In August 1939 the German and the Soviet government signed the Ribbentropp-Molotov-Treaty and divided Poland between them. The USSR gained the eastern part of the country, which was largely inhabited by the Ukrainians and Byelorussians, but had a large share of Polish population, too. This raised the question on how to deal with the ethnic minorities as well as how to treat the indigenous inhabitants at all. What conceptions of them did the occupiers have in mind? Which kind of images of the civilian population influenced their thinking? Did they see themselves as invaders or as inhabitants, as the official Soviet propaganda claimed? Which official orders were given and how did soldiers of the Red Army or Soviet officials on the local level receive these orders? How did the image of the indigenous population changed due to personal contacts? This paper will examine these questions, concentrating on the Byelorussian part of the annexed territories. The local focus on a special region, the city of Baranowicze and its surroundings will help to achieve a detailed, yet representative picture.

When on September 17th 1939 Soviet troops crossed the Polish border and occupied the eastern parts of the country, they embellished this military aggression as an act of liberation of the oppressed population. This alleged oppression had an double aspect: On the one hand, the Soviet government claimed to free poor workers and peasants from the capitalists’ and landlords tyranny, on the other hand, they promised the non-Polish population to rid them of the Polish dominance. These two aspects culminated in the slogan of the “liberation of the Polish pany (masters)”. Officially the new regime should bring along the complete emancipation of Byelorussians and Jews, but not result in a discrimination of Poles. However, many Soviet officials received the constant blaming of the “Polish pany” as an order to do exactly this. To a large extent, this might have been due to the fact that the definition of a pany remained vague, whereas it was quite easy to identify the Poles. Finally, even some propaganda material issued from Moscow or Minsk did not pay much attention on how to avoid a general anti-Polish direction.

Guidelines for the treatment of the non-Polish population were much clearer, but the de-facto behavior towards them differed very much from those orders. On the one hand they were guaranteed equal rights (which was true for the Poles as well), on the other hand, they were treated with mistrust and kept out of responsible positions. At the same time, encouragement of Byelorussian and Jewish schools and culture made clear that the Soviet slogans were more than just lip service. All in all, the new regime’s attitude towards the population of the recently annexed territories stayed inconsistent and ambiguous.