

# THE TRAUMA OF WAR IN ANDRZEJ STASIUK'S TRAVELOGUES

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**Abstract** – In Andrzej Stasiuk narrative and travel writing, war emerges as a dominant and recurring motif. It takes on the form of a true myth, in which fear and desire, rejection and fascination, past and present are inextricably intertwined. This study aims to analyse the Polish author's travel writing in the light of this issue and demonstrate how this war mythology emerges in his representation of the cultural landscape and his reflection on the boundaries of European space. The thesis argues that Stasiuk's myth of war is fueled by a paradoxical identity trauma, rooted not only in the writer's family history but also in the very way Poles perceive themselves and their past. The study will thus illustrate how the theme of war, initially a youthful and masculine myth, becomes instrumental in reflecting on Polish identity.

**Keywords:** Andrzej Stasiuk; Trauma; Postmemory; War; Travel Writing.

*This is what it means to be a central European: To live  
between an East that never existed and a West that  
existed too much*

(A. Stasiuk, "Dziennik okrętowy" 2001, p. 136)

## 1. *Trauma Studies* and Poland

In the last twenty-five years, the concept of trauma, originally derived from psychiatry, has become a tool of investigation in the humanities in its broadest sense. This transfer – one that is not merely conceptual but also entails a comprehensive theoretical and methodological framework – originated in the American context (particularly within the Yale School, influenced by Paul de Man and Derrida's post-structuralist theories) and is subsequently transmitted to other cultural contexts. Two essays by Cathy Caruth are of fundamental importance in the rise of Trauma Studies: *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Caruth 1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Caruth 1996). Despite her now somewhat outdated theoretical approach, these works, which intertwine psychoanalytic theory, neuroscience and literary criticism, were instrumental in generating a dynamic theoretical debate around the notion of trauma, a debate that remains vibrant today.

This debate also reached Poland in the second half of the 1990s and gave an important impetus to literary criticism, leading to studies focusing on the literary or artistic production of people who – directly or otherwise – experienced the Polish traumas of the 20th century (Tabaszewska 2022). In other words, the great interest aroused by the concept of trauma and the problems of its experience and elaboration produced a natural convergence between Trauma Studies and memory writing, which was already widely practiced in Poland throughout the twentieth century. Scholars have begun to analyse the effects and legacy of collective traumas that previously – at the time of socialist Poland –

could not be freely faced due to censorship. It deals in particular with the experience of repatriation operations in the context of the redefinition of the Polish borders established at Yalta, the mass executions in Katyń, the massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943-1944, the pogroms carried out by Poles during the occupation, the years of Stalinism and the years of martial law in Poland. In other words, through the research by historians, journalistic investigations and collection of testimonies, a profound and difficult process of social elaboration of these experiences began. Its purpose was to show the historical truth of these events and to integrate them into the collective memory. This situation also met with a response from the institutions. In 1998, the Institute for National Remembrance was established to collect, study and publish archive material of the Polish security services as well as conduct investigations into the crimes committed against the Polish Nation by both the Nazi occupiers and the communist regime.

The Trauma Studies revolution also extended to a field of research that the communist regime did not hinder: Holocaust studies. In this sense, the monograph *Sąsiedzi* [*Neighbours*] (2000) by historian Jan Tomasz Gross played a key role. His reconstruction of a historical episode that was guiltily silenced for decades – a pogrom by Polish hands but of Nazi inspiration in the village of Jedwabne in 1941 – aroused an authentic collective trauma (that of victims discovering that they were also oppressors), fueling one of the fiercest public debates since 1989.<sup>1</sup> A debate where the search for historical truth has been hindered by problems of conscience, or bad conscience, or by the difficulty of accepting a simple and painful truth: in wartime the boundary between good and evil blurs; in other words, these two dimensions of the human soul – which always coexist in an indissoluble bond but which for the sake of our mental and social health we tend to keep separate – in those tragic circumstances take shape in painful, paradoxical, traumatizing combinations.

Staying within the experience of war, the subject of this essay, it is not an exaggeration to say that almost every Pole – including the millennial generation (those born in the early 1980s) – has been directly or indirectly affected by the traumas it left behind. Sławomir Buryła (2020, p. 21) is certainly right when he states that: “It is [war] in the twentieth century the fundamental historical experience, shaping the identity of Poles”. The terrifying memories of the Second World War are passed down from one generation to the next, as a heavy legacy. And like any legacy, they bring with them issues of management, resentments and claims that writers try to give literary form to. Because trauma can have a positive impact on the artistic field, both on an individual and collective level. It can lead to absolute masterpieces (such as *Kolyma Tales* by Varlam Shalamov or *If This Is a Man* by Primo Levi) or even influence the history of literature. This is what Paul Crosthwaite (2009, pp. 15–44) argues in his book *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II*, according to which the First World War contributed to the rise of Modernism in the arts, while the development of Postmodernism can be traced back to the experience of the Second World War.

<sup>1</sup> On this pogrom, see Anna Bikont’s seminal journalistic reconstruction (2004), another book that rekindled the aforementioned debate. On the problem of Polish memory and the removal of the Holocaust see Steinlauf 2001. Among the most important recent publications on Holocaust literature see Tych *et al.* 2011; Buryła *et al.* 2012; Kowalska-Leder *et al.* 2017.

## 2. A representative of the post-trauma generation

Andrzej Stasiuk, born in 1960, is an exponent of the first Polish generation who did not experience the dramatic events of the two world wars firsthand. Of humble origins, his parents moved after the Second World War from the peasant province to the working-class Grochów district of Warsaw. After a restless and rebellious youth during the time of socialist Poland – which left a mark on his early narrative works<sup>2</sup> – Stasiuk founded with his wife (the cultural anthropologist Monika Sznajderman) the publishing house Czarne, specializing in literature from Central and Eastern Europe and, in the last ten years, in reportage and travel literature.

Stasiuk is the prototype of the proletarian writer without academic qualifications, a sort of Polish Martin Eden or Jack Kerouac. Those who have been following Polish literature for the last thirty years are familiar with his brusque and intemperate manners, his on-the-road attire, his literary monologues made up of quotations, brilliant remarks, digressions, short circuits of meaning, all “seasoned” with colorful and hilarious vulgarisms, a vast and confused erudition, brilliant insights expressed not so much conceptually as artistically (with metaphors and similes). In short, Stasiuk should be placed at the head of all outsiders of Polish literature, picking up the legacy of illustrious predecessors such as Marek Hłasko and Edward Stachura, to whom he has often been compared. His premeditated mixing of life with art makes him, on the one hand, yet another decadent model in literature, and on the other, one of the most original faces of the so-called Pokolenie “BruLionu” (BruLion Generation, named after the magazine in which young Polish writers often debuted after 1989).

This generation was marked at an early age by the transition from the old to the new era, and this historical caesura is variously problematized in the works of its exponents. Stasiuk's rebellious youth comes in the waning, even terminal phase of the communist dictatorship. For him, 1989 does not represent the advent of a happy era full of possibilities, but rather years of maladjustment and difficult acclimatization into liberal society. The first phase of Stasiuk's narrative production, which develops roughly in the 1990s, gives voice to a fierce critique of the savage neo-capitalist revolution that occurred after the collapse of the regime and a paradoxical nostalgia for the socialist Poland experienced from below. In the second part of his production – dominated by the models of artistic reportage and travel literature – his writing investigates the cultural landscape of that part of Europe and Asia where the traces that the transition from communism to capitalism has left behind are most visible. In this ‘mature’ phase of his production, the issues of memory, which in his production of the 1990s had a personal and generational significance, rather invest the family and national experience. Thus, in his writing, a paradoxical convergence occurs between trauma and the poetics of nostalgia, which dominates his entire artistic production. At the same time, the writer reflects on Poland's role and position within European civilization, problematizing the concept of limes, particularly in relation to the eastern border.

<sup>2</sup> In the volumes of short stories *Mury Hebrony* [The Walls of Hebron] (1992) and *Przez rzekę* [Across the River] (1996) and in the autobiographical book *Jak zostałem pisarzem (próba autobiografii intelektualnej)* [How I Became a Writer (An Attempt at an Intellectual Autobiography)] (1998).

### 3. The myth of war

The theme of war is one of the least studied motifs in Andrzej Stasiuk's literary production, but it represents one of its most interesting aspects from his debut novel *Biały kruk* [*White Raven*] (1995) to his latest novel *Przewóz* [*Shipping*] (2021), set at the time of Second World War in Galicia. The theme of war emerges as one of the elements of male and generational mythology. In *Biały kruk*, five Varsavian friends decide to venture into the Bieszczady Mountains in the middle of winter to escape the boredom and loneliness of the narcotized contemporary world. They set off to fight, like a partisan unit, but there is one problem: they have no enemy, there is no war to fight. In the end they stir up a war situation by engaging in a battle against the border police and at the same time measuring themselves against the wilderness of the mountains, somewhat like modern-day Rambos. While building their epic feats – which can be seen as a desperate attempt to assert masculine values that are useless in capitalist society – they continuously encounter traces or testimonies of war and the Nazi occupation. In this novel, the Second World War is portrayed precisely as a grand and terrifying adventure that is undergoing a process of artistic idealization. Wiesio says:

That war must have been a wonderful period, or so I think when I listen to the old folks. All it took was a pinch of courage, where no brave men were in charge, and the world was yours. I wouldn't have thought twice—I'd have become a Volksdeutscher right away and I'd have just watched which way the wind was blowing. Maybe I'd have even become German if they'd let me... (Stasiuk 1995, p. 156)

The process of aestheticizing horror – its artistic expression and elaboration – allows the writer to control the traumatic and destabilizing force of the war. What stands out in this quotation is precisely the passage and transmission of the war experience from one generation to the next through storytelling, an aspect that will be revisited several times in this essay.

In this dialectic between myth and trauma, literature and reality, the memory and legacy of the First World War also seek their place. In the travel stories of *Fado* (2007) Stasiuk wanders around the cemeteries of the places where he lives (the Beskid Niski Mountain chain) looking for the graves of soldiers who died during the First World War: “My own loved ones do not lie here where I live. But there are cemeteries everywhere in the area. There are Lemko graveyards – all that remains of the villages resettled in the 1940s. There are Austro-Hungarian military cemeteries, a memento of the First World War and the Battle of Gorlice-Tarnów, one of the bloodiest encounters of that period” (Stasiuk 2009, p. 104). The war has left its indelible marks on the landscape, through which the writer reconstructs the history of the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the event that initiated the dissolution of an ancient multicultural and multiconfessional reality. This lost Atlantis came to a definitive end with the forced displacement of populations during and immediately after the Second World War (in the case of the Lemkos, their uprooting from the Beskid Niski and Bieszczady mountains took place between 1944 and 1946 with their deportation to Ukraine and ended in 1947 with their relocation to northern and western Poland as part of Operation “Wisła”).

Compared to these very traumatic events, the First World War – the first mass trauma of Western society (Branchini 2013) – arouses in Stasiuk a sense of fascination: the writer evokes it with narrative devices as a kind of great epic. This is how he imagines the advance of the Russian army into the region:

I can imagine the Russian infantry in their grey greatcoats plodding through the snow towards

the low passes in Radoczyn or Konieczna. On their backs they carry rolled-up blankets, while on their gun barrels there are bayonets like long skewers, which are only good for stabbing—not, as in the case of Austrian or Prussian bayonets, for cutting bread and opening cans. The buildings in the villages have burned down and there's no shelter. They have to wade through deep snow under fire from the mountain artillery, and from Schwarzlose and Maxim machine guns. The world has three colors: the white of the snow, the muddy brown of the earth torn up by shells, and the red of blood. (Stasiuk 2009, p. 108)

The fascination Stasiuk feels stems not only from the character of that war and the temporal distance that allows it to be considered as in the categories of myth. The writer feels nostalgia for the world – the cosmopolitan, multicultural Habsburg empire – that generated it only to be annihilated by it:

Who knows if the fondness for those times, and the special memory of that war, doesn't arise out of nostalgia for a period in which a person's own individual identity was, quite naturally, a part of a larger universal reality. It's quite possible that the "prison of nations", as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was called back then, will come in time to be seen as a kind of prototype, however imperfect, of a unified Europe. (Stasiuk 2009, p. 109)

Stasiuk's reflection recalls the nostalgic strand of Austria Felix, which had so much space in German literature after the dissolution of the Empire (think only of Joseph Roth, Robert Musil, Arthur Schnitzler, Stefan Zweig), or rather its Polish and Ukrainian variant. It is indeed possible to detect in part of his production the emergence of the myth of the Galicia Felix, elaborated before him by Polish writers such as Andrzej Stojowski or Andrzej Kuśniewicz, and also developed by Ukrainian writers such as Jurij Andruchowycz and Bohdan Ihor Antonyč (Woldan 2019).

Stasiuk is aware that the myth of the First World War in Galicia is fostered by the fact that it was an "old-fashioned" war, incomparable to the mass carnage experienced by troops on the Western Front, where the ill-fated "Short Twentieth Century" (to use the words of E. J. Hobsbawm) had already entered:

In the west, the twentieth century was beginning, whereas here, in Galicia, it was still the nineteenth, as Cossack divisions fought with regiments of hussars and uhlans. [...] Because the Western Front was a glimpse into the future of Europe. In Galicia, war was still waged in the old style, though Švejk could already sense the menace and horror of history to come. (Stasiuk 2009, pp. 110–111)

Another aspect that Stasiuk highlights is the dimension of the "theatricality" of the First World War: "Yes, this war had something of the theater, of a stage production, about it. After all, Švejk observed it like some kind of immense cabaret, a universal vaudeville and a foreshadowing of the theater of the absurd" (Stasiuk 2009, p. 110). Stasiuk looks at that conflict through the prism of literature. His conception is determined by what he read in the picaresque events of Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk* where the First World War in Galicia is seen and depicted as a gigantic, plebeian individual adventure.

#### 4. The war between dream and memory

Again regarding Stasiuk's odeporic literary production, the traumatic and autobiographical background of war myth manifests itself in *Dojczland [Germany]* (2007), a book containing his memories and notes from many trips he made to Germany to promote his work. Stasiuk tells how crossing the western border caused the emergence of a trauma in

him that every Pole of his generation cannot help but feel.<sup>3</sup> The writer reveals that he was only able to control it, or rather overcome it, in time.

I arrived in Leipzig around midnight to watch the post-East German skinheads. I had to grow up to get through it unscathed. I had to distance myself from Soviet and Polish war cinema. I had to give up my childhood. I had to renounce those beautiful spells: “Hände hoch, raus, polnische Schweine”, which we used in the courtyards at the age of seven, learning the basics of German. (Stasiuk 2007, p. 30)

Stasiuk acknowledges the overcoming of childhood trauma – which later became an obsession – fueled by cultural products (cinema) and in general by the education he received during communism: “When I see an elderly German, I just see an old man, not a member of this or that military formation” (Stasiuk 2007, p. 30).

The writer obsessively looks for signs of war in the landscape and ends up recognizing them even where it is impossible for them to be. For example, in the Swiss landscape captured from the perspective of the train: “It resembled the GDR, it resembled Poland, Służewiec Przemysłowy, as if they had bombed it and rebuilt it in a hurry” (Stasiuk 2007, p. 69). The recording studio where he gives an interview “was housed in some ruins. It was as if the Allies had only left yesterday” (Stasiuk 2007, p. 69). But in Western Europe, the trauma is under control and Stasiuk’s interest in this socio-cultural space soon fades. In the West, the genetic memory of the Second World War has been lost: Stasiuk soon realizes that the sleepy, consumerist cities of the West are not interesting for him.

In his odeporic production, which has been the central thread of his writing since the early 2000s, the reflection on war is primarily linked to the cultural space of Central and Eastern Europe, before expanding towards Asia (Russia, Mongolia, China). During one of his journeys eastward, Stasiuk recognizes in Kazakhstan, in a twenty-year-old young man, the same type of legacy that weighed on his generation: “A twenty-year-old boy, who should be entangled in the networks of globalization and pop culture, relates the first sentence he utters to war! He says that so many Poles and Russians perished. And Jews. Unbelievable. As if the shared experience of war and communism were transmitted as genetic memory” (Stasiuk 2015a, p. 81).

The desire to travel to places where the memory of war is still alive, and thus to encounter further testimonies of war, drives him towards the Balkans. In *Dziennik pisany później* [*Diary written later*] (2010), a work in which memories and reflections from his travels in the former Yugoslavia converge, we read:

Bosnia was the last European war I could count on. My childhood was steeped in war. We lived through war, we remembered war, we admired it, we feared it, and we longed for it. When I was already fully grown, when I was beginning to age, the hyper-realistic terror of bombers still haunted my dreams [...]. They were all large, greenish, and vivid, like the models we used to assemble in our youth. Traveling to Bosnia felt like regressing into some prenatal phase. Because it was in our blood, passed down by our parents and grandparents, it circulated in our veins, and all that was missing was the real image, on a one-to-one scale. (Stasiuk 2017, p. 57)

<sup>3</sup> “You can’t travel sober from Poland to Germany. Let’s not kid ourselves. It’s a trauma, after all. It affects asparagus farmers and writers alike. You can’t go to Germany casually, like you would to, say, Monaco, Portugal, or Hungary. Traveling to Germany is psychoanalysis” (Stasiuk 2007, p. 27).

The trauma of the war in Bosnia evokes familial trauma, awakening the genetic memory of war. Reality allows the manifestation of something that had emerged primarily on an unconscious level, in the obsessive dream activity that has accompanied the writer invariably from childhood to adulthood. In this passage, the intrinsic connection between fear and desire – fundamental to understanding the phenomenology of postmemory – becomes evident. Stasiuk cannot and does not want to free himself from the trauma he has inherited. He travels to the Balkans because there he has the feeling of breathing in the air that same restlessness he feels within himself, the unease which he seeks to reconcile through writing. He needs the Balkans because they allow him to externalize his trauma. Stasiuk assumes the role of a witness to the trauma of others, reliving it within himself. He writes about his first impressions of Sarajevo, the symbolic city of the Balkan war: “In the morning, we drove further. I felt fear. Burnt-out houses with vegetation growing inside, old people, and war, war, war, even though peace had prevailed for ten years. But I was afraid” (Stasiuk 2017, p. 49).

In the Balkans, war is a possibility; it is immanent, not merely a fact consigned to history. Stasiuk is aware of the compulsive and irrational nature of his attraction to this region: “I couldn’t help myself. I had to go. At least once a year, I had to. It didn’t make much sense, but travelling elsewhere made even less sense. So it seemed to me [...]. So, at least once a year, I had to go, even though it didn’t make much sense” (Stasiuk 2017, p. 28–29). In this quotation the repetitions are significant; they mark the obsessive recurrence of a thought, a theme, a knot that cannot and must not be untied. It is natural to recall Freud’s theory of the repetition compulsion, formulated in 1920 in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* [Beyond the Pleasure Principle]. The anxiety-inducing and frightening experience of war, lived in childhood through the involuntary violence of storytelling, must be compulsively reenacted in adulthood – in Stasiuk’s case, through his morbid yet conscious attraction to places where war lingers in the air: “In Srebrenica, the war ended fifteen years ago, yet I subconsciously sniffed the air, trying to catch the smell of burning. As if it had been just last year. Or the smell of decomposing bodies” (Stasiuk 2017, pp. 88–89).

The identity value of traumatic historical experience is a further aspect that needs to be emphasized when attempting to define the meaning of war in Andrzej Stasiuk’s writing. In the burden of traumatic memories that every Pole carries with him, in the impossibility of forgetting Poland and its painful and bloody history, Stasiuk locates the roots of his attraction to Bosnia.

My country is used to the thrashing, the historical beatings, the bloodletting. With greed it looks at the massacres, the vigils, the mournings and the funerals. Let them kill us all, for fuck’s sake, at least they will remember us! [...] Let them burn us in the cellars of the city, so that the stench penetrates the walls forever. Let them forget us in the sewers, so that we can rot and rot and they can drink, drink and drink the cadaverous water. Let them forget, but so they can remember. Let them remember all the rotten, eaten by animals, dried up [...]. That is why I go to Srebrenica, to think of all this. To think of my homeland, which weeps for the massacre, but no longer has the courage of the Balkans and has to mourn old corpses. It digs them out of their graves and drags them before the eyes [...]. That is why I travel to the homeland of vampires. I am like a nomad thirsting for loot and that is why I am so attracted to the East. I live among the graveyards. (Stasiuk 2017, pp. 104–105)

It is also worth noting at the end of this quote how some linguistic indicators show that we are dealing with a poetics of desire: *thirsting*, *attracted*. Stasiuk’s words polemically and provocatively recall the conception of the Polish martyrology, codified in culture at the time of Romanticism, and passed from one generation to the next. The historical references are the experiences known, albeit indirectly, to the writer: the Warsaw Uprising

and the partisan struggle during the occupation years of the Second World War. Despite his polemical attitude, Stasiuk is unable to place himself outside this paradigm: it is as if it were encoded in him as a torrid desire rooted in childhood, in blood, in the prenatal phase:

Probably throughout my entire childhood I wanted to take part in some war. I was basically angry that it was over, that I had to learn everything from old aunts and grandmothers, that I had to ask them what the burning houses, the repressions, the shootings, the mass executions, the bombings, the artillery shots and so on looked like. The image I liked best was of one of my aunts playing in the sand with empty cartridge while the bombing was going on and the adults had forgotten to take her to the shelter. I heard this story when I was about eight years old, and since then I have never stopped dreaming about the bombers [...]. That is probably why I went to Bosnia. That's probably why six months earlier, in Novi Sad, I was looking with awe at the remains of a bridge over the Danube bombed by NATO. So it is possible, I repeated inwardly. And the same goes for those gloomy ruins in Belgrade. The aunts and grandmothers were telling the truth. You can bomb something, destroy it, and then see it not on television, but just like that. Moreover, it lies long enough for everyone to see. Like a publicly exposed corpse. (Stasiuk 2017, pp. 57–58)

Stasiuk practices pure self-analysis. He goes to Bosnia to verify the correspondence between truth and tale, between what is real and what is imagined; he goes to remove a doubt, to definitively acquire the certainty that war is not fiction, not Soviet films, and not even family tales. Stasiuk goes to Bosnia to see live the object of childhood's nightmares and fantasies.

I dozed in the warmth and semi-darkness and heard: then the Germans, then the Russians, the partisans... By the light of the only oil lamp I could see their shadows. I could hear their footsteps in the dark beyond the wooden wall. They were creeping along. The words of grandmothers and aunts were taking shape. They took, they set fire to, they went. From west to east, from east to west. Everywhere they left traces. (Stasiuk 2022, p. 115)

As in a shadow theatre, words project their shapes on the screen of the imagination and reality mixes itself with fantasy, the memory of trauma takes on contours, voices, figures. The shadow is the primordial fear, the fear of the other who threatens us. And the other is the German, the Red Army. If – as Freud teaches – the dream is the oneiric fulfilment of an unfulfilled desire, writing is its surrogate: it is lucid, controlled dreaming, it allows us to manage fear, to give form, syntax and narrative to trauma.

## 5. The East: The Identity Paradox

The theme of war recurs insistently in Stasiuk's subsequent book, *Wschód* [East] (2014), where the author – through the accounts of family members crystallized in memory – directly relates the trauma of war and the East, the vast steppes from which, at any moment, a new threat may arise. This is not merely a testimony to the experiences of the previous generation: Stasiuk also gives voice to a perception deeply embedded in cultural consciousness. In Polish literature, starting from the Romantic period, the East is identified with the Kresy, the ancient eastern territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Their literary representation has been ambivalent from the very beginning: on the one hand, these lands are depicted as the idyllic birthplace of origins; on the other, as the gateway to what is irrational and menacing, threatening the Polish homeland (Czaplejewicz 1996, p. 29). It is precisely to the negative pole of this mythology that Stasiuk refers: the depiction of the East as a site of destruction and a cultural space fraught with tensions ready to explode. This motif has persisted in Polish literature from Malczewski's poem *Maria* to the novels of Krasiński, Sienkiewicz, and, later – just to



give an example – the specific catastrophism of Witkacy's works. I am thinking in particular of the novel *Nienasylenie* [*Insatiability*], where the fear of Bolshevik revolution is linked to the annihilation of Western civilization and to the “yellow” danger (cultural or “genetic” memory of the ancient Mongol invasions of Europe).

Some critics have interpreted Stasiuk's fascination with the Asian spaces dominated by Russia as a form of historical revisionism regarding Polish-Russian relations, a desire to overcome postcolonial resentment (Stryjakowska 2012, p. 133). In reality, this is not a revision of Poland's relationship with Russia; rather, Stasiuk simply seeks to understand his feeling of fascination and fear of the vast eastern expanses through cultural categories. In doing so, he continues (inadvertently or not) a line of reflection pursued by other Kresy's writers before him. If, in the national literary tradition, the East was the source of everything that threatened or negated Polish civilization and identity, Stasiuk provocatively assigns it an identity-defining value. In other words, the writer asserts that, in order to express and reveal itself, Polish identity also requires that which has historically sought to annihilate it. It needs trauma: “For what would we be without Siberia, Hitleria<sup>4</sup>, and Communism? Nothing. Just one of many banal nations with a history that yawns with boredom. To whom would we raise our temples? [...] Siberia, Hitleria, and Communism – like three putrid idols in the gardens of Eden. Our greatness, our exceptionality, our immortality. [...] They led us out of nothingness” (Stasiuk 2017, pp. 115–116). The threat of the erasure of Polish civilization is, paradoxically, both a collective historical trauma and a foundational element of national identity and self-perception. It is evident that Stasiuk clashes polemically with the historical narrative of Poland's political right, which feeds on these traumas to reinforce the Romantic myth of Polish exceptionalism and historical mission of the Nation. But the point is that Stasiuk cannot conceive of the set of problems that he brought together under the denominator of East, without referring to those categories and those romantic myths that he wants to desecrate. The themes of travel and memory, the attraction to cemeteries and ruins as testimonies of fallen utopias, the perception of the East as both the space of origins and a constant threat, the role as the mouthpiece and conscience of the Nation: all these elements make Stasiuk, despite himself, a further epigone of Romanticism, perhaps one of the most significant in postmodern Polish literature.

However, the problem of the East, of its borders, is not only a Polish concern – it is a European one. The concentration camps and crematoria are the traumatic legacy of all Europeans. Those who planned destruction, Stasiuk argues, chose to do so in the East:

I realized that the East is also a grave. The farther one moves in that direction, the less we matter, the easier it is to dispose of us, to turn us into dust or ice. It is a matter of space and its vast, boundless excess [...]. Because no one will demand accountability for the East. Because the East has always been a dumping ground for bodies. And there, they could be burned until fat settled on the windowpanes of houses five kilometers away. Yet no one dared to ask for accountability – only women, silently, washed the windows. That is how it was in Belzec from the autumn of 1942 to the spring of 1943. (Stasiuk 2022, pp. 88–89)

The East is therefore the common denominator, the spatial dimension used by the two totalitarian regimes that most threatened Poland to carry out their plans of extermination. The concentration camps and the Gulags were made possible by the East's capacity to erase traces – and, consequently, the memory – of human beings. The Nazis chose the east as the area in which to carry out the Final Solution: “Forest, wasteland, and railway. The

<sup>4</sup> Hitleria is a neologism coined by Stasiuk to indicate Nazism.

East. The edge of civilization – that is how they imagined it when they built the camp. A dark fissure in which everything would disappear. The edge of the world. Just push the remnants over” (Stasiuk 2017, p. 112).

The East is, therefore, a paradoxical chronotope: on the one hand, it is the mythical cradle of Polish origins; on the other, it is a dehumanizing space, an inhuman land, a laboratory where, time and again throughout history, projects of annihilation and destruction have been enacted. The memory of what has happened in the East must serve as a legacy for all European citizens, ensuring that such horrors are never repeated. If the West represents the erasure of memory through the leveling effect of consumer culture, which leads to the loss of identity in the all-encompassing dimension of contemporary life, the East is instead the critical space that compels everyone to remember – first and foremost, the Poles: “If not China, then Russia, which will not let us sleep or savor Westernization. It is a fascinating country. I fear it, but I go there” (Stasiuk 2015b, p. 246).

## 6. Conclusions

Stasiuk focuses on the problem of European identity and the legacy left by the twentieth century: from Nazi and Soviet concentration camps to the war in Bosnia. Poles themselves have to face their own traumas, being willing – when faced with the evidence of certain historical episodes – to abandon the reassuring position of victims and look critically and honestly at their own history. There are no holy peoples: there are ideologies that move people, that inspire and direct the legitimate need of people to improve their living conditions. There are circumstances in which one has passed by the horror with indifference, or with helplessness, because one was afraid, because thinking of oneself or one’s family came first. What remains is the legacy of a baggage of wrongs endured, of traumas, of unacknowledged responsibilities in which the writer – as a representative of post-memory – must put order. Stasiuk starts with his own family. He is aware that war is at the root of his family genealogy. He says in reference to his parents, who after the Second World War – moving from the region of Podlachia – thus from the east, participated in the gigantic migration phenomenon that transplanted the peasant harvest into the destroyed Polish cities: “The Warsaw Uprising, Hitler and communism allowed them to conquer the metropolis” (Stasiuk 2022: 25). The writer uses the plural consciously. He tries to look at his parents’ story with detachment, as if it were that of any Polish family. In this way, starting from his private experience, he becomes the spokesperson for a collective point of view and tries to judge objectively what happened to the previous generation. Thanks to the war, his parents had the opportunity to abandon the poverty of the countryside to seek their fortune in the new suburbs of Warsaw. They had in fact made a social advancement: from peasants they became urban workers; in fact, they had to replace: “All those who were no longer there. All the dead. Starved, shot, buried in the basements of the city, drowned in the sewers, burnt in the ovens” (Stasiuk 2022, p. 47). Stasiuk’s parents are “them”: representatives of those who have benefited – despite themselves – from the tragedies of others. The emptied houses in Warsaw are being reoccupied by Polish peasant families:

We went into other people’s houses and laid out our things in the cupboards. We said: ‘These are nobody’s houses, nobody’s cupboards’ and we laid out our things. We looked through other people’s windows, thinking this was our view. We had no idea what it was hiding. And it hid millions of other people’s views that were charred and invisible ash fell on our days. (Stasiuk 2022, p. 89)

Notice how the writer switches from the third to the first person plural, integrating private and family experience with that of the Polish nation. The writer takes upon himself the heavy legacy left to him by the previous generation. Thus emerges that link between trauma, sense of guilt, defense mechanisms (rejection of responsibility, self-judgement) that psychoanalytic literature has long analyzed also in a collective key (Bilewicz 2016; Wohl *et al.* 2006).

Compared to the previous generation of writers “thrown into history”, Stasiuk does not write in order to rebuild broken bridges with the past, to leave a testimony of the traumas suffered or to get to the bottom of the causes of trauma. He wants neither to remember nor to forget. Stasiuk's movement is not backwards, towards the past, to reconstruct a vanished world or reality, but towards the present understood as the result, the effect, of the past. His aim is to integrate the past (which cannot be overcome) into the present. He does this in the name and on behalf of those who have experienced the trauma, just as if he had received a task, a mandate: “That is why now I, the grandson, am going on a reconnaissance. [...] I did these things because of grandmothers and aunts who lived on the Bug River. I set out on the trail to the east. Just as if they had silently sent me” (Stasiuk 2022, p. 116).

In the illustrated case of Stasiuk – a writer of the “next generation” – trauma thus fits perfectly into the paradigm of Postmemory. For him, war is a projection, it is images, stories, places, fears and desires that he is confronted with by “composing” them in his writing. If on the one hand trauma has marked his perception of reality, on the other it is also a possibility: it has offered him the key to interpreting contemporaneity and to analyzing the aporias of European identity. As the analyzed case shows, the trauma of the post-witness is paradoxically distant and present, personal and non-personal, but nonetheless identitary and inescapable. As Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (2004, p. 98) writes about the formation of post-trauma, it “does not want healing, rather it is fulfilled by obsessively staring at a not healing wound”.

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