The "Russian Bear" in Polish Caricature of the Interwar Period (1919–1939)

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The "Russian Bear" [1] as an animal metaphor occupies a special place among the characters of contemporary ethnic caricatures. The use of animal metaphors for designating peoples and states has been a widespread practice for centuries—for instance, Blacks were depicted as gorillas, the Japanese as macaques, Irishmen as chimpanzees (Keen 1986: 62-65; Curtis 1972; Сенявская 1999). However, today such metaphors are taboo; that is a fundamental rule violated only at the cost of scandal (as recently demonstrated when the president of the United States was compared to a chimpanzee; Leonard 2009). We find only one case—namely that of the Russian Bear—in which an animal metaphor is applied so consistently and with such legitimacy to an entire culture in respectable media outlets. One good example is the Western media's portrayal of the Russia-Georgia conflict of 2008 in which the British *Independent* referred to the "bear's paranoia" ("Do not feed the bear's paranoia" 2008). The Russian Bear was indeed a highly featured character of any discourse concerning the "Five-Day War" (Рябов, Лазари 2008), with dozens and dozens of caricatures appearing in the Western (including Polish) media.

In this article, in analyzing the meanings and functions of the image of the Russian Bear in Polish caricature, we focus on the period between the first and second world wars, which was especially rich with examples—partly because the interwar period was the Golden Age of political caricature as a genre and partly because Soviet-Polish relations were extremely strained.[2] Not surprisingly, the problem of relations between the two countries occupied an important place in Polish graphics in the 1920s and 30s, earning the close attention of the day's leading satirical magazines, such as *Mucha*, *Cyrulik Warszawski, Szpilki*, and *Wróble na dachu,*

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[2] Early attempts at the satirical visualization of Russia can be traced back to the eighteenth century in Polish graphics (De Lazari, Riabow 2008).

and caricature artists, including Bogdan Nowakowski, Teodor Lipiński, Kazimierz Grus, and Feliks Topolski.

The article focuses on the following questions: What meaning was attached to "the Russian Bear' in Polish satirical graphics of the interwar period? What functions did this symbol carry out? What modes of 'the Bear" were used to represent various sides of Soviet Russia's image? And lastly how did the image of Russia "the Bear" correlate with other means of representing the country?

But first let's turn to a brief history of the symbol in Western discourse on Russia. Although the bear is often called the unofficial symbol of Russia, the bear as a metaphor for the country is largely a Western "invention." The comparison of Russia with a bear goes back to the seventeenth century (Россомахин, Хрусталев 2007). Later it occupied an important place in representations of the country, appearing in travelers' accounts, political pamphlets, and caricatures. For example, in his *Letters on Russia* (1759), the Italian Francesco Algarotti likened Russia to "an enormous polar bear, standing with his rear paws on the shore of the Arctic Ocean, with his tail lowered into the water, his snout pressing against Turkey and Persia, and his front paws stretched to the West and East" (Algarotti, 1823: 65). Research into the history of the image of a bear *per se* indicates that in this period in the cultures of Western Europe it had strong negative connotations (Иванов, Топоров 1992: 128–130; Shepard, Sanders 1985; Bieder 2005; Brunner 2007).

The Russian Bear called to serve as a "symbolic border guard": the identity of the West is dependent in no small degree upon the exclusion of Russia (Wolff 1994; Neumann 1999; Рябов 2007);[3] and this symbol evidently plays an important role in substantiating propositions regarding both the Otherness of Russia and its inferiority (Hudabiunigg 2000).[4]

As Peter Møller notes, "Russians were constructed as body and nature, whereas Europeans were constructed as mind and civilization. Enlightenment discourse at large clearly

[3] Though the Western discourse on Russia is certainly neither invariable nor homogenous (see: Malia 1999).

[4] A bear carries the same function of marking a symbolic border between "civilization" and "barbarity" in Russia, which has its own East and its own Orientalism. For instance, the coat of arms of Perm province which was approved in 1783 depicts a walking bear carrying the golden Gospel accompanied in the head of the shield by a silver stretched cross: the animal symbolizes the savagery of customs and morals of the native Finnish people of the province, whereas the Gospel and the cross – their enlightening through the Christianity (Пчелов 2005).

drew on such a dichotomy, and this seems to be a locus from which arose the metaphor of the Russian *ursa major*, the metaphor that is still very much present in European discourse in its delatinized form" (Quoted in: Neumann 1999: 80). That image contributed significantly in providing a symbolic border between "civilization" and "barbarity."

In the Western authors' eyes Europeanness was only a semblance of the Russian Bear which was fatally incapable of progress.[5] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz called Russians "the baptized bears" (Quoted in: Кантор 1995: 36). As is well known, the leitmotif of Marquis Astolphe de Custine's book "Russia in 1839" was "the Russians are a nation of imitators." The French author wrote that the Russians had "just enough of the gloss of European civilization to be "spoiled as savages," but not enough to become cultivated men. They were like "trained bears who made you long for the wild ones" (Кюстин 1996: 347).

Apart from barbarity, backwardness, and lack of culture, the bear metaphor contributed to ascribing to Russians various other traits, which the Modernity discourse used to mark Otherness, including laziness, sluggishness, inability to progress, unpredictability.[6] Lastly, the bear was intended to accentuate aggressiveness as a characteristic of the country. For instance, Winston Churchill talked of "the murderous paws of the Russian Bear" (Уткин 2002: 161), and Karl Marx wrote that "the Russian Bear is certainly capable of anything, so long as he knows the other animals he has to deal with to be capable of nothing" (Маркс 1957: 172-173).

Obviously this image, by arousing fear, helps to substantiate certain politics in regard to Russia/the USSR. Hardly surprising then that the bear metaphor was used in propaganda in support of military conflicts with Russia—from the Napoleonic Wars through to the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War, and both world wars to the Cold War (Рябов, де Лазари 2011; Россомахин, Хрусталев 2008). After the end of the Cold War, there was talk of "the death of

[5] Friedrich II reproached Voltaire for the decision "to write a history of Siberian wolves and bears", that is a history of Russia, and his father Friedrich Wilhelm I considered Muscovites as bears which one shouldn't unchain because it would be impossible to chain them up again (Лиштенан 1999: 83, 80).

[6] We share Jason Dittmer's observation that the connotations of the bear metaphor (barbarity, mindlessness, irrationalism, and the necessity to be controlled by the West) are typical for the discourse of Orientalism (Dittmer 2003: 170).

the Russian Bear."[7] In recent years the metaphor has again become popular in representations of the Russians; thus, first place in the World Press Cartoon Competition for 2007 was awarded to a caricature showing Vladimir Putin as a bear sharpening his claws (Putinbear, Hansson R., 2007, Riber.net (www.riber.net/caricatures/putinbear.jpg). Predictably enough, the election of a new Russian president gave new life to the metaphor; thus, a result of the 2008 elections was headed: "Beware Dmitry Medvedev the Bear" (Service 2008).

So it was not surprising that the image of the bear was present in Polish caricature at the time of the Soviet-Polish war of 1920. This conflict had shaped the features of portraying the eastern neighbor including the bear metaphor of Russia for the whole interwar period. The Bolsheviks went to war under a class banner; the Poles, under a national one. This fact determined two trends in representing Soviet Russia in satirical graphics. The first one consisted of exploitation of the traditional image of the "Russian enemy," which had been formed in previous years; the caricaturists emphasized the Russia's bestial cruelty, Eastern barbarity, despotism, cultural alienness, and imperialistic aspirations. The second trend was the use of the image of a new enemy, based more on anti-Semitism than Russophobia.[8] A "cosmopolitan, nationless Bolshevik" was represented as the main enemy of the Polish people (Jewrejskaja Rossija, Mucha, 1919, № 40; Dżingis-chan współczesny, B. Nowakowski, Ibid., 1920, № 30; Wyprawa na Europę, B. Nowakowski, Ibid., 1919, № 6; Pożar bolszewicki. B. Nowakowski, Ibid., 1919, № 18).

Bogdan Nowakowski's caricature "The Bear Hunting" serves as a remarkable example of the first tendency. It was published while the Red Army was attacking Warsaw in August 1920. The image of a bear with the star was intended to convince the Poles that Mikhail Tukhachevky's warriors were bringing to the Polish people, not liberation from the exploiters—the world revolution—but a new, recurrent enslavement by Russian/Soviet imperialism. In other words, the Russian Bear made national borders more visible and important than class ones

[7] True, not everyone was quite so "optimistic". For instance, the authors of the futurological "Russia 2010" included as one possible scenario for the country's development one that they called the Russian Bear, which included the establishment of a dictatorship by representatives of defense and secretary structures (siloviki), Russian nationalism, anti-Western sentiments, and hatred for America (Yergin, Gustafson 1993: 152-155, 207).

[8] Józef Pilsudski noted this fact in a book which was published several years after the war (Piłsudski 1924; De Lazari 2004).

(Figure 130).

One can see here that the main function of usage of the bear image in Polish interwar caricature was to embody the contradictions between two cultures and represent them as everlasting and unchangeable. Another function is the ability of the bear metaphor to instantly awaken associations of Russia's image in Polish culture, that of a bloody, barbarous, backward, and aggressive country. Thus, on the one hand, the bear represented mortal danger for Poles, while on the other, it generated the confidence of success, the feeling that defeat of the bear would be inevitable. By that it carried out one more function of the image of the enemy: after all, the bear is just an animal; meanwhile, in a fight between an animal and a human being the latter usually wins. In the final analysis, this metaphor lead indirectly to the dehumanization of the Russians, to the obliteration of the human face—so the beast had to be annihilated without mercy.[9]

Some weeks later a caricature "Pole and Bolshevik" was released; it helps us to expose the second trend (figure 132). The caricature contains two drawings; the first one pictures a Polish warrior pursuing a bear; the second shows that he has chased down the enemy, however, his hands hold only the bearskin. And under this skin, one can see a ram of grotesquely exaggerated Semitic appearance, symbolizing a commissar. Therefore, the bear was also exploited to mobilize anti-Semitic prejudices; this *debearization* (italics is absent in pdf.version; my proposal is to restore it) of Soviet Russia was a significant trait of representations of the Bolshevik regime, at least in the 1920s.

The war's results generated both feelings of military superiority and fear of another invasion by the Red Army. A "fallen Goliath," a "Colossus on clay legs"—by such images the satirical graphics of the day were intended to demonstrate the Eastern giant's weakness.[10] A caricature of 1924 pictured imperialistic states dividing up the bearskin (figure 129).

At the same time a "Russian barbarian" was depicted as prepared to attack Poland again at any point (figure 134), and the bear was indispensable as a symbol of imperialism.

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[9] On the functions of the image of the enemy see Frank 1967: 182–185; Keen 1986; Rieber, Kelly 1991; Harle V. 2000.

[10] A cartoon of 1921 portrays both „Tsar" and „Bolshevik" with clay legs (Car i bolszewik, Mucha, 1921, № 1; see also, e.g.: Trójprzymierze, S. Rydygier, Ibid., 1935, № 15; Na Ukrainie, Ibid., 1920, № 36).

For instance, a caricature devoted to the Battle of Lake Khasan portrayed the Soviet Union as a bear bent upon revenge for its defeat in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1906. (, page 321).

"Honey is sweet, but the bee stings" (1924)—that is the motif of a caricature that depicts a bear with designs on Bessarabia.

This play upon the theme of the beast's liking for honey served many caricature artists (and not only Polish ones) as a favorite device (Рябов, де Лазари 2011), illustrating Bolshevik Russia's insatiable greed. The bear is about to regale himself with Chinese honey on a drawing from 1929 and with French honey on a drawing dated 1931 (Sowiecki niedźwiedź na łańcuchu niemieckim, Mucha, 1931, № 39).

One should note that the bear metaphor served to, not only promote the idea of the Bolshevik threat, but also to point out Poland's cultural superiority, occupying a significant place among other features all pointing to Soviet Russia's inferiority.

"Ivan" is kicked out of Europe's door—a caricature devoted to the Munich Agreement of 1938 expresses the idea that Russia was alien to European civilization (figure 135; see also Bolszewja otworzyła okno do Europy, A. Romanowicz, Mucha, 1922, № 33; Cywilizacja w Bolszewji, Ibid., 1925, № 25). Polish caricaturists depicted a typical Russian as a slovenly drunk with an untidy beard.[11] It appears that the bear was given similar traits on some pictures (e.g., Pakt przyjaźni francusko-sowieckiej, Mucha, 1936, № 14).

The traditional theme of barbarity was supplemented with a new topic—that of Bolshevism: caricaturists attributed contempt for culture to the Bolsheviks (<Bolszewik>, *Mucha,* 1930, № 11). Atheism as part of Communist ideology was another peculiarity of the new barbarity; in this context, a drawing of a "Bolshevik barbarian," which is going to destroy the symbols of Christianity, is extremely significant (figure 136). Apparently the image of the nation as the savior of the Christian values of Europe from the "Godless Communists" became an important part of the new identity of Poland.

[11] E.g.: Rozsadnik nowej kultury, W. Lipiński, Ibid., 1924, № 24; Po Genui, B. Nowakowski, Ibid., 1922, № 21; W Bolszewji, Ibid., 1926, № 52; WCIK zaangażował do Akademii Naukowej w Leningradzie nowe siły ze sfer proletariackich, S. Rydygier, Ibid., 1929, № 52; Protest astronomów bolszewickich, Ibid., 1930, № 17.

Predictably enough, Russians were given an exaggerated Asiatic appearance in caricatures (e.g., Ostrożność nie zawadzi, B. Nowakowski, Ibid., 1920, № 52; Na Krymie, W. Lipiński, Ibid., 1920, № 48; Ex Oriente lux, Ibid., 1919, № 15). Besides that, a stamp of orientalness, non-Europeanness of Russian life was provided by the image of the slavery of the Russian people and lack of political freedom. These traits, as the caricaturists pointed out, were not only preserved under the Bolshevik regime but even strengthened (Odradzająca się Rosja, B. Nowakowski, Ibid., 1919, № 26). For instance, Bogdan Nowakowski chooses as an allegory for the civil war in Russia, a fight between Vladimir Lenin and the White Guard leader Aleksandr Kolchak for the right to whip Russian peasants.

That was a factor that allowed for the appearance of a bear with a different, a "people's," face. The idea of the anti-people and anti-Russian essence of the Bolshevik regime was very important in the ideological fight against the "soft power" of the "fatherland of the world proletariat"; it was explicated through the representations of various sides of Soviet life. Polish caricaturists created drawings that depicted the social inequality in "Bolsheviia" (W Bolszewji, R. Andersen, Ibid., 1930, № 3), and during the 1920s, this theme not infrequently acquired anti-Semitic connotations (e.g., Kryzys aprowizacyjny w Bolszewji, R. Andersen, Ibid., 1929, № 42; W Kremlu, Ibid., 1923, № 24). In this context, the changed mode of Russian Bear is understandable: the bear now playing the role of a victim of the Bolshevik State. (For example, a caricature of 1927 painted Russia as a bear tamed by a commissar; figure 133). This image changed in the 1930s when the German threat, repressions against the Jews, and Stalin's purges in the Soviet Union pushed Polish anti-Semitism into the background, and "the Eastern Enemy" became "more Russian." However, the Bolshevik regime remained anti-popular, and a bear was kept on as a symbol of the Russian people oppressed by the state.

A drawing "News from Russia" showing two bears was intended to convince a Polish audience that the Russian State still maintained its despotic essence. One bear says to another: "In fact nothing has changed in Russia; only the Tsarist iron handcuffs have been replaced by Bolshevik wooden stocks" (figure 128).

It's noteworthy that this motif was often played up by the caricaturists; for instance, a cartoon of 1930 pictures a peasant bending under the weight of the Bolshevik star: "Neither the Tatar yoke nor the Tsarist regime were as heavy as this star" (R. Andersen, Ciężko, Ibid., 1930, № 19).

Apparently this conflict between the state and the people gave Polish authors the hope that the Russian Bear would finally throw off the "Commissars' yoke." A drawing "Let's hope to God!" (1929) depicts a dialogue between a Bolshevik and people: "Well, bear, turn into a Communist!"—"I got bored with that long ago!" (figure 131).

Finally, let's consider the 1938 cartoon "It cuts both ways." The bear chained to a pillar bearing the nameplate "Communism" looks sad and pitiful. However, the Soviet leader is puzzled: maybe he has tamed the Russian Bear too much? What if Europe stops fearing him? (figure 127).

Thereby two types of Russian Bear, the State's and the people's, both featured in Polish satirical graphic art. The first symbolized imperialism and the Russian/Soviet State. The second was intended rather to generate compassion; the bear was depicted as a victim of the State, regardless of the latter's ideology, whether "White" or "Red." Serving as a symbol of "genuine Russianness," he embodied the Russian people. One should take into account that in the people's guise the bear also played the role of the symbolic border guard, marking Russian civilization as alien and inferior. The picture of an enslaved nation separated Russia from Western countries still more: nobody should expect mercy from a state that treated its own citizens in such a way.

In conclusion, let's mention that the image of the bear kept being actively exploited to represent the Soviet Union in satirical graphic art after 1939. As for the post-Communist period, Polish caricaturists use the metaphor in picturing all important events concerning relations between the two countries. During the last two decades, the role played by metaphors in international politics has raised the special interest of researchers (Cohn 1993; Chilton 1996; Medhurst et al. 1997; Marks 2004). Analyzing representations of the Gulf War, George Lakoff has observed that active use is made of mechanisms of metaphorical thinking in discussions of foreign policy: backed up by bombs, metaphors can kill (Lakoff 2003). Metaphor is a basic mechanism used by people to simplify the world and bring it closer to their own life experience. It provides a readymade solution, enabling people to fail to notice contradictions; in this fashion, it functions as one means of mythologizing politics. Obviously, the visual metaphors embodied in images, including caricatures, possess a special suggestive force. The bear served as an influential sign of Otherness in Polish satirical graphics; thereby, the bear's metaphor—a harmless thing, it would appear merely a means of aestheticizing a boring narration of political events—impacts on contemporary Polish-Russian relations.

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