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The Linguistic Policy of the German Occupation Authorities in Belarus during the First and Second World Wars

Polityka językowa niemieckich władz okupacyjnych na Białorusi podczas pierwszej i drugiej wojny światowej

Моўная палітыка нямецкіх акупацыйных улад у Беларусі ў часы Першай і Другой сусветнай вайны

Abstract

The linguistic policy implemented by the occupying powers in Belarusian territories during the World War I and World War II has never before been studied in a comparative perspective. In the present article, the author examines the territories of the Ober-Ost occupation district (1915–1918) and the occupied territories of the Belarus (1941–1944). The article poses the following research questions: Was there a policy of Germanization of the Belarusian population in the occupied territories during the two world wars? What role was assigned to the languages of national minorities in these periods? What was the position of the occupation authorities regarding the competition between the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets? How did the occupation authorities address the issue of language in education? What policies were pursued toward the Polish and Russian languages – the languages of the former metropolises? The research is based primarily on archival documents, both published and previously unpublished, discovered by the author in various archives. The analysis revealed that the most consistent feature of German occupation policy in both wars was the support of the Belarusian language (albeit grounded in different ideological rationales), the rejection of the Germanization of the local population, the promotion of minority languages, the use of the national language in education, as well as depolonization and derussification. The most evident difference was that, unlike the occupation authorities of the First World War, the General Commissariat of Belarus initially prohibited and later restricted the teaching of the German language for racial reasons. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the needs of the army and the economy frequently adjusted the linguistic policy of the German authorities.

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Keywords: occupation, language policy, World War I, World War II, Ober-Ost, General Commissariat of Belarus (Weißruthenien)

Abstrakt

Językowa polityka okupacyjna na ziemiach białoruskich podczas I i II wojny światowej nigdy wcześniej nie była badana w aspekcie porównawczym. W prezentowanym artykule autor rozważa terytoria okręgu okupacyjnego Ober-Ost (1915–1918) i okupowane terytoria Białorusi (1941–1944). W artykule postawiono następujące pytania: Czy istniała polityka germanizacji ludności białoruskiej na okupowanych terytoriach podczas dwóch wojen światowych? Jaką rolę w tych okresach przypisywano językom mniejszości narodowych? Jakie było stanowisko władz okupacyjnych wobec konkurencji cyrylicy i alfabetu łacińskiego? Jak władze okupacyjne rozwiązywały kwestię języka szkolnictwa? Jaką politykę prowadzono wobec języka polskiego i rosyjskiego – języków byłych metropolii? Badania przeprowadzono głównie na podstawie dokumentów archiwalnych (publikowanych i wcześniej niepublikowanych, odnalezionych przez autora w różnych archiwach). Rezultatem analizy było stwierdzenie, że najbardziej zbieżnym elementem niemieckiej polityki okupacyjnej w obu wojnach było wspieranie języka białoruskiego (z różnymi ideologicznymi podstawami), odmowa germanizacji miejscowej ludności, wspieranie języków mniejszości narodowych, używanie języka narodowego w edukacji, a także depolonizacja i derusyfikacja ludności. Najbardziej oczywistą różnicą było to, że w przeciwieństwie do władz okupacyjnych z czasów I wojny światowej, Generalny Komisariat Białorusi najpierw zakazał, a następnie ograniczył naukę języka niemieckiego ze względów rasowych. Należy jednak zauważyć, że potrzeby armii i gospodarki często wymagały od władz niemieckich korekty polityki językowej.

Słowa kluczowe: okupacja, polityka językowa, I wojna światowa, II wojna światowa, Generalny Komisariat Białorusi

Анатацыя

Моўная акупацыйная палітыка на беларускіх тэрыторыях падчас Першай і Другой сусветных войнаў ніколі раней не даследавалася ў параўнальным аспекце. Аўтар у прадстаўленым артыкуле разглядае тэрыторыі акупацыйнага раёна Обер-Ост (1915–1918) і акупаваных тэрыторый Беларусі (1941–1944). У працы ставяцца наступныя пытанні: Ці праводзілася германізацыя беларускага насельніцтва на акупаваных тэрыторыях падчас дзвюх сусветных войнаў? Якая роля ў гэтыя перыяды адводзілася мовам нацыянальных меншасцяў? Якая была пазіцыя акупацыйных уладаў да канкурэнцыі кірылічнага і лацінскага алфавітаў? Якая была палітыка ў дачыненні да польскай і рускай – моў былых метраполій? Даследаванне праводзілася, галоўным чынам, на аснове архіўных дакументаў (апублікаваных і раней не апублікаваных, знойдзеных аўтарам у розных архівах). Вынікам праведзенага аналізу стала канстатацыя таго, што найбольш падобным элементам нямецкай акупацыйнай палітыкі ў абедзвюх войнах была падтрымка беларускай мовы (пры рознай ідэалагічнай падаплёцы гэтага), адмова ад германізацыі мясцовага насельніцтва, падтрымка моў нацыянальных меншасцяў, выкарыстанне нацыянальнай мовы ў адукацыі, а таксама дэпаланізацыя і дэрусіфікацыя.

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Самым відавочным несупадзеннем стала тое, што ў адрозненне ад акупацыйных уладаў часоў Першай сусветнай вайны, нацыянал-сацыялісты ў Генеральным камісарыяце Беларусі з расавых меркаванняў спачатку забаранілі, а потым абмежавалі вывучэнне нямецкай мовы. Варта, аднак, адзначыць, што патрэбы войска і эканомікі нярэдка карэктавалі моўную палітыку, якая праводзілася нямецкімі ўладамі.

Ключавыя словы: акупацыя, моўная палітыка, Першая сусветная вайна, Другая сусветная вайна, Генеральны камісарыят Беларусі

In this article I will try to present in general terms the language policy towards the Belarusian ethnos of the German occupation authorities. Two regions and two time periods are chosen for the analysis: firstly, the so-called Ober Ost region during the First World War and the zone of responsibility of the civil administration in occupied Belarus during the Second World War. The study of the Ober Ost region allows us to show how in the conditions of cohabitation of different ethnic groups, some of which had implicit signs of national identity (for example, Belarusians and Lithuanians), the German occupation authorities carried out the work on the differentiation of ethnic groups and developed the language policy in the region on this basis. Using Belarus during World War II as an example, I can trace how the occupation language policy was formed in the national republic of the Soviet empire: first of all, in the field of Belarusian, German, and minority languages. In addition, by comparing the German occupation of the First and Second World Wars, one can see the dynamics of ideological approaches to language policy and the national identity of the people of the occupied territories.

The article pays special attention to the language policy in the sphere of education, religion, press and office work with regard to the Belarusian language, the language of the main national minorities, German, as well as the choice of Latin or Cyrillic script for the Belarusian language.[1]

1. World War I

There is no doubt that World War I plays a special part in the formation of the national, cultural and linguistic identity of the Belarusians. The creation by the German occupation authorities of the so-called Land Ober Ost (hereinafter referred to as Ober Ost) on the territory of Courland, Lithuania, Southern Latvia, as well as Central and Western Belarus played the key role in this process (Ober Ost was an administrative territorial unit under the command of Erich Ludendorff and the general

[1] Similarly, the author has analysed language policy during World War II in all occupied Slavic countries (see Zinkevič, 2021).

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supervision of Paul von Hindenburg). Ober Ost, with different borders, existed from 1914 to the beginning of 1919 and was a multinational protected state under military command with administrative divisions created on non-national grounds. In 1915 it included 3 districts – Courland, Lithuania and Bialystok-Hrodna. The main ethnic groups of Ober Ost were the Lithuanians, the Poles, the Latvians and the Belarusians.

The following key approaches characterized the national language policy of the German authorities in Ober Ost: first, de-Russification; second, de-Polonization; third, a new approach to the question of national identity of the population. The principles below underlay the cultural and linguistic policy pursued by the German authorities[2]:

• Lithuanian, Polish and Belarusian were the three original languages in the territory;

• in school education, teaching was conducted in the mother tongue, especially religious studies, which were in native languages (in Hebrew for the Jews);

• equal treatment for all nationalities and their languages was proclaimed in the directive of Paul von Hindenburg on *Basic Provisions for the Renewal of School Education* dated 22.12.1915);[3]

• Russian was banned in elementary non-Russian schools and Russian teaching materials were restricted there.[4] Russian could only be studied in middle and high schools as an optional subject. In the transitional period and as an exception, Russian could be a compulsory foreign language in higher schools (only with the permission of the head of the administration);

• support of national culture, printed media[5] and education (first of all, Belarusian[6] and Lithuanian) – teaching in national schools was conducted in native languages;

• compulsory learning of German at schools to an extent which allowed "each child to have a good command of spoken and written German after graduation".[7]

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2 Based on Hans Zemke's work (Zemke, 1936) and the documents cited by him 1914–1919.

3 The directive is cited in (Zemke, 1936, pp. 105–110).

4 Russian was the language of teaching at schools for the Russian national minorities.

5 Interestingly, 75 Belarusian books were published throughout the 19th century, while the number of books, not to mention newspapers and magazines, published in the Belarusian language from 1901 to 1916 was 245. Most of them were published during the German occupation (Aleksandrovìč, 1971, pp. 163–164).

6 At the beginning of the 20th century, there were no schools with Belarusian as a language of teaching in Russia (Kryžanoŭskì, 2008).

7 From the Directive of Paul von Hindenburg on *Basic Provisions for the Renewal of School Education* dated 22.12.1915 (Zemke, 1936, p. 107). The Guidelines for the Application of these Provisions, published by Hindenburg on 16.01.1916, determined the number of hours for language classes (Sprachunterricht) per week – from 9 to 16. Probably, the number included classes both in native and foreign languages. This document did not specify the volume of German language classes for any type of school: "The number of hours for the German language is determined

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German could be used as a language of teaching for non-German schools, but teachers were expected to learn German as soon as possible to communicate with school authorities and keep documentation.

The two documents already referred to (the directives of Paul von Hindenburg on *Basic Provisions for the Renewal of School Education* dated 22.12.1915 and *Guidelines for the Application of Basic Provisions for the Renewal of School Education* dated 16.01.1916) were published and were accessible to a wider public in the occupied territories. At the same time, there was another document clarifying certain statements of Basic Provisions, classified as top-secret and attached to the Guidelines dated 16.01.1916. It stated that:

• the new educational system aims to strengthen the link between liberation from Russian domination and the new opportunities in national education;

• Germanization prohibited on the occupied territories. It is only advisable to implement the German model of education, which should bring benefits for Germany in future;

• the rights of national minorities (in particular, of the Lithuanians and the Belarusians) should be protected, while the new education system is designed to awaken a sense of national identity;

• there should be absolute equality of all religious confessions and collaboration with local churches on education matters;

• the fact that Lithuanians and Belarusians also speak Polish should be taken into consideration when determining the mother tongue. In this case, recording Polish as a native language infringes on the rights of the Lithuanians and the Belarusians.

This last statement was probably the most important for Belarusian and Lithuanian nation-building. The fact that the occupation authorities understood the difference between the *native language* and *nationality* existing under conditions of Polish dominance on many territories of Ober Ost led to the following approach: distributing children to national schools, the German authorities took into consideration both the language used by parents and children in the public sphere and all the possible factors helping define the true (primordial) nationality of the family. The language spoken in the family was not always a key factor in attributing an individual to this or that nationality. For example, the language spoken by the oldest member of the family (which was justifiably believed to have preserved the true national identity of the family) could be a more significant factor. But the understanding of the ambiguous correlation between native language and nationality did not come immediately – according to Erich Ludendorff's memories, when the occupation began, the German authorities "could not find Belarusians at all", as there were a lot

on the basis of paragraph 10 of the provision, graf 2" (Zemke, 1936, p. 107), as to acquire the German language for oral and written fluency after graduation.

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of polonized population (Zemke, 1936, p. 53).[8] Polish was often used as a family language, especially in towns, in obviously Belarusian and Lithuanian families. This made it difficult to determine the native language. Furthermore native-language identification in Ober Ost was complicated by the existing multilingual and mixed-language areas.[9]

By the beginning of 1916, the German authorities had developed methods for determining the native language, which distinguished between the concepts of *nationality* and *language of non-family communication*. To ensure an equal approach in the definition of the school language, Hindenburg gave the following definition in the decree on *Guidelines for the Application of Basic Provisions for the Renewal of School Education* dated 16.01.1916: "any language spoken by parents with their registered children is considered their native language" (cited by Zemke, 1936, p. 56). Local occupation authorities could tighten language identification. For example, understanding that ethnic minorities often use Polish in family circles, the head of the administration of Suwalki County determined language identification in areas with uncertain ethnic composition in the following way:

> The concept of native language is often unconscious. Deciding on the language of teaching, no one questions, for example, whether parents speak with their children in Polish and whether the children understand it... So, to determine the language of teaching, it is important to take into consideration the language of the eldest members in most families where children will attend a new school (Zemke, 1936, pp. 56–57).

Despite the fact that Ober Ost occupied a small part of Belarusian territory, the national-language policy of the German command became an important prerequisite for recognizing implicit ("hidden") national minorities by separating the concepts of *people* and *language*.

The other territory of Belarus, which was not included in Ober Ost but was also under occupation, experienced revolutionary changes in the system and hierarchical arrangement of national relations. Furthermore, administrative and political ties with the Russian Empire there were broken. On Belarusian ethnic territories within the German occupation zone, language policy defining Belarusian as the main language also took into consideration the interests of the largest national minorities. According to the Order of Commander-General of III Army Corps of the German army issued in March 1918, Minsk Council was to print all orders and notifications in German, Russian, Belarusian, Polish and Yiddish (NHAB, f. 24, op. 1, d. 3678, l. 53).

In the first third of the 20th century, Belarusian had two competing writing systems – Cyrillic and Latin. The German Occupation authorities recognized the Latin

[8] Translations from German and other languages in this article are by the author of the article.

[9] This refers to the mixture of Lithuanian, Polish and Belarusian in some areas.

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writing system for Belarusian and used the script to publish literature and official documents.

The tolerant national policy (including support for the Belarusian language) pursued by the occupation authorities was one of the factors contributing to the development of the Belarusian national movement with its idea of political autonomy from the Russian Empire: an independent Belarusian state – the Belarusian People's Republic – was proclaimed in March 1918.

Based on the documents on the occupation policy in the Ober Ost district, I can draw some conclusions about the language policy:

The German occupation of the territories united into the Ober Ost administrative district influenced the cultural and linguistic self-identification of the Belarusian population. The German authorities pursued a targeted policy of de-Russification and de-Polonization, promoting the development of national identity, especially among Lithuanians and Belarusians. By officially recognising Belarusian as the native language for a significant part of the population of these territories and supporting its use in education and print media, including in Latin script, the occupation regime promoted the formation of a separate national identity. The separation of language and ethnicity in defining national identity reflected a nuanced approach to complex multilingual realities. Despite its limited territorial scope, language policy in the Ober Ost played a role in the process of formation of the Belarusian nation and served as one of the factors that made possible the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918.

2. World War II

Belarus, together with the other western territories of the USSR, endured a relatively long occupation period: different areas were under the authority of the armed forces of Germany and their civil administration for 2–3 years. In total, around 8 million people lived under the occupation at different periods of time.

2.1. The major legal documents on language policy during occupation in the General Belarusian District (Generalbezirk Weissruthenien)[10]

Belarus, subordinate to the Reichskommissariat Ostland[11], fell under the first decree of the Ostland civil administration dated 18.08.1941 on the *Assumption of Authority by Reichskommissar of Ostland*, where language policy was defined in general

[10] The author explores original archival documents on language policy in all Slavic countries occupied during World War II in more detail in his book (Zinkevič, 2021).

[11] Besides Belarus, this Reich Commissariat also included Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

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terms along with the main governance policies. Paragraph five of the decree stated that "The official language (office language, Amtsprache) in the Reichskommissariat of Ostland is German. The local language (Landessprache) is permitted in each General District (Generalbezirk)" (Meyer, 1943, p. 1; Kleist, 1950, p. 175; Bräutigam, 1954, p. 15). The decree issued in all general districts of Ostland in August-September 1942 allowed the publication of laws in both the local and German languages. For Belarus, the decree determined that "The orders of the Commissioner-General in Minsk ... are published in the *Amtsblatt des Generalkommissars*" in German and Belarusian. To avoid misreading of different versions of the text, the German version was to be considered the major one (Meyer, 1943, pp. 72–73).

Another fundamental document defining the language policy in Belarus was *Language Regulation in the General Commissariat of Belarus* issued at the end of October 1942.[12] The Decree dated October (20) 1942[13], which survived in a Berlin archive, was intended for the Head of Ostland and the Commissioner-General of Belarus. This delayed language regulation of the Belarusian lands compared to the rest of Ostland is explained in the document by the fact that "in order to comply with the special principles of the management policy, it was necessary to wait until the local population becomes involved in cooperation" (BA R 6-173, pp. 55–56). Apparently, the linguistic situation in Belarus, unlike the Baltic states, was not quite clear to the occupation authorities, so it took time to study it.

The Decree made major provisions for the special status of the Belarusian language in the General District of Belarus, which corresponded to the policy of "separation of the Belarusians from the other nations" (BA R, 6-173, pp. 55–56)[14]. Besides the Belarusian language, "the Polish, Russian, and Tatar languages were among the so-called minority languages" (BA R, 6-173, pp. 55–56); in the areas with a significant non-Belarusian segment of the population, the Decree laid down the use of the minority language along with the German and Belarusian languages[15]. The Decree required the authorities to counteract the linguistic assimilation of minorities in every possible way and defined linguistic regulation in Belarus as "a politically fair balance (between the interests of the titular language and minority languages) suitable

[12] This is one year after the first version of the language decree for Ostland (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) on the *Use of Languages in Ostland* (BA R, 6-173, pp. 11–26).

[13] The number is illegible.

[14] In a broader context – separation and support of national identity of as many ethnic groups as possible.

[15] The decree gives comments to this paragraph warning against a formal approach to decide on minority languages in certain districts (for example, based only on the percentage of the population of a particular nationality), and encouraging to consider all the pros and cons. It should be noted that in the documents of the occupation administration that I have studied, the Jewish minority and the Roma are not among the national minorities covered by the legal acts on language policy.

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for the German authorities" (BA R, 6-173, pp. 55–56). Belarusian was the language of teaching at schools, except in the case of schools for national minorities where the minority language was used. The question of teaching German at school was left open, so that the local authorities could decide on the matter taking 'expedience' into account. This provision diverged from the German-language teaching policy in the rest of the Ostland (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), where the German language was prioritized not only among foreign languages, but also among all the other subjects. German was supposed to become the language of interethnic communication, thus replacing Russian and Polish used in this function. Here is what Alfred Rosenberg wrote as head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (1941–1945):

> The idea to spread the Belarusian language at schools with other languages, primarily Russian, should be given up at the moment. Above all, I would like to see that German is studied not only in Belarusian, but also Polish, Russian and Tatar (i.e. minority) schools, so that, in communication between people of different nations, as it stands, Belarusian would not be replaced by Polish or, much less, by the Russian language (BA R, 6-173, pp. 55–56).

The next version of the decree on *Language Regulation in the General Commissariat of Belarus* appeared almost a year later, on September 28, 1943. By chance or not, it was sent to Minsk a few days after the death of Wilhelm Kube, the Belarusian Gauleiter, and in the first days of the rule of his successor, Curt von Gottberg[16]. This edition largely repeats the previous version, but contains significant changes regarding the teaching of German and its use as the language of teaching in the General District. In addition, paragraphs containing the definition of 'minority' were corrected with the following explanation:

> For political reasons, it seems inappropriate right now, just before the new division of the territories, to use 'minority' or 'minority language' terms to describe the population speaking foreign languages. Therefore, it is by no means in our interests through the introduction of the concept of 'minority' to recognize their status of a foreign-language-speaking population and thereby give it certain rights, which will be applicable to all the nationalities living in other ethnic groups (BA R, 6-173, p. 74).

The reaction of Curt von Gottberg, the acting Commissioner-General of Belarus, to this version of the language decree was absolutely negative – the draft decree was sent back to the office in Berlin on December 15, 1943, with a request to take into

[16] Most likely, the activity of Rosenberg's Ministry in Belarusian direction is not accidental as the letter mentions that "the government bodies of the General District were submitted directly to the Ministry for the Occupied Territories". It also refers to the possible departure of Weißruthenien from the administrative structure of Ostland. On April 1, 1944, Hitler recognized Gottberg's independence from Lohse (Reichskommissar for Ostland) with further direct submission to Berlin (Êržabkova, 2008, p. 57).

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account Curt von Gottberg's opinion that "the Belarusian language would not be understood by the general public, unlike the Russian language" (BA R, 6-173, p. 76). In March 1944, Curt von Gottberg in a letter to the Minister for the Occupied Territories advised "to follow the old language policy" to keep the peace on the territory of the general district entrusted to him and asks to postpone the language regulation issue until better times (BA R, 6-173, p. 79). For Curt von Gottberg, the Belarusians were "made up by Berlin armchair politicians, ... people speak Russian in Minsk" (Kleist, 1950, p. 175).

2.2. Replacement of the Belarusian writing system by the Latin script

The occupation authorities considered introducing the Latin script for the Belarusian language in autumn of 1942, which was even earlier than in Ukraine. Oscar Kienzlen[17] in a letter to the Reichskommissar of Ostland dated June 25, 1942, reported that starting from the first academic year (1942) schools in the General District of Belarus would start studying the Roman script, while new textbooks would be printed only in the Latin script. In the letter, he also asked the Reichskommissariat Ostland to make "proposals on ... the Roman script for the Belarusian language" (NARB, f. 652, op. 1, d. 1, l. 100).

Before the beginning of the academic year 1942, Dr. Erich Boeme[18] in a memo[19] dated 28.08.1942 expressed his position on the introduction of the Latin script in Belarus, demonstrating a good knowledge of the history of the Belarusian writing system: "The Cyrillic alphabet is now more suitable for the transmission of the Belarusian language than Latin" (NARB, f. 652, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 94–95). He brought forward various historical, intra- and extra-linguistic justifications, including the argument that the preservation of "the Cyrillic alphabet does not in any way erase the difference between the Belarusian and Russian languages" (NARB, f. 652, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 94–95). This document traced a direct connection between the occupation language policy during the First and the Second World Wars regarding the issue of the Latin alphabet for the Belarusian language. Thus, Erich Boehme considered the introduction of the Latin script for the Belarusian language used in 1916–1918 during the German occupation possible, but later and developed by Belarusian philologists.

The Belarusian alphabet in Latin script had been developed by September 1942. This can be seen from the letter of the Reichskommissar of Ostland to the Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories dated 25.02.1943 (NARB, f. 652, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 9–16). Two letters from the General Commissariat in Minsk were enclosed. In the first letter dated 12.02.1943, the Department I "Culture" reported that:

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17 A responsible officer in the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories.

18 There is no exact information about him. He was probably one of Ministry experts on the occupied eastern territories.

19 Resulting from the meeting held on January 27, 1942.

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> The issue of the Belarusian writing system ... has been finally resolved. The alphabet developed for the Belarusian language based on the Latin script is enclosed. The new Roman alphabet will be officially introduced into Belarusian schools through new ABC-books (NARB, f. 652, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 9–16).

In addition, the letter referred to Belarusian editions prepared to be published (German-Belarusian and Belarusian-German dictionaries, dictionaries for professionals, conversation books, etc.). The second letter dated 28.09.1941 gave information about, among other things, the possible participation of Professor Max Vasmer from Berlin in the development of the Latin script for the Belarusian language together with professors Jan Stankevich and Tsarsky(?), which could help find ways to render soft consonants and iotated vowels in the new Belarusian writing[20].

From this report it is absolutely clear that the Latin script for the Belarusian language had not been prepared by the end of September 1942. This is why it is stated that "school textbooks can be printed only when the Latin alphabet for the Belarusian language is approved" (NARB, f. 652, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 9–16).

In the end, the Latin script for the Belarusian language was never fully introduced not only because of different opinions about its expediency, but also because of Red Army's advance in 1943–1944.

2.3. Competition of the Belarusian, Russian and Polish languages in education and information policy

The first decree on preliminary procedures for school education in the General Commissariat of Belarus dated September 24, 1941, already indicated the desire of the new authorities to pursue a particular hierarchical cultural and linguistic policy in Belarus. The major competitors of the Belarusian language and culture were Polish and Russian. The entire territory of the Commissariat was declared to be the *Lebensraum* of the Belarusians, so "concern for Belarusian culture, morality and education" (NARB, f. 370, op. 1, d. 28, l. 7) was the primary task of schools in the General Commissariat of Belarus. And furthermore:

> Other nationalities like the Poles and Russians inhabiting this living space should integrate themselves into the Belarusian culture. ... The language of teaching is Belarusian. At least six hours of the Belarusian language should be taught in the areas inhabited by the Polish minorities. ... In the preliminary curriculum from October 1, 1941, schools focus on reading and writing in the native language (in Belarusian and native languages in the Polish regions)... (NARB, f. 370, op. 1, d. 28, l. 7).

[20] The letter and the two mentioned enclosures are addressed to Dr. Leibbrandt, the Head of the Main Division I "Politics", for review and with a request to send Sivitsa, Stankevich and Karsky to Berlin. Documents 2 and 5 were compiled by Dr. Seeger, Ostland Reich Commissioner.

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The civil administration evidently took into account not only the historical background of the Polish influence on the Belarusians, but also the possibility of restoring the Polish influence in Western Belarus which had been lost after the partition of Poland between the USSR and the Third Reich in September 1939. This is confirmed in the paragraph on preventing the Polonization of the "Belarusian living space" through school:

> Any abuse of school to spread the ideology of the Polish minority will be seriously punished as the Belarusian Lebensraum is primarily intended for the Belarusian population (NARB, f. 370, op. 1, d. 28, l. 7, p. 8).

The issue of language competition in Belarus was raised subsequently, especially by nationally oriented Belarusian forces. For example, the memorandum to the Reichskommissar of Ostland on *The situation in Belarus compared to other parts of Ostland*[21] (NARB, f. 370, op. 1, d. 5, ll. 9–10), in particular, states:

> The use of the Muscovite language is a legacy of Bolshevik times. We demand that the use of the Muscovite language be banned in the state and public spheres. ... We demand that the same be done with the Polish language (NARB, f. 370, op. 1, d. 5, ll. 9–10).

Unlike school education, the language policy of the General Commissariat of Belarus regarding propaganda and public awareness was quite flexible. In September 1941, one of the first decrees on sharing information with the residents proposed to use the Belarusian, Russian and Polish languages as an anti-Soviet sabotage propaganda:

> In each district, the population should be informed about ... the front line using appropriately prepared wall maps. ... These maps should be in Belarusian, and, if necessary, also in Russian, as well as in Polish in the western regions. ... Loudspeakers are to be installed in all the regions in suitable places for these purposes. Programs in the Belarusian language of the Baranavichy radio station are to be transmitted through these loudspeakers, and where necessary – also in the Russian and Polish languages. ... (NARB, f. 370, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 1–2).

According to Ivan Gribkov, despite the policy of de-Russification, most newspapers in Belarus (as compared to the other occupied territories) were published in Russian, which can be demonstrated both as a percentage of all non-Soviet publications in the Russian language and in absolute numbers (43 editions out of 300,

[21] The document was partially preserved, the author and date are not specified on the remaining part of the document. Most likely, this memo dates back not earlier than 1942 as there is a reference to the "already developed network of schools in Belarus", which could not exist in the first six months of the occupation.

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which made 14.3% of the entire non-Soviet press in the Russian language)[22] (Gribkov, 2016, p. 256). As a comparison, in Ukraine, the number of editions in the Russian language was 30 (10%); in Transnistria (the territories occupied by Romania) – 18 (6%); in the Baltic states – 15 (5%). In Germany and the European countries which were under its occupation, 12.3% of newspapers and magazines were published in Russian, i.e. 37 editions (Gribkov, 2016, p. 256). The figures on Belarus, Ukraine, Transnistria and the Baltic states prove that the Russian language in all these territories actually remained the most important competitor of the local languages, as well as the languages of new metropoles, forcing the occupation authorities to give an advantage to the Russian-speaking population in the sphere of information provision and propaganda (but to a far lesser extent in education, management and culture). Intense field publishing in the Russian language in various parts of the Wehrmacht in Belarus is noteworthy – 42 editions were in Russian (14%) (Gribkov, 2016, p. 256). The next part of the article is dedicated to the phenomenon of Wehrmacht's propaganda of the Russian language.

2.4. The language conflict between the Wehrmacht propaganda department and the civil occupation authorities of Belarus

It has to be said that supporters and opponents of Belarusization competed with each other in wartime not only in the public life of Belarus, but also in the structures of the occupation administration. On May 30, 1942, Wilhelm Kube sent a report to Alfred Rosenberg, the Minister for the Eastern Occupied Territories (NARB, f. 370, op. 6, d. 42, l. 1–9), pointing to the language practice of the Wehrmacht Propaganda Department working only in Russian, thus neither supporting the Belarusian language nor allowing propaganda in it. Wehrmacht Propaganda Department published all the newspapers in Russian only (for example, "Колокол" in Minsk, "Новый путь" in Viciebsk, Smolensk, Babrujsk). The new publications were planned only in the Russian language (for example, Barysaŭ newspaper), while newspapers in the Belarusian language were not allowed and sending them to the same places where newspapers in Russian were sent was forbidden by the Wehrmacht Propaganda Department. This does not only concern the printed media. Indeed, the attempt to show a propaganda film (offered by the Commissioner-General (!))[23] in the Belarusian language in Barysaŭ failed as the Wehrmacht Propaganda Department did not allow it, instead recommending a film in Russian.

Wilhelm Kube remarked that even the Bolshevists had not demonstrated such a level of Russification, while the (semi) official Russification policy, intentionally

[22] Despite the fact that Ivan Gribkov gives roughly the same figures for the North Caucasus, it is important to bear in mind that that the period of occupation there was quite short and many editions were, as they say, "one-day newspapers", existing from several weeks to several months.

[23] At the same time, according to the report, the film was sent to Wilhelm Kube by Dr. Kurtz.

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or not, supported the principle of "one and indivisible Russia". According to Wilhelm Kube, the apparent influence of Russian nationalism on the German administration in Belarus could not be solely explained by the remaining influence of individual local Russophiles. Wilhelm Kube stateed that there were people with a pro-Russian disposition or just Russians in the German administration of Belarus. For example, Wehrmacht Russian translators sent from Germany were advancing the great Russian national idea. The German authorities required for Polish circles to Belarus and outside it to follow similar policy.

Wilhelm Kube drew attention to the denationalization of the Belarusians beyond the administrative boundaries of civil and military zones in occupied Belarus. He remarked that the Lithuanians closed Belarusian schools and reopened Lithuanian schools on the territory annexed to Lithuania; the Ukrainian authorities pursued the same policy on the annexed territories of Belarusian Polesye. According to Wilhelm Kube, the Poles carried out national work in Prussia, expanding the use of the Polish language at the expense of Belarusian, and thus driving out the Belarusians from key administrative positions. The Commissioner-General believed that the political and administrative integration of Belarusian ethnic lands could help in this situation (NARB, f. 370, op. 6, d. 42, ll. 1–9).

The competition between the Belarusian and Russian languages can also be traced in radio broadcasts – Anton Adamovich, the editor of "Беларуская газета", in his letter to the occupation administration stated that the Belarusian radio show called "The Belarusians sing and dance" broadcasts ... Russian songs in Russian. Anton Adamovich asked to exclude the Russian language from Belarusian radio shows (NARB, f. 370, op. 1, d. 1261, ll. 2–3). The problem of language competition between Belarusian and Polish was especially acute in Western Belarus, which was part of the Polish state in the 20s and 30s.

Even if Polish and Russian were used as the main administrative language, the language of communication between the authorities and with citizens in the first period of the German occupation (Brakel, 2009, p. 128), the situation changed after September 1941 when the civil administration ordered only the German and Belarusian languages to be used for these purposes. The Polish language was disappearing as the language of the printed media, public signage, the Catholic Church and education. The use of the Polish language in public places (for example, applying to official authorities) was to be punished by a fine of 50 marks (Brakel, 2009, p. 130). The situation was complicated by the fact that there was no experience of using Belarusian as a written language in Western Belarus unlike in the Soviet part of the republic. The Belarusian language was mainly used for oral communication. Due to poor knowledge of Belarusian or its substitution by a mixture of Russian and Polish speech, the German authorities were forced to organize Belarusian language courses for the local population working in the civil administration (Brakel, 2009, p. 130).

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Besides the resolution of language competition between the Russian, Polish and Belarusian languages, one of the key issues in the national language policy of the occupation authorities was to separate Belarusian and Russian ethnic groups, and at the same time try to bring the Belarusian people away from the influence of Russia's imperial ideology. In language terms, the most noticeable steps in this direction were: first, the afore-mentioned attempt to replace the Cyrillic alphabet with Latin; second, the orientation towards non-Russified spelling and grammar in the Belarusian language (to the so-called taraškievica); third, liberation of the Belarusian language from lexical Russianisms; fourth, the Belarusification of the (Orthodox) church. Presumably, perception of the Latin alphabet in Western Belarus was much easier than in Eastern Belarus due to the close twenty-year contact with the Polish language. But even there, the combination of such factors as poor knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the Belarusian language by many segments of the population, poor written tradition and the new alphabet made many print media return to the Cyrillic alphabet some time later (Brakel, 2009, p. 130).

A noticeable change in the linguistic situation in Belarus took place when Belarusian became the language of the Orthodox Church. On June 30, 1942, the Belarusian Church achieved autocephaly (Brakel, 2009, p. 132). Despite the clear position of the German authorities and the active work of the followers of the Belarusian national movement and national organizations, the language situation was changing very slowly – the Polish and Russian languages still remained important communication tools not only among the Poles and Russians, but also as a kind of lingua franca in communication with official bodies and various national groups of the local population (Brakel, 2009, pp. 134–135).

Based on the sources about language policy in Belarus during World War II, some conclusions about its goals and results can be drawn:

Language regulations were introduced in Belarus only at the end of 1942, which testifies to the uncertainty of the occupants in the sociolinguistic dynamics of the region.

Language policy in Nazi-occupied Belarus during WWII was characterized by a strategic and ideologically driven effort to promote Belarusian while suppressing Russian and Polish influence. However, it faced serious obstacles: Occupation authorities underestimated the deep bilingualism and diglossia in Belarus; Lack of consensus within German authorities; Entrenched use of Russian and Polish; Limited administrative capacity and educational infrastructure; Short occupation period.

A notable success of Belarusization was the Belarusization of the Orthodox Church, especially after the Church's declaration of autocephaly in June 1942. Religious life began to shift to Belarusian, providing cultural reinforcement for the language.

Despite some symbolic steps, the German occupation failed to fundamentally shift the linguistic landscape of Belarus. Russian remained dominant in media

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and communication, while Belarusian, though elevated in status, struggled to gain practical traction beyond select institutions.

The background of language and national policy during World War II in Belarus (and not only there) was differentiation (delimitation) of nations in accordance with the racial essence of the national-socialist ideology.

For better clarity, the language policy of the occupation authorities in Belarus can be presented in the form of a table:

Sphere	Policy / Measures	Implementation / Outcome
Official Languages	German as the official language; Belarusian as a "local" language.	German used in official documents; Belarusian used in limited, symbolic contexts.
Russian Language	Intended to be restricted.	In practice, remained dominant in media, propaganda, and everyday communication.
Polish Language	Banned; fines imposed for public use.	Continued to be used informally, especially in Western Belarus.
Belarusian Language	Supported by civilian administration (notably Wilhelm Kube).	Partial success, mainly in church services and some schools.
German Administration Conflicts	W. Kube promoted Belarusization; Wehrmacht preferred Russian for practicality.	Internal contradictions weakened consistent policy enforcement.
Education	Belarusian promoted as main language; Russian and Polish banned (with exceptions).	Schooling was inconsistent; teacher and material shortages hindered policy.
Latinization	Plans to shift Belarusian from Cyrillic to Latin script in 1943.	Not implemented due to lack of time and public resistance.
Church Affairs	Belarusian used in Orthodox Church; Belarusian Autocephalous Church created (1942).	One of the few lasting results of Belarusization.
Media and Propaganda	Declared intention to use Belarusian.	In reality, Russian remained dominant (newspapers, radio, newsreels).
Public Space (Signage, Notices)	Signs mostly in German and Belarusian; Polish forbidden.	Russian was still widely used in interaction with locals.
Population's Language Use	Goal: strengthen Belarusian, eliminate Russian and Polish influence.	Population largely bilingual (Russian/Polish); Belarusian was mainly oral and unstable.

Comparing the basic principles of the language policy practiced by the occupying German authorities on ethnic territories of Belarus during the First and Second World Wars, the following most significant differences between them can be distinguished – unlike World War I, when the teaching of German to the people living on the occupied territories was encouraged in every possible way, during World War II, the German language was regarded as a privilege of the „Aryan race" and its

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distribution on the territories excluded from Germanization procedures was either prohibited or the number of German language classes was limited to the extent to achieve the applied objectives, that is to ensure communication between the Germans and the East Slavic labour force. Strikingly, the Germanization of East Slavic territories was prohibited during both occupations.

The common provisions of language policies during both the First and Second World Wars include the support of national minority languages, orientation towards the Latin alphabet (at least for the future), the exclusive use of the national language in education, as well as the de-Polonization and de-Russification of the population living on Belarusian ethnic territories.

It should be noted that both during the First World War and during the Second World War (to an even greater extent) the language policy of the occupation authorities had a contradictory character due to internal contradictions in the German leadership and the inertia of the language situation in the territories considered in the article.[24]

	World War I	World War II
Was there a policy of Germanization of the Belarusian population in the occupied territories?	Prohibited, support to the local people with the teaching of German.	Prohibited, teaching of German is seriously limited.
What role was assigned to the languages of national minorities?	Support of national identity, the language is important but is not the only factor of national identity.	Support and differentiation of national groups (excluding the Jewish and Roma minorities).
What was the position of the occupation authorities with regard to the competition of the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets?	Latin script.	Latin in the future, discussion of the competition between Cyrillic and Latin scripts.
How did the occupation authorities solve the question of the language of education?	National language, int. al. for the main minority groups.	National language, int. al. for the main minority groups.
What was the policy with regard to Polish and Russian – the languages of the former metropolises?	De-Russification and de-Polonization.	De-Russification and de-Polonization.

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[24] For more on this, as well as an extensive list of documents and published sources, see the book Zinkevič, 2021, pp. 56–62, 227–276.

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