 1939), 4.

⁵² B. Meller, *Bor’ba prodolzhaetsya. Rabochie v fashistskoï Germanii* (Moskva, 1935).

⁵³ Mikhail Volotskoï, ‘O polovoï sterilizatsii nasledstvenno-defektivnykh’, *REZh*, i, 4 (1923), 201–22.

ill targeted the working class. This ideological approach was in line with Soviet psychiatry. At the Second All-Union Congress of Soviet psychiatrists in Moscow in 1936, the psychiatrist Georgii Karanovich characterized the sterilization in Germany as “an instrument of struggle against exploited workers and a form of class violence.”⁵⁴ At the same time, the victims of forced sterilization in Nazi Germany were not only anti-fascist resistance activists, but also multiracial children in the Rhineland (so-called *Rheinlandbastarde*), Jews, Roma, and mentally ill people.⁵⁵

By the end of the 1930s, eugenics in the USSR became a ‘dangerous tendency’ in scientific activity. With the attack on eugenics, Soviet experts abandoned eugenics-related topics; henceforth, they turned to medical genetics, biology, etc. Some Soviet scholars drastically changed their previous ideas on the topic. For example, in 1932, the Soviet botanist and academician Boris Keller (1874–1945) wrote that eugenics in the Soviet Union had great significance, but in contrast to the West mainly aimed “to make human labour highly productive, creative, and joyful”.⁵⁶ Several years later, he and a group of Soviet academicians attacked Nikolai Kol'tsov as a supporter of the “Nazi science of eugenics”.⁵⁷ Despite the attacks on him, Professor Kol'tsov still enjoyed immense prestige as an outstanding biologist. In 1935, he was invited to head the Institute of Biology of the Belarusian Academy of Science in Minsk. However, he declined, just as he turned down the invitation to become an academician in the west Soviet republic.⁵⁸ In January 1939, his former colleagues passed a resolution at a general meeting of the Institute of Experimental Biology in Moscow on the political harmfulness of the eugenic ideas put

⁵⁴ GARF, f. P-8009, op. 1, d. 46, l. 130, Report ‘Organization of the neuropsychiatric services in connection with the tasks of the 3d Five-Year Plan, discussed at the All-Union Congress of psychiatrists and neurologists in Moscow on 25–29 December 1936’.

⁵⁵ Ralf Forsbach, *Die Medizinische Fakultät der Universität Bonn im ‘Dritten Reich’* (München, 2006), 520; Achim Bühl, *Auf dem Weg zur biomächtigen Gesellschaft?: Chancen und Risiken der Gentechnik* (Wiesbaden, 2009), 46.

⁵⁶ Boris Keller, *Genetika. Kratkii ocherk* (Moskva, 1933), 89.

⁵⁷ Valerii Soifer, *Vlast' i nauka. Razgrom kommunistami genetiki v SSSR* (Moskva, 2002), 427.

⁵⁸ ARAN, f. 450, op. 2, d. 15, l. 1–4, Invitations of Professor Nikolai Kol'tsov to the Belarusian SSR (1935).

forward by Professor Nikolaï Kol'tsov.⁵⁹ Unable to bear the harassment, he died in 1940.

By 1939, eugenic ideas were no longer discussed publicly. The reasons for this silence were the Soviet press criticism of eugenic theories in 'bourgeois countries', the mass training of a new generation of medical personnel unfamiliar with the works of well-known eugenicists, and the removal of eugenic literature published in the USSR and abroad over the previous decade. Yet, some eugenic ideas remained in currency, for example regarding questions of heredity, a healthy family, degradation, etc. In addition, a low-key discussion of eugenics in Soviet society continued to take place.

VI EUGENICS IN THE OCCUPIED EASTERN POLISH TERRITORIES

In 1939, under the Soviet occupation of the eastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic (so-called western Belarus), the Soviet authorities started to re-organize the health care system according to the Soviet model. The development of the eugenics movement in Poland had been closely linked to the formation of the recently established Polish state, which included the Polish lands divided between Prussia, Austria, and Russia in the late eighteenth century. The rise in the popularity of eugenics in Poland has been associated with the fight against sexually transmitted diseases and social problems such as prostitution, which were the legacy of the Great War and the social transformation of the Polish society.⁶⁰ In the interwar period, the Polish eugenics movement made an effort to integrate itself into the public and political life of the country. Polish medical doctors contributed to the development of the eugenics movement. From the 1920s onwards, *Polskie Towarzystwo Eugeniczne (PTE)* [the Polish Eugenics Society] managed to expand its activity across the country.⁶¹ The eugenics movement in interwar Poland gained interest and

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, op. 4, d. 15, l. 2–4, 'The Resolution on political harmfulness of eugenic ideas discussed by Professor Nikolaï Kol'tsov (January 15, 1939)'.

⁶⁰ See Magdalena Gawin, *Rasa i nowoczesność. Historia polskiego ruchu eugenicznego 1880–1953* (Warszawa, 2003).

⁶¹ Leon Wernic, 'Ruch eugeniczny w Polsce i jego zagadnienia aktualne', *Nowiny Lekarskie*, xl, 21 (1928), 747.

support within the circles of intellectuals of big cities and major university towns.

There were, however, contradictory views on eugenics and racial theories in Polish society. Polish eugenicists discussed the problem of sterilization vigorously.⁶² Some supporters (psychiatrists and military medical doctors) hoped to include such ideas in eugenics projects. At the same time, representatives of the Catholic Church were determined opponents of sterilization.⁶³ There was also no common approach to abortion. Many Polish eugenicists opposed the practice, while some medical doctors openly supported it, suggesting it to women from low social strata during their medical consultations. Polish eugenicists and supporters of a 'modern doctrine' focused on the problems of heredity and a 'healthy family', and most of them rejected the extreme side of negative eugenics. In the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic, the eugenics movement was less developed in comparison with other regions of Poland. The eugenics movement in the east Polish provinces can be seen as a typical national Polish-centred project meant solely for ethnic Poles.

There was an alternative to the Polish eugenics movement in the Second Polish Republic represented by the activities of Jewish intellectuals (not only Zionists), who attempted to improve the demographic qualities of the Jewish population.⁶⁴ Within eugenic discourse, numerous practical measures for the improvement of Jewish medical and social institutions and the wellbeing of mothers and infants were undertaken. Many Jewish activists collaborated with *Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności Żydowskiej (TOZ)* [The Society for Safeguarding the Health of the Jewish Population].⁶⁵

Lectures on eugenics and eugenics-related topics were initiated by Polish eugenicists, upon agreement of local authorities. For example,

⁶² See Magdalena Gawin, 'Polish Psychiatrists and Eugenic Sterilization During the Interwar Period', *International Journal of Mental Health*, xxxvi, 1 (2007), 67–78; Musielak, *Sterylizacja ludzi ze względów eugenicznych*.

⁶³ See: Władysław Wicher, 'Eugenika w świetle zasad chrześcijańskich', *Ruch Katolicki*, 11 (1935), 521–31.

⁶⁴ Kamila Uzarczyk, "'Moses als Eugeniker'? The Reception of Eugenic Ideas in Jewish Medical Circles in Interwar Poland', in Turda and Weindling, 'Eugenics, Race and Nation', 286.

⁶⁵ Ignacy Einhorn, *Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności Żydowskiej w Polsce w latach 1921–1950* (Toruń, 2008).

in November 1933, in Brześć nad Bugiem (Brest) a former military medical doctor Gracjan Roguski delivered a lecture on eugenics entitled 'Demographic policy and improving race in Poland' in a district court building.⁶⁶ Roguski did not belong to the ranks of well-known Polish eugenicists. It is known that he practiced as a surgeon and gynaecologist in Brzeżany and Warsaw.⁶⁷ In 1936, the PTE planned to establish an office in Brześć.⁶⁸ Parallel eugenic ideas within the Jewish community were spreading. The majority of Polish supporters of eugenics rejected the principles of German 'racial hygiene', which formed the basis of Nazi policy for exterminating mentally ill people, Jews, Roma, and Sinti.

After September 1939, the Soviet administration established on the occupied Polish territories was not really concerned with the eugenic ideas held in Polish medical circles. Its main task was to reveal disloyal people and replace them with Soviet specialists approved by the local Communist party organs to work on the so-called 'liberated territories'.⁶⁹ However, some information on the local Soviet press approved the fact that some medical doctors were not only familiar with Polish eugenic ideas but also propagated them.⁷⁰

VII IN THE SHADOW OF RASSENHYGIENE

During the Second World War, Belarus, like other regions occupied by the Nazis, experienced a catastrophe: the Jewish population was persecuted and many communities were destroyed; local Roma, disabled and mentally ill people, and other 'enemies' were killed. Vicious fighting against partisans (Soviet partisans and the Polish *Armia Krajowa*) claimed enormous numbers of civilian victims in

⁶⁶ Evgeniï Rozenblat (ed.), *Brest v 1919–1939 gg.: dokumenty i materialy* (Brest, 2009), 200.

⁶⁷ *Rocznik Lekarski*, ii (1936), 85; *Rocznik Lekarski*, iii (1938), 743.

⁶⁸ *W trosce o przyszłość: Polskie T-wo Eugeniczne w Warszawie: jednodniówka* (Warszawa, 1936), 7.

⁶⁹ Andrei Zamoiski, 'Weißrussische Psychiater vor dem Krieg und unter der deutschen Okkupation', in Friedman and Hudemann (eds.), *Diskriminiert – vernichtet – vergessen*, 143.

⁷⁰ Sh. Markus, 'Tak lyachyli w Panskay Pol'shchy', *Kalhasnitsa i rabotnitsa Belarusi*, 22 (1939), 14.

Belarus. Nazi crimes such as the sterilization of Jewish women and the extermination of the disabled and patients of psychiatric hospitals in Minsk and Mogilev should be considered in the context of the Nazis' 'racial hygiene' policies and their implementation of the anti-human practices enshrined in the so-called *Nürnberger Gesetze* [the Nuremberg Laws].⁷¹ Marriages between Jews and non-Jews were prohibited in the occupied territories. At the same time, the Nazis forced non-Jewish spouses to divorce their Jewish partners. In some known cases, Jewish women were allowed to remain with their non-Jewish husbands outside the established ghettos after sterilization. It is likely that at that moment sterilization was seen by victims as a chance to escape Nazi persecution. However, even such a brutal method as sterilization did not guarantee safety, and some victims were killed later.⁷²

The Germans treated the population of the occupied territories of East Central Europe according to their concepts of "racial hygiene". In Belarus, a small group of *Volksdeutsche* [ethnic Germans] enjoyed a privileged position. However, members of the *Einsatzgruppe B* expressed their concern that young Soviet German citizens did not appear to be 'pure-blooded' Germans, as the majority of them being born in ethnically mixed families. Additionally, they had been strongly affected by the policy of Russification during the Soviet rule.⁷³ After 1942, the Nazis promoted the activity of a German organization called *Deutsche Jugend Weißrutheniens* [German Youth of Belarus] along the lines of the *Hitlerjugend*.⁷⁴ Membership of this organization was obligatory for young *Volksdeutsche*. The German authorities' favourable attitude toward this organization inspired Belarusian nationalists to establish a similar body for Belarusians. The German civil administration in Minsk approved the foundation of the nationalist youth organization known as *Sajuz Belaruskay Moladzi – Weißruthenische*

⁷¹ More detailed see: Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*; Friedman and Hudemann (eds.), *Diskriminiert – vernichtet – vergessen*.

⁷² 'Vospominania Rakhil Rappoport', in Inna Gerasimova (ed.), *Vyzhit' – podvig: vospominaniya i dokumenty o Minskom getto* (Minsk, 2008), 128–9.

⁷³ Natsyyanal'ny arkhiv Respubliki Belarus' [National Archives of Republic Belarus, hereinafter: NARB], f. 1440, op. 3, d. 953, l. 160, 'Zusätzliche Nachricht der Einsatzgruppe B über Volksdeutsche (1 June 1942)'.

⁷⁴ Bernhard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrussland 1941–1944* (Düsseldorf, 1998), 222.

Jugendwerk (SBM) [the Union of Belarusian Youth] in summer 1943.⁷⁵ In the final stages of the Nazi occupation, the leadership of this union designed its own variant of eugenics. The ideas of SBM leadership were published in the organ *Zhyvye Belarus'* [Long Live Belarus!].

Eugenic ideas were mainly propagated by the SBM leader Mikhas' Han'ko. Born in 1918, an Orthodox Belarusian Han'ko studied medicine in Vilnius.⁷⁶ Under the Soviet occupation, he worked as a teacher. After the German invasion in June 1941, he was recruited to the Red Army, and in summer 1941 was taken prisoner. In a POW camp, Han'ko declared his willingness to cooperate with the occupiers. He graduated from a propaganda school in Germany and later became a propagandist in *Generalbezirk Weißruthenien* [the General Region Belarus]. It is unknown whether Han'ko became familiar with eugenic ideas through his medical studies in Vilnius or if he familiarized himself with 'racial hygiene' during his German training. Undeniably, the ideas of 'racial hygiene' influenced him greatly; along with a radical anti-Semitism, they played a remarkable role in his further activity. Han'ko claimed that, before the German invasion, the so-called "Jüdischer Bolschewismus" [Jewish Bolshevism] had brought 'physical degeneration and destruction' to the Belarusian people. The Bolsheviks, he believed, had been eager to create a "special sort of people"; consequently, Belarusians would dissolve into the "international mass of the Soviet people", losing their "racial purity and the natural characteristics of their healthy national soul".⁷⁷ In the second half of 1943, the situation on the Eastern Front dramatically deteriorated for the *Wehrmacht*, and the Nazis sought to mobilize the population of the occupied territories for a final struggle against 'Jewish Bolshevism'. Han'ko publicly discussed the previously unimaginable idea of 'racial kinship of two Aryan nations – Belarusians and Germans'. The chief of the SBM firmly convinced the audience of his journal that Germans and Belarusians would find their place

⁷⁵ Bundesarchiv, sign. BA R 6/186, fol. 7, 'Weißruthenisches Jugendwerk (JWJ): Satzungen, Organisation und Zusatzbestimmungen (1943)'; Lyavon Yurevich, *Vyrvanyya bachyny. Da historyi Sayuzu Byelaruskae Moladzi* (Minsk, 2001), 19; Yury Turonak, *Lyudzi SBM* (Vilnius, 2006), 70.

⁷⁶ Maryya Han'ko, *Kab s'vyedchylы pra Belarus': Zhyts'syo y dzyeynas'ts' Mikoly Han'ka* (Minsk, 2005), 8.

⁷⁷ Volat [Mikhas' Han'ko], 'My i Bal'shavizm', *Zhyvye Belarus! Weißruthenische Jugendführer-Zeitschrift*, 6 (1943), 6–8.

in the "New Europe of Adolf Hitler" and would fight jointly against the so-called "Judeo-Bolshevik hordes".⁷⁸

Han'ko's deputy in the SBM, the psychiatrist Nadzeya Abramava was responsible for working with girls within the organization. A former Soviet psychiatrist in Minsk, Abramava expressed her ideas on problems of femininity, marriage, and family on the pages of the organization's paper. For example, she criticized the Soviet regime, where a woman had become a "neutered creature", losing her femininity due to the socioeconomic transformations of the interwar USSR.⁷⁹ The task of the SMB was to bring back 'femininity' to Belarusian women, who were expected to "break with Bolshevik morality" and develop their "healthy and Aryan Belarusian nature". A Belarusian woman had to return back to her family, spend more time with her children, and do housework. Abramava named the virtues of diligence, obedience, humility, patriotism, and loyalty to be obligatory for a Belarusian woman. All these virtues would help "restore a natural type of Belarusian woman". Abramava expressed eugenic views on marriage and family. Before getting married, a Belarusian girl was supposed to lead a modest life. It was expected that both spouses were patriots.⁸⁰ Abramava emphasized the need for healthier and physically stronger children. She stressed that the SBM members themselves had to take care of their health as "it belongs to the Belarusian people".⁸¹ Other authors contributing to the periodical discussed a healthy lifestyle. For example, they pointed out the danger of alcoholism or the necessity of physical training for a young generation of Belarusians.⁸²

Naturally, the views of the ideologists of the SBM were formed under the strong influence of National Socialism during the German occupation. Han'ko's position as a fervent supporter of the Nazi ideology seemed to stand out sharply against the background of other Belarusian collaborators. This is probably why he was appointed to the post of SBM leader by the *Generalkommissar for Weißruthenien*, Wilhelm

⁷⁸ Mikhas' Han'ko, 'Meta i zhadan'ni Sayuzu Byelaruskae Moladzi', *ibidem*, 1 (1943), 3–4; *idem*, 'Chamu tol'ki hety shlyach?', *ibidem*, 1 (7) (1944), 3–4.

⁷⁹ Nadzeya Abramava, 'Byelaruskaya yunachka w vadbudove Bats'kavshchyny', *ibidem*, 1 (1943), 4–5.

⁸⁰ *Eadem*, 'Za motsnuyu byelaruskyyu syam'yu', *ibidem*, 6–8.

⁸¹ *Eadem*, 'Tvayo zdorovye nalezhysts' narodu', *ibidem*, 6 (1943), 8.

⁸² L. Charnyavski, 'Fizichnaye Uzgadvannye', *ibidem*, 1 (7) (1944), 11–12.

Kube (1887–1943).⁸³ It is likely that Abramava, as a conformist, adapted to the new political realities of the German occupation. As people with a medical background, they probably had some basic understanding of eugenic ideas, but in reality they were out of touch with the works of the famous German eugenicists. Abramava studied at a Soviet medical faculty during the period of massive attacks on theories of eugenics. Mikhas' Han'ko, who had not finished his medical education, borrowed his ideas from Nazi propagandist literature. In line with their political goals, they urged young Belarusians to contribute to the establishment of a 'New Europe' and the 'rebirth' of Belarus. The SBM ideologists appealed to the national feelings of Belarusians, especially members of the Union. The authors asserted the uniqueness of the Belarusian national character and family. Eugenics projects were actively discussed in the articles of members of the SBM, but did not obtain concrete shape. It is difficult to estimate how far these eugenic ideas reached Belarusian youth. Despite active efforts at recruitment, many young people managed to avoid joining the SBM. Moreover, its activities were obstructed by underground resistance groups and Soviet partisans. Pro-Soviet agents infiltrated the organization with the aim of sabotaging all its campaigns. In addition, the partisans terrorized the activists' parents.⁸⁴ But, above all, the SBM organization was short-lived. In July 1944, during the Soviet offensive, its leadership left Belarus with the retreating German troops. After May 1945, there is no information about Mikhas' Han'ko's activity. It is likely that he, like his brother Mikola Han'ko and many other collaborators, managed to escape to Western Europe, Canada or the USA.⁸⁵ After May 1945, as a Soviet citizen, Abramava had to go into hiding, even taking refuge within a cloister for a certain period. She later collaborated with the Institute for the Study of the USSR in Munich.⁸⁶ In the post-war years, Abramava did not play an active role in the political life of the Belarusian emigration. Nevertheless, she was attacked by Soviet propaganda like other emigres.⁸⁷ She died in February 1979.

⁸³ Turonak, *Lyudzi SBM*, 33.

⁸⁴ NARB, f. 385, op. 2, d. 37, l. 88, 'Letter of N. Abramova to the Department of Youth of the General Commissariat for Weißruthenien, May 5, 1944'.

⁸⁵ Han'ko, *Kab s'vyedchyli pra Belarus'*, 11.

⁸⁶ Turonak, *Lyudzi SBM*, 63.

⁸⁷ A. Budzeyka, 'Na hety list adkazu ne bylo', *Holas Radzimy*, 77 (1961), 3.

After the liberation of Belarus, the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, actively searched for members of the union to punish them severely for collaboration.⁸⁸ The SBM's printed materials, alongside other Belarusian publications printed by the Germans and collaborators, were pulped or confined to the special *fonds* of Soviet archives and libraries. For a long period, they were inaccessible not only to a broader audience, but also to researchers. In this way, the SBM's 'racial' project in Belarus failed.

After the Second World War, eugenics was regarded in the Soviet Union as a "pseudoscience to improve the human race, widespread in the capitalist countries".⁸⁹ It was closely associated with Nazi crimes and, for propaganda purposes, Western eugenic theories were denounced as 'unscientific'.⁹⁰ In Soviet science, an objective discussion of the history of eugenic ideas and movements was not possible until the end of the 1980s. In Poland, there was an unsuccessful attempt to revive the Eugenic Society after the war. In 1947, the Polish Eugenic Society was re-established by its former head, Leon Wernic. However, the Polish state did not support such activities anymore. In the common view, they were closely associated with the eugenic crimes of the German occupiers.⁹¹

VIII CONCLUSIONS

There was no *ex facte* independent Belarusian eugenics project in the interwar period. The supporters of eugenics in Belarus belonged to the Russian-Soviet or Polish eugenics movements. Both Soviet and Polish eugenic discourses were not isolated from international (German, American, etc.) ones. Russian and Polish eugenicists were engaged in existing research networks. The transfer of ideas was based on personal contacts and the circulation of scientific publications. In the Soviet case, it was limited but not cut off in the 1930s. For

⁸⁸ Andrei Zamoiski, 'Sud'ba Kopyl'skogo podpol'ya po vospominaniyam rukovoditelya molodezhnoĭ podpol'noĭ grupy Ivana Zinevicha', in Inna Sorkina (ed.), *Kopyl': gistoryja gorada i regiona* (Minsk, 2012), 314–15.

⁸⁹ 'Evgenika', in Boris Vvedenskii et al. (eds.), *Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya*, xv (Moskva, 1952), 372.

⁹⁰ Vasilii Legchaev, *Evgenika: Nadezhdy i trevogi* (Smolensk, 1977), 2.

⁹¹ Gawin, *Rasa i nowoczesność*, 309.

different reasons, debates on eugenics barely reached Belarus. This republic did not attract experts such as Kol'tsov or Filipchenko, who could encourage colleagues to join the ranks of the eugenics movement. In the 1930s, Kol'tsov was invited to Minsk as a world-renowned biologist, but not as the founder of Soviet eugenics. The favourable period for the development of the Soviet eugenics coincided with the period when Soviet Belarus had to rebuild its healthcare system and establish a system of higher education. From the beginning of their activity, the newly established higher educational institutions in this republic developed according to Soviet norms and were strictly controlled by the Communist Party. Consequently, they were not open to ambiguous Western theories, which later were labelled as 'bourgeois' and 'fascist'. The dissemination of eugenic ideas among the population required the population to have some level of literacy. First, in Belarus there was a pressing need for propaganda promoting basic sanitary standards among the population. Supporters of this 'modern doctrine' in the Soviet Union focused on the problems of heredity and a healthy marriage, and they rejected the extreme side of 'negative' eugenics. An interest in eugenic theories was shared mainly by medical doctors, albeit only as a potential avenue for scholarly activities (a 'new science') during the revolutionary changes at the beginning of the 1920s. Eugenic theories did not become the subject of a broad discussion in the republic. At the end of the day, as with everything related to scholarly or public life in the USSR, debates on eugenics in Soviet Belarus were subject to the policy dictated in Moscow.

This could have changed as a consequence of the 1939 enlargement of Soviet Belarus. The eugenics movement in the eastern Polish provinces, however, was a Polish-oriented project. The Polish eastern borderlands (with the exception of the university centres such as Vilnius and L'viv) have not been at the centre of the Polish debates on eugenics. Consequently, in the territories of the Second Polish Republic, eugenic ideas did not receive as much support among the Belarusian and Ukrainian populations as they did in central Poland. The reasons were likely related to a lack of initiative from the side of local population as well as a lack of native activists, including medical doctors. A so-called 'brain drain' affected these territories, as the scientists and academics who could have contributed to debates and a eugenics movement migrated to find better conditions in larger

cities outside Belarus. This process was also typical for the Soviet state, where the centres Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev attracted scholars from other peripheral regions, including Soviet Belarus.

The interest in eugenic ideas in Belarus appeared in periods of political transformation (during the collapse of the Russian Empire and the Russian revolutions, the making of the Soviet regime, and, later, under the Nazi occupation of the Belarusian lands). Eugenics in the Belarusian territories managed to win a tiny number of adherents. Ideas on how to improve human heredity, prevent the degradation of the population, preserve a 'healthy family', 'femininity', etc. circulated within medical or political groups.

Under the Nazi occupation, a group of Belarusian collaborators attempted to carry out their own eugenics project closely related to the ideas of 'racial hygiene'. Using nationalist and eugenic rhetoric, they sought to attract a group young people, mainly activists of the nationalist organization SBM. These young people were expected to disseminate such ideas to their families and to the masses. However, the liberation of Belarus by the Soviets ended this project.

During the German occupation of Belarus, the Nazis employed measures of 'negative' eugenics (including sterilization of Jewish women and euthanasia of mentally ill people). 'Eugenics' was identified with the horrors of the occupation, and this facilitated the task of post-war Soviet propaganda in discrediting all eugenics-related theories.

proofreading Christopher Gilley

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