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CUSTOMS PROTECTION OF THE BELARUSIAN PART OF THE WESTERN BORDER OF THE USSR IN 1944 – EARLY 1950s

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The restoration of the customs guards on the Belarusian part of the state border of the USSR in the period from 1944 till the first half of the 1950s is analysed in the article. The author considers the main problems that Soviet policy makers had to deal with to create an efficient customs system: legal, organizational, personnel, material and technical. Special attention is paid to the organisation of counteraction to different types of smuggling in the post-war period. It is concluded that a broad and systematic set of measures aimed at strengthening the customs service allowed to control successfully the movement of goods across the border and to fight against smuggling in the early 1950s.

Keywords: state border; border line; restoration; customs service; customs; customs post; border troops; post-war period; customs control; smuggling.

ТАМОЖЕННАЯ ОХРАНА БЕЛОРУССКОГО УЧАСТКА ЗАПАДНОЙ ГРАНИЦЫ СССР В 1944 – НАЧАЛЕ 1950-х гг.

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Анализируется восстановление таможенной охраны на белорусском участке государственной границы СССР в период с 1944 г. до первой половины 1950-х гг. Рассматриваются основные проблемы, которые пришлось решать советским директивным органам для создания эффективной таможенной системы: правовые, организационные, кадровые, материально-технические. Особое внимание уделено организации противодействия разным видам контрабанды в послевоенный период. Делается вывод, что проведение широкого и системного комплекса мер по укреплению таможенной службы позволило к началу 1950-х гг. успешно контролировать перемещение товаров через границу и бороться с контрабандой.

Ключевые слова: государственная граница; пограничная линия; восстановление; таможенная служба; таможня; таможенный пост; пограничные войска; послевоенный период; таможенный контроль; контрабанда.

The history of public administration bodies of the Republic of Belarus is one of the least studied areas of the past of our country. Moreover, the history of some departments and services became the object of scientific study only in the late 1990s. The history of the Belarusian customs service, which became the object of scientific analysis only from the beginning of the

2000s, is also full of gaps. Of course, among the few authors a historian from Grodno V. Sayapin should be noted first. V. Zhuk, I. Kiturko, A. Suvorov, etc. have also made contribution to the popularization of various periods of the glorious past of the customs authorities. But now many other episodes of history of the Belarusian customs require the attention of a researcher.

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Thus, one of the urgent problems, from the perspective of studying the historical experience of the service of the economic border, is the theme of the restoration of customs protection of the Belarusian part of the western border of the USSR in the post-war period from the end of 1944 till the early 1950s.

The liberation of Belarus from fascist occupation in 1944 put on the agenda the issue of restoration of the border and customs protection of the state border of the Soviet Union. On 27 October 1944 the National Commissariat of Foreign Trade (NCFT) of the USSR issued order No. 375/1 on the restoration of the Brest customs, the only customs in the BSSR, on the threshold of the Great Patriotic War. In the autumn of the same year, a customs post was opened at Lososno station near Grodno, and in December, the customs office in Berestovitsa began to work. In the following 1945, in February, the customs office began to function in Grodno [1, p. 94]. Later in June of the same year, a customs office was also opened at the airport in Minsk. In comparison to the whole territory of the USSR there were 22 customs offices in 1944, mainly for the admission of immigrants and charitable goods. It is necessary to note that on 1 January 1945 the staff of the customs department of the Soviet Union were 1043 customs officers, about 50 people of them were in the BSSR [2, p. 42]. During the reviewed period, customs were divided into three classes. So, Brest customs was the 1st class, Grodno customs and Berestovitsa customs were the 2nd class, and Minsk customs was the 3rd class. The customs had customs posts. So, at this time, Grodno customs office subordinated customs posts of "Kuznitsa" ("Bruzgi"), "Lepschany" and "Hvorostyany". In 1948–1949 it included the customs post at Vilnius airport.

The mentioned recovery processes took place in the most difficult conditions. Moreover, even the restored Western border itself was not yet precisely defined and called the "border line". The Soviet side of the border was protected by the border troops, and the neighboring Polish troops and the troops of the National Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NCIA) for the protection of the rear of the army. This process was carried out on the basis of a special instruction developed by the General headquarters of the Red Army together with the NCIA and the NCFT. So, in August 1944 the commander of the 1st Belarusian front, Marshal K. Rokossovsky issued an order "On the procedure of crossing border line by military units and units of goods and vehicles" [3, p. 333]. On 28 August 1944, the Military Council of the 1st Belarusian front adopted a resolution "On the border regime in the borderline areas". These were the first documents regulating the order of movement across the state border of the USSR. In accordance with them, the pass through the state by border troops, individual soldiers and categories of civilian population, other persons (the repatriated, prisoners of war, the interned, the evacuated, etc.), as well as cargo was carried out only through specially created checkpoints. It

should be noted that the customs control points were created at the restored border almost simultaneously with the border guard checkpoints, which ensured the rapid establishment of effective control over the movement of people and goods across the border line.

Since 1945, the activity of the customs system in the west of the USSR had been increasing. In the first half of the year, the flow of cargo for the current units of the Red Army increased, in the second – the volume of passenger traffic and military equipment in connection with the transfer of units to the Far East and the return of Soviet citizens sent to Germany. The main task of the customs authorities during this period was the control of goods moved by individuals and soldiers. So, within 1945, through the western border of the Soviet Union 19 145 443 persons proceeded in a simplified manner; with passports and visas – 48 507 people. At the same time it was adopted from abroad: the Soviet prisoners of the war – 359 730 people; Soviet citizens returning to the USSR – 2 254 238 people; the evacuated from Poland to the USSR – 327 120 people; the evacuees from the USSR to Poland – 749 710 persons. Thus inspected and passed: trains – 79 290; aircrafts – 11 302; cars – 1 981 279; pack animals 278 053 units [2, p. 42].

The movement of huge masses of people was a specific feature of the late 1940s. We should add that in 1946–1947, in accordance with interstate agreements, the exchange of population between Poland and the USSR also took place. In this regard, through the Belarusian customs almost 240 000 immigrants passed from the Western regions of Belarus to Poland and 27 000 people – from Poland to Belarus, carrying household goods and livestock. In general, the property of immigrants was passed with minimum formalities, although some customs officers found goods prohibited for export, usually various gold products.

In the post-war period, implementing the tasks set by the government, customs officers faced great difficulties. Thus, there was no necessary regulatory framework. The customs code of 1928 could no longer provide a proper legal basis. To remedy this problem, a large number of guidance documents on the work of customs offices (instructions, directives, and memos) were developed in a short time, a large number of different issues were agreed with the concerned departments, which were not previously encountered in practical work. In the post-war decade, the range of legal acts on customs control was supplemented by numerous customs documents: resolutions and orders of the government, orders of the NCFT or Ministry of Foreign Trade (MFT, transformed from the NCFT in 1946), rules, instructions, orders of the General customs administration (GCA) on customs issues. For example, in 1953, the Rules for the registration and admission of personal baggage and unaccompanied baggage of citizens crossing the state border of the Soviet Union were adopted. A very important innovation was the establishment of

a form of customs declaration, which had to be filled in by all citizens when crossing the state border.

A great difficulty was the shortage of personnel and a significant lack of Western customs personnel trainings to perform specific and important tasks in the conditions of the end of the war and first peaceful years. It was so due to the lack of experienced workers, despite all the measures taken. It was decided to bet on demobilized front-line officers, and in 1946 special courses for their training were opened at Riga port customs. Among the later well-known Belarusian customs officers were the soldiers of Brest customs (A. Andronov, V. Gamal, M. Kiselev, O. Kondrashkin, A. Krulwich, V. Rebenok, M. Rodyukov, I. Solonko, I. Tereshenkov, M. Khovanskii, N. Tsvetkov, A. Cherepanov, N. Ihava); of Grodno customs (F. Gorin, V. Belyaev, V. Polyansky, Y. Sayapin) and of Minsk customs (N. Smirnov).

In the most difficult conditions the employees of the restored Belarusian customs selflessly performed their duty. Thus, the first head of the Grodno customs V. Belyaev, deprived of one leg as a result of severe wounds suffered at the front, could carry out customs control of 100–150 passengers within 30–40 minutes, moving from car to car [1, p. 95]. Finally, by the end of 1945, Brest customs officers and border guards detained 6 trespassers, confiscated 369 firearms, confiscated smuggled goods in the amount of 500 thousand rubles, inspected and let pass in 212 267 Soviet and foreign trains [4, p. 54].

Among other problems of the post-war customs service is the lack of office and living space, lack of necessary equipment and inventory. In addition, in the first post-war years, employees of Western customs, especially in Grodno, experienced constant risk coming from the anti-Soviet armed groups operating in the region. The veteran of Grodno customs Y. Sayapin recalled: “in April 1945, there was still the war, in the forests there were gangs that attacked the representatives of the newly emerged authorities in the liberated territories. Sometimes at night they attacked border guards and customs officers. I lived near the house of the chief of customs, and when there were attacks, we jumped up in linen with guns in hands out of the house and occupied planned in advance positions since they could throw grenades in the house. But everything went without a special firefight. Bandits attacked the location of border guards more and more” [5, p. 239].

The work of customs bodies and institutions was repeatedly checked by the state control of the USSR. A special audit group was established under the GCA. In 1947, it revealed serious violations of the Customs code: the inspection of goods was carried out selectively, some of the goods were not inspected at all, baggage was allowed to be inspected in private apartments, it was not surprising that the records of confiscated and detained goods were unsatisfactory done [6, p. 311]. But the customs system was still being restored and measures were taken to establish the work of customs.

The post-war revival of the country's economy coincided with the beginning of the growing political tensions between the Soviet Union and capitalist countries. Customs officers were also involved in the cold war. This reflected the general tendency of state policy to isolate the Soviet people from the corrupting influence of the west, cosmopolitanism and low-worship. In addition, the idea that almost every foreigner was a spy was constantly being planted among border guards and customs officers. In 1946, the government of the USSR took strict measures to limit the access of foreign goods imported privately to the domestic market. But despite the bans, the flow of consumer goods on the western border was growing. Belarusian customs officers, acting in accordance with the instructions of the legislative bodies to prevent the import of illegal goods, carried out a complete check of hand luggage and passengers crossing the border.

In the 1950s, the number of customs officers began to decline due to the significant decrease in the volume of transportation and travel of citizens. Therefore, from 1 June 1951, the Grodno customs office was transformed into customs post of Berestovitsa customs. Since 15 February 1954 it has been abolished, and its employees were transferred to other customs or dismissed. On 1 December 1954 in Berestovitsa custom house of 2nd class was transformed to the customs post of Minsk customs. But soon in April 1955, by the order of the MFT of the USSR, it was reorganized into the customs post of Vilnius customs of the 3rd class, and the former Berestovitsa customs post was closed. As a result, by the middle of the 1950s in Soviet Belarus, again, as before the war, there was only one Brest customs.

The second wave of recovery and development of the customs system began only in the second half of the 1950s, due to the implementation of new tasks of the Council of Economic Mutual Assistance (CEMA) created in 1949 among the socialist countries. At this time, due to the expansion of contacts of the USSR with the countries – participants of the CEMA, every year the volume of trade, the flow of vehicles and the number of foreign tourists crossing the state border increased. Basically, they passed through the customs posts of the Brest customs, which from that time became a real “Western gates” of the Soviet Union and the best customs of the Soviet Belarus. The most important task of the Soviet customs officers of the considered period was the fight against the attempts to smuggle goods. But in the first post-war years a small number of personnel, the lack of its training had a negative impact on the quality of work to combat smuggling.

The peculiarity of smuggling in 1944–1946 was that its carriage was associated with the use of bold and clever ways of concealing due to the usage of ranks of officials under the cover of documents containing instruction on the “secret” nature of the cargo carried in sealed containers, under the guise of reparations and the return of the goods, trophy property, as well

as the necessity of implementation of customs control in respect of the enormous number of border-crossing individuals. At this time there was an increase in the smuggling of essential commodities: tobacco, matches, baking soda, black pepper, dye for cloths and stuff. It should be pointed out that those years smuggling was detained in the number of 85% for import and 15 % for export [2, p. 48]. For commodity groups the reduction in detention on export refers to foreign currency and non-ferrous metals and precious stones. When importing, on the contrary, detention of different tissues increased 245 %, leather – 198 %, clocks – 537 %. The nomenclature of the detained smuggled goods in 1945 looked as follows: silk, silicon for lighters, sewing needles, jewelry, currency and currency values, gold, silver. Some senior military officials tried to import from Germany to the USSR various products for personal use and sale such as consumer goods machines, cars, and even trains with forged documents.

So, in 1945, the former employee of Grodno customs U. Sayapin recalled that the General of the Army illegally received a trophy car from the garage of a former senior nazi J. Goebbels and tried to enter the USSR without documents. However, the car was detained during customs control in Grodno. The General, not wanting to part with it, left his driver with the car and went to Moscow. There he got a reception from I. Stalin. But, as it was known later, he entered the office as a General, and left as a Lieutenant Colonel. In another case, in the autumn 1945 Grodno customs officers

detained a military echelon with a large batch of contraband transported under the guise of military equipment. However, in response to the legitimate demands of the customs officers, the chief of the echelon put up armed guards and demanded that the station chief send the echelon. The echelon was sent, but stalled and in the end waited for the smuggler-military consent on clearance [1, p. 109].

Some difficulties were also brought by repatriates, especially those who left the USSR in 1945–1947. Many of them, as it has already been pointed out, tried to hide their savings in the form of gold products and coins in household items, in secluded from customs officers places in cars. So, in one of the cars half of which was occupied by horses during the inspection of Grodno customs officers, golden coins of Royal coinage covered with manure were found on the floor [1, p. 110].

In turn, according to the memoirs of the veterans of the Brest customs haberdashery products, sewing machines and accessories, leather were the most popular smuggling in the 1940s. And since the beginning of the 1950s a serious segment of smuggling had become a variety of imported fabrics [7, p. 53].

Thus, a wide range of measures in strengthening the customs service held since 1944 at the restored Western border provided a successful performance of customs, letting through troops, cargo and various categories of civilians and detecting a significant amount of smuggling at the border line at first and then on the state border.

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