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## THE BREST FORTRESS IN THE BORDERLAND CONTEXT: SYMBOLISM, MEMORY AND HERITAGE

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### Abstract

Drawing hundreds of thousands of tourists annually, predominantly from Belarus and Russia, Brest Fortress plays a pivotal role in shaping pro-Russian consciousness. It achieves this by reviving (post-)Soviet ideological motifs and by highlighting the self-sacrifice and heroism of the Fortress's defenders in 1941, effectively translating these narratives into contemporary anti-Western contexts. For other nationalities—Poles, Germans, etc.—this tourist product could also hold significant historical importance related to the events of World War I and II as a site of remembrance. The main goal of the paper has been to examine and assess the symbolic perception by tourists of different nationalities of the Brest Fortress—including both the Memorial Complex on the Belarusian side of the border and the Terespol Bridgehead on the Polish side.

### Keywords

Brest Fortress • Belarus • Poland • memory • symbolism • tourism • heritage • border

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### Introduction

Border areas often have a turbulent history, experiencing changes in borders and territorial and national affiliations. The objects remaining from earlier events and affiliations offer various possibilities for interpretation, sometimes weighing heavily on them and sometimes drifting from their origins and roots. Their memory also belongs to different states and nations, and sometimes their meaning and identity change, and states, regions or even particular cities exploit them

as voices of (memory) symbolism or propaganda to suit their own needs. National borders can often hinder the development of frontier regions by restricting spatial opportunities, and proximity to a border is frequently perceived as a developmental barrier (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999). In many respects, borders and borderlands function as a “microcosmic laboratory of socio-economic development and geopolitics” (Więckowski et al., 2024). This is particularly important and interesting in a situation of changing borders, emphasizing differences

and national affiliations. The Brest Fortress is one of the most significant showplaces located on the contemporary Polish–Belarusian border. Research on this area combines broader issues of border studies and tourism, emphasizing the historical legacy and symbolic heritage that shape its attractiveness and understanding.

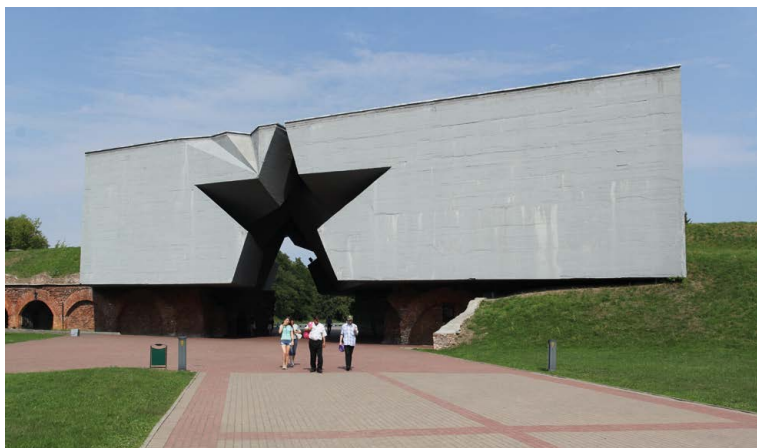
The topicality of this article is also reflected in the fact that the Brest Fortress was included on UNESCO's Tentative List of World Heritage Sites between 2004 and 2015/2016 and was re-listed in 2024. This confirms the significance of the site not only within Central and Eastern Europe but also at the international and global levels. The contemporary relevance and importance of this research are also related to the new meanings and symbolism that former Soviet military heritage has obtained, especially in the context of the political crisis in Belarus in 2020, beginning of the migration collapse on the Polish–Belarusian border in 2021, and the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2022.

The aim of this article is to examine and assess the symbolic perception of the Brest Fortress—including both the Memorial Complex (Fig. 1) on the Belarusian side of the border and the Terespol Bridgehead on the Polish side (Fig. 2). The research included in this article is based on conceptualization, in-depth

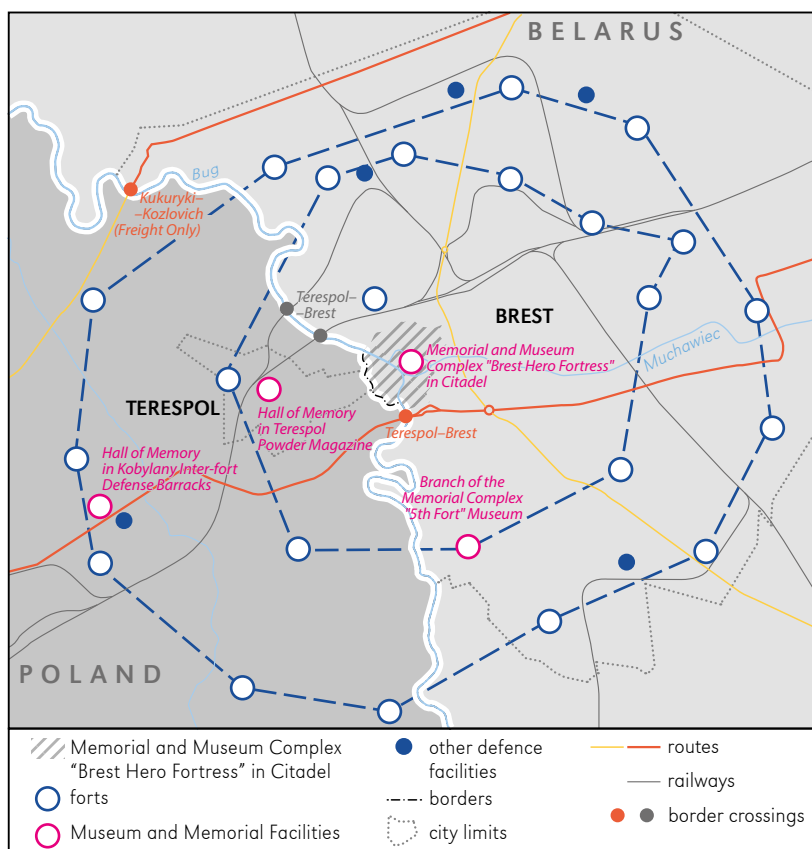
interviews, primary research, and several years of observation.

### Between borders, heritage, symbolism and memory

It has been observed that borders are deeply connected to heritage, and instead do not and will not disappear but rather transform (Balogh, 2019). One should note that heritage is a complex, dynamic, and negotiable socio-political, symbolic – often territorial – process and concept, serving different actors by communicating narratives of inclusion and exclusion, continuity and instability, and cannot be separated from the interrelated concepts of memory and identity (McDowell, 2008). Borders enclose and define stable national identities (Källén, 2019: 7). Even in the shadows of massive geopolitical change, debordering, and supranationalism, borders continue to reinforce a sense of national identity and belonging (Andersen & Prokkola, 2022). According to border studies and critical tourism geographies, borderspaces function as performative areas that generate meaning through the combination of narratives, emotions, and spatial practices (Newman, 2006; Brambilla, 2014). For instance, the ambiguous spatial nature and symbolic power of water borders create emotional engagement



**Figure 1.** Main Entrance to the Memorial Complex “Brest Hero Fortress” in the shape of a five-pointed star



**Figure 2.** Localization map of the Brest Fortress in the transboundary context

and interpretive possibilities which make them fertile ground for the performance of identity, memory, and imagination (Borschberg & North, 2010; McGrath et al., 2023; Konrad et al., 2026).

The variability of borders (shifting, division, or disappearance), together with their memorialisation as sites of frontier heritage, underscores identity and memory while producing geopolitical borderlands that sustain myths of division and hegemonic narratives (Konrad et al. 2026). Significantly, (Timothy & Więckowski, 2022) argue that political boundaries can be regarded as cultural heritage with implications for tourism in the heritage-making, or heritagisation process, expressed in six dimensions: symbols of power, dominance, and national pride; sites

of conflict and war that foster dark tourism; meeting spaces that encourage neighborly relations; sources of local stories and heritage narratives; border infrastructures as tangible heritage; and shared transboundary or transnational cultural and natural heritage as a resource (Kolosov & Więckowski, 2018; Komornicki et al., 2019; Cyargeenka & Więckowski, 2020; Cyargeenka, 2023).

However, the impact of borders on regional development is highly context-dependent, with the nature and shifting dynamics of borders playing a crucial role (Jakubowski & Mischczuk, 2021). Borders may function in multiple ways—ranging from rigid barriers to integrative contact zones (Martinez, 1994). Borders can also be seen through four main functions: barriers, creators of periphery and isolation,

lines of differentiation, and axis of cooperation, which help explain their impact on border landscapes, international relations, socio-economic life, including tourism (Więckowski, 2019). The role of borders is often closely associated with propaganda (Guichonnet & Raffestin, 1974). One of the primary functions of a border is also linked to ideology, understood as a display of power and difference from other states, often manifested through visible markers that carry symbolic and touristic significance (Guichonnet & Raffestin, 1974; Foucher, 2007; Więckowski, 2022). This highlights that the state, along with its multiple levels (local, regional, international) possesses memory, history, and identity, but also carries the pressure of negative aspects of both past and present, as well as apprehension about the future (O'Dowd, 2001). Every place has heritage. It may be personal, local, regional, national, or international in its reach, touristic appeal, and commemorative value (Timothy, 1997). As such, borders continue to narrate important histories about faith, family, culture, and nationality. They are crucibles of history, both conflicted and peaceful (Timothy & Więckowski, 2022).

Heritage tourism in post-socialist and post-Soviet countries of Central and Eastern Europe has its own specificity and symbolism. Many tourism products related to the Soviet past carry political, ideological, and even propagandistic characteristics, treating the Soviet heritage in various ways (Light et al., 2009). Moreover, there exist opposing systems of values and memory – the enemy's against our own, the 'ours-theirs' divide—which impose internal consensus on society, concentrating the purest moral values in the figure of the hero, who becomes a powerful basis for state governance and legitimization, with war museums functioning as its symbolic "temples" (Bogumił et al. 2015). In essence, much of socialist symbolism centered on monumental architecture, museums, and heritage sites, which primarily served as instruments of state propaganda and tools for promoting patriotic values (Naumov & Weidenfeld, 2019).

## Symbolism after border changes

Any change to the border may have an impact on shaping and changing the symbolic meaning of the areas adjacent to it (Więckowski, 2010; Komornicki et al., 2019). In the Russian-Finnish borderland, symbolic cross-border solidarity has been expressed through shared war commemorations of the victims of devastating wars and the preservation of common heritage sites, graves etc. Following the 1992 Treaty on the Foundations of Relations, Russia and Finland agreed to jointly honor soldiers who fell on both sides, leading to the erection of numerous bilingual monuments across Russian Karelia. (Melnikova, 2025). Following World War II, the regions of Warmia-Mazury and Kaliningrad came to illustrate how borderland identities and historical memory can be reshaped. What had once been German East Prussia was redistributed between Poland and the Soviet Union through decisions taken by the major powers. Perceptions of these territories drew on two main factors: the crafting of national narratives and identities for the newly acquired lands, and the selective use of historical memory to legitimize their inclusion within each state. In the last years, numerous former defensive constructions have been adapted for cultural and educational purposes, now hosting local museums as well as artistic initiatives (Żęgota, 2021). As a result of the significant changes in borders and population after the Second World War, nostalgic tourism emerged in the early 1990s to those kinds of regions divided after WW II (Balogh 2014; 2019), which also includes Western Belarus and the Brest region. However, over time these trips declined, as people realized that the "utopian homeland" they were seeking no longer existed, and that the differences between the symbolic past and its heritage and contemporary realities were further deepened by the divergent historical and political trajectories of these regions (Paasi, 1999). The Cerić and Więckowski (2025) study investigated how tourists perceive and

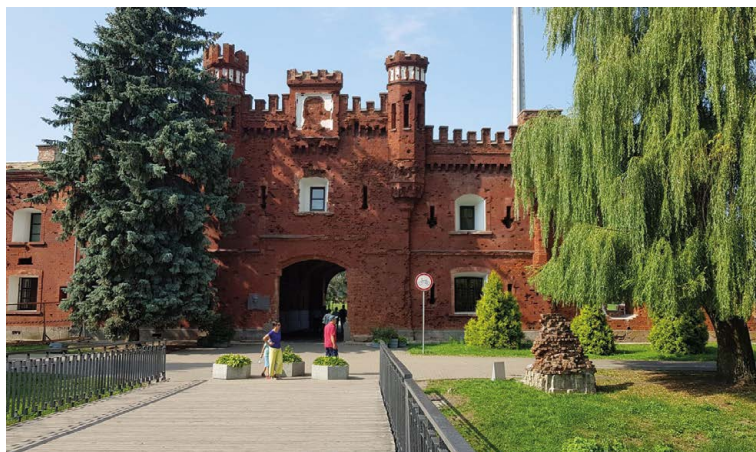
understand the German-Polish maritime border under the current open-border regime that eliminated formal controls but preserved symbolic and emotional meanings.

### Regional context of Brest

In the three East Slavic European countries — Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine — together with Poland, which Timothy Snyder called the “Bloodlands” (Snyder, 2010), the brutalities of the war itself can hardly be separated from the mass crimes committed by Hitler’s and Stalin’s regimes, although the scale of suffering was greatest in Ukraine and Belarus. The Republic of Belarus represents a distinct case within the landscape of East European memory. Rather than an open battleground of competing interpretations of the past, Belarus—with its restricted public sphere and few actors independent of state institutions—functions more as a controlled space for selective remembrance. Here, standard Soviet narratives are continuously reinvented, adapted, localized, and appropriated in various, often competing, ways (Ackermann, 2017).

From the era of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic to the present day, the Second World War has remained a crucial historical event in the collective memory,

shaping public consciousness of Belarusians by framing the struggle against German occupation as a fight for national independence (Sahm, 2010) (Fig. 3). While the culture of remembrance in EU states focuses mainly on the victims, in Belarus, as in Russia, the emphasis is placed on the heroic aspects of victory in the war, paying little attention to the victims that this victory cost (Sahm, 2011). The symbolism embodied by the Heroic Brest Fortress memorial and museum complex underscores the enduring belief in Belarus’s historical ties to Russia, portraying them as foundational elements in Belarusian geopolitics, history, and culture (Marples, 2006). Consequently, numerous prominent landmarks in Belarus such as museums, avenues, and squares are intricately intertwined with the memory and legacy of commemorating the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) (Marples, 2012). Memory constructs a tailored depiction of history and heritage, encompassing not only the individual’s experiences but also inserting them within familiar, social, and national frameworks and levels (Saraiva, 2015). Navigating a memory terrain that is progressively influenced by political agendas, particularly evident in the post-Soviet context, presents a distinct challenge for Belarusian researchers



**Figure 3.** Kholm Gate of the Brest Fortress Citadel. It became a symbol of the fierce fighting during the Defense of Brest Fortress in June 1941, at the beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union

within a “nativist” or “fatherland” framework, necessitating their academic efforts to align with local standards while also contending with the politicization of memory institutes (Lastouski & Rudling, 2024).

The post-war Soviet Union derived its legitimacy from the victory over Nazi Germany, constructing a triumphalist and heroic narrative of the “Great Patriotic War” that, particularly under Brezhnev, both suppressed memories of wartime trauma and Stalinist repressions and reinforced the collective identity of the “Soviet people.” (Fedor et al., 2017b). Nevertheless, both in the post-Soviet period and in modern-day Russia and Belarus, one can observe a “hyper-exploitation of the past Victory” which “leads to the constant making-present of the war experience, to the unending search for new methods of commemoration, so as to further extend the life of this event” (Rozhdestvenskaya, 2015)

While some historical events are selectively emphasized by Belorussian authorities to promote national unity, others are ignored. The Holocaust occupies only a marginal place in official memory, and Belarusians who remained loyal to Poland or fought under Polish command are largely forgotten. Ukrainian nationalism is viewed with suspicion. A simplified Soviet, Orthodox, Eastward-oriented narrative competes with an anti-Soviet, Western, often Catholic one. Reflecting this stance, in 2009 Belarusian authorities declared September 17, 1939—the Soviet invasion of Poland—as “Reunification Day of Western Belarus with the BSSR” in the positive role, casting Poland in the negative one (Rudling, 2017). The geographic dimension of the divided memory is very pronounced in neighboring Ukraine, in Belarus this divide more often runs between the urban and the rural, between generations, and between levels of education.

In Ukraine, instead, memory politics and the symbolism surrounding World War II are shaped by a dichotomy between two narratives: co-titled “nationalist”, predominantly Western Ukrainian one centered on the glorification of the UPA and UNA-UNSO, and

a (post-)Soviet or currently mostly pro-Russian narrative (Yurchuk, 2017). These form two bigger symbolic camps – the “fascist” and the “anti-fascist.” The anti-fascist banner (in contrast to the anti-totalitarianism) served as a key justification for Soviet ideology and as evidence of the Soviet system’s moral superiority (Grunenberg, 1996). To preserve the purity of this myth, any questioning or criticism of Soviet leadership or the Red Army’s actions – including their defeats and crimes during or after the war – was strictly forbidden.

In contemporary global scientific opinion, the Brest city and fortress is associated mostly with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, concluded in early 1918 between Germany, Austro-Hungary and its allies, Soviet Russia, and Ukrainian Central Rada, marking Russia’s exit from World War I (Stachel, 2022). Additionally, for Poles, Brest is rather associated with the “Brest Trials” in the early 1930s, as well as the defense of the fortress in September 1939. From the perspective of Belarusians and Russians, the main and pivotal event was the defense of the Brest Fortress against the Nazi forces in 1941 at the onset of the Great Patriotic War.

Moreover, since the 1970s, the Memorial and Museum Complex of the Heroic Brest Fortress have played a highly significant symbolic role for (post-)Soviet people, serving as an iconic example of patriotism, masculinity, and self-sacrifice (Bottlik, 2017; Naumov & Weidenfeld, 2019). Presently, the memorial constitutes one of the key components of the history and state ideology of Belarus and Russia, making this composite product and destination visited by millions of tourists.

Tourist attendance from European countries such as Poland, Ukraine, German, Austria etc. directly depended on the permeability of borders in the different historical phases of easing or tightening the mode of crossing them, which can be encapsulated in the “bordering – debordering – rebordering” approach (Brańka et al., 2020; Więckowski & Timothy, 2021).

The external frontiers of the European Union do operate as barriers to free travel

and the development of tourism, ensuring that the borders involved will probably remain marginal as tourist destinations, if with some exceptions. Certainly, the creation of cross-border tourist regions near the Schengen Zone's external frontiers will prove difficult (Zupančič et al., 2018; Więckowski & Saarinen, 2019; Cyargeenka, 2021).

The Polish-Belarusian international border was established in 1945, stretching approximately 399 km in length (Zhoomar & Kocsis, 2017). Predominantly following the so-called Curzon Line, this border has an antecedent character and was largely imposed top-down by the Soviet and Polish authorities of the time (Eberhardt, 2008; 2012). Today, this border also holds geostrategic significance as it constitutes a part of the eastern external land border of the European Union and NATO with Eastern Neighborhood countries and Collective Security Treaty Organization, serving as a barrier-filter role (Browning & Joenniemi, 2008; Więckowski, 2025) (Fig. 4).

## Aim and methods

The aim of this article is to examine and assess the symbolic perception of the Brest Fortress—comprising both the Memorial Complex on the Belarusian side of the border

and the Terespol Bridgehead on the Polish side. Drawing on desk research, several years of continuous observation, and stakeholder- and expert-focused individual in-depth interviews, the research investigates how tourists of various nationalities (including Polish, Belarusian, Russian, German-speaking, and others) interpret the symbolic meaning of this heritage and memory site within the contemporary political context marked by the deterioration of Polish-Belarusian relations and the resurgence of post-Soviet narratives and propaganda. Furthermore, the article seeks to evaluate the site's symbolic and touristic significance through the intersecting perspectives of Brest and Terespol as a tourism hub situated on the eastern land border of the European Union and the Schengen Area.

## Methods

In this article, a qualitative research design was employed, “as a systematic method of inquiry that seeks to build a holistic approach that is largely narrative, a description to inform researchers’ understanding of social or cultural phenomena,” described as “subjective in approach among other key importance,” and well suited to exploring perspectives,



**Figure 4.** The contemporary border runs along the Bug River. From the fortress side, reaching the river and the border is still prohibited.

generating contextual knowledge, and examining texts and documents to “fine-tune the pre-conceived notions, analyzing and estimating the issue from an in-depth perspective” (Anas & Ishaq, 2022: 89). Within the broad spectrum of qualitative methodologies, four principal approaches were operationalized: interviews, case studies, observation, and desk research (Pegani, 2023).

**Firstly**, the primary method employed consisted of semi-structured, individual in-depth interviews (IDIs), in which in addition to the structured interview, extra questions were also asked to deepen the topic of interest in a specific area (Żelazo, 2013). This approach emphasizes diverse understandings of social reality, with the respondent regarded as “the expert” – the researcher interprets this perspective through “values reflection and listening with the goal of empowering and giving voice to respondents’ experiences” (Hesse-Biber, 2010: 455). The following phases were carried out: defining the research objectives and preparing the questions, selecting respondents, conducting the interviews, data analysis, and writing up the results as an article. (Kriukow, 2024).

An interview content was developed consisting of open-ended, extensive questions designed to guide respondents in recreating and explaining the research matter. The initial question was: “*Which areas and tourism products in the Polish-Belarusian borderlands do you consider the most attractive?*” This was followed by: “*Is the border and borderland a tourist attraction?*” and “*How would you evaluate tourist traffic and infrastructure?*” **Fundamental and essential questions focused on** the historical and cultural significance, heritage, memory, symbolism, and attractiveness of the study area – Brest Fortress, the city of Brest, and Terespol – taking into consideration that most respondents held at least a higher education degree, had professional experience and knowledge in tourism in the Polish-Belarusian borderlands, and had interacted with hundreds or even thousands of visitors, both local and domestic or international.

A total of nine IDIs ( $n = 9$ ) were conducted in Polish ( $n = 5$ ), Russian ( $n = 3$ ), and Belarusian ( $n = 1$ ) between September and December 2024, in the respondents’ natural environments during pre-arranged face-to-face meetings at their workplaces in Warsaw ( $n = 2$ ) and Terespol/Kobylany ( $n = 4$ ). Three additional interviews ( $n = 3$ ) were conducted online due to the risks associated with crossing the Polish-Belarusian border. More precise information about responders contains Appendix 1. Each IDI lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, was audio-recorded, transcribed, and subsequently thoroughly dismantled and analyzed. The examination focused on identifying key statements relevant to the research topic, following a pre-prepared analytical framework (matrix), and contributed to the composition of the results presented in this paper.

Audio data obtained during the interviews were transformed into textual format and additionally translated from Russian ( $n = 3$ ) and Belarusian ( $n = 1$ ) into Polish using the TurboScribe software. During the first reading of the transcripts, the authors identified the most important and most compelling responses, statements, and reflections provided by the respondents. Subsequently, an initial working matrix (table) was created and coded. It included the key statements of the informants ( $n = 9$ ), divided into following categories ( $c = 15$ ): border(land), twin city, tourist hub, transport, heritage, symbolism, memory, museum, UNESCO, tourist attendance, as well as – Poles, Belarusians, Russians, German-speaking, and Other visitors.

In the next stage, the most significant statements were entered into the matrix, and, taking into account their relevance and frequency, approximately 30 quotations, translated as literally as possible into English, were incorporated into the main text in appropriate places. The final stage involved coding the Table N 1 and 2 for the discussion section, where nine categories ( $n = 9$ ) were retained, divided into the Belarusian side (Memorial Complex) and the Polish side (Terespol Breadgehead), in order to visualize

the most repeating and significant topics. Many decisions regarding selection, categorization, and systematization were, naturally, dependent on the authors' conceptual perspective.

**Secondly**, a single-case study was conducted, which primarily involved a detailed description of a specific transboundary study area – the Brest Fortress, located in Brest, Terespol, and their surroundings. This approach allows for drawing conclusions regarding the causes and outcomes of its development, as well as explaining the characteristics and conditions of emerging cultural, social, and symbolic trends associated with the tourist attraction.

**Thirdly**, two field trips were conducted to the study area, employing participant observation to examine its up-to-date characteristics, heritage condition, unique features, attractiveness, symbolism, infrastructure, and accessibility. The first trip, in July 2019, covered Terespol and Brest, including crossing the Polish-Belarusian border. The second trip, in October 2024, focused on visiting memorial and heritage facilities, and local municipalities in Terespol and Kobylany, Poland, and included IDIs with four informants.

**Finally**, desk research (secondary research) was undertaken: a comprehensive review of scholarly and popular literature and web sources to establish the historical and cultural conditions, relevant institutional and infrastructural factors – relevant to this research. The review encompassed conceptual works on tourism attractiveness, symbolism, and heritage, with attention to transport and border issues, as well as case studies directly related to the study area. Both recent publications and older sources, including several modern and Soviet-era guidebooks, were consulted to enable a retrospective analysis (Kałaska et al., 2020). For instance, this review revealed quantitative data that allowed for estimating visitor numbers to the Brest Fortress Memorial Complex since its inception, as well as identifying changes in the symbolism and tourism-related functioning of this attraction.

## Symbolism of the Brest Fortress as a military and architectural heritage

The history of defensive structures in Brest dates back to the Middle Ages, as the first detinets was built in the 11th century, and a wooden castle in the second half of the 13th century. By the late 16th century, the castle had been reconstructed in stone, but during numerous wars and sieges, it suffered significant damage. By the late 18th to early 19th century, it had become quite outdated in terms of advancements in existing fortification techniques.

The necessity of a comprehensive modernization, and in reality, the construction of the Brest Fortress, was imperative in the context of the strategic military situation at the turn of the 18th to 19th century, as the city of Brest was situated on the shortest route from Warsaw to Moscow. The initial plans for fortifications emerged in the early 19th century, but they were hindered by the Napoleonic (1803-1815), the Russo-Turkish (1806-1812), and the Russo-Swedish (Finnish, 1808-1809) Wars. Only in the years 1829-1830, an architectural construction project was presented to the Emperor of Russia Nicholas I and approved by him. However, construction work was again delayed due to the Polish-Russian War 1830-1831 and only began in 1833. The key inspirers and architects were military engineers and leaders of the Russian school of fortification Karl Opperman and Jan Pieter van Suchtelen (Anszperger, 2013: 39-40). At that time, the build-chiefs and supervisors were general Iwan Dehn and count Ivan Paskovich-Erevansky. The Brest Fortress started operating as a Russian first-category fortress in 1842 (Mel'jancuk, 2019: 95). The fortress, in addition to the citadel, had three external fortifications (Terespol, Volhynian, and Kobryn) as well as other defenses such as curtain walls, free-standing ravelins, caponiers, lunettes, and redoubts etc.

In the new geopolitical reality after the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), the still

designed Brest Fortress could play a more significant role among the defensive fortifications in the western part of the Russian Empire. It was an essential part of a network of other Russian fortresses located between the Baltic and Black Seas, such as Fortresses Sveaborg, Daugavpils, Kaunas, Grodno, Osowiec, Zegrze, Novo-Georgievsk (Modlin), Warsaw, Ivangorod (Dęblin), Dubno, Tighina etc. (Gruszecki, 1966: 200-203). A unique aspect was that Brest, as well as Bobruisk and Kiev Fortresses, were not situated near the national borders then, but rather served as a protective rear hub for military management and supply. The mentioned arc line of fortresses was erected in order to avoid possible German-Austrian attack deep into Russia as well as sealing off the territory of the Polish Kingdom (Łupienko, 2016: 266-267). In addition, the Brest fortress was one of the more modern defensive points of that time and could serve as a secure military command headquarters. *“This is also interesting, because the Brest Fortress was likely the only one within the Warsaw Military District during the Tsarist era that extended beyond*

*Congress Poland. It would even be possible to develop a historical route connecting these fortresses, including the Citadel in Warsaw and Modlin” (R 8).*

The next period of functioning of the Brest Fortress began in the 1860s and was not finished until the beginning of the First World War when two phases of modernisation occurred (Ansziperger, 2013). The reason was related to technological advancements and progress in the development of weapons and artillery. Previously, the fortress had a bastion character, but during the modernization and expansion of the fortifications, it became a circle stronghold system, with two lines of several external forts around the citadel located between them at distances of 6-7 km (Lawin & Stasiak, 2006) (Fig. 5). Of course, this history has remained deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Polish inhabitants from the Terespol area: *“As for the fortress’s symbolism, the locals have a more sentimental connection — they recall that their grandfathers helped build it on this side” (R 1).* Six of these forts and four of the other defense facilities are currently situated in Poland in the vicinity



**Figure 5.** Fragment of the historical Austrian-Hungarian map with the location of Brest-Litovsk Fortress printed in 1911

Source: Richter and Udalri (1911).

of the town and gmina Terespol and are largely neglected buildings with exception of the Powder Magazine in Terespol and Barracks near the village Kobylany which are serving as local Halls of Memory providing educational, cultural and exhibitional events. *"The sections of the Brest Fortress fortification are our brand. What matters most for a monument is its location — it has become a distinctive symbol of a certain place. This part of the forts, on our side, is bound to our history. There were partitions and occupations, but it was always our municipality, our land. It doesn't matter who built them or for what purpose — they are part of our cultural heritage, and we can take pride in them... These are interesting sites for enthusiasts who travel across Poland and Europe visiting defensive structures and fortresses" (R 4).* But these heritage monuments may not meet the expectations of every tourist: *"In Terespol there are forts of the Brest Fortress and the Powder Magazine. It's a specific kind of tourism — not everyone wants to travel to see fortifications and pieces of walls and concrete." (R 2).*

Continuing the historical account, it is worth emphasising that during World War I, the Brest Fortress did not play a significant defensive role, serving mainly as a logistical and railway hub for the Russian army. In 1915, following defeats in the defense of fortresses such as Novogeorgievsk, Osowiec, and Kovno, Russian forces avoiding encirclement abandoned Brest without engaging in battle with the Germans and Austrians, evacuating or destroying accumulated ammunition, equipment, and provisions. The city was burned down by 70%.

In December 1917, separatist negotiations between the Central Powers (German, Austro-Hungary, and Ottoman empires and Bulgaria) and Soviet Russia and Ukrainian People's Republic began in Brest, and in February-March 1918, were concluded. These crucial military and geopolitical peace discussions resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which withdrew Russia from World War I (Spalević & Jerotijević, 2023). The negotiations took place directly in the fortress

in the officers' salon building known as White Palace. Interestingly, Brest fell under the rule of the Ukrainian People's Republic as the center of Podlasie Region, but the future of this area had to be decided by a joint Ukrainian-German commission, taking into account the opinion of the local population. Nevertheless, de-facto administrative and military functions in Brest were carried out by the German stronghold crew until February 1919, when the city and fortress passed to the Second Polish Republic. During the Polish-Soviet War, Brest was occupied by Red Army units in August 1920 until their defeat in the Battle of Warsaw. In these military events, the fortress also did not play any significant defensive role. According to the Treaty of Riga in 1921, Brest became part of the Second Polish Republic as a capital of Polesie Voivodeship. A culturologist from the Terespol Commune identifies the next stage in the site's history as follows: *"The interwar period is known as the 'Polish period of the Brest Fortress.'" (R 4).* At that time, the significance of the construction was minimal, being used as barracks, a military depot, and prison. In the early 1930s, after the Brest Trials, the fortress housed ten political prisoners opposed to the Piłsudski Sanation regime, including Wincenty Witos, Wojciech Korfanty, and Herman Lieberman. **Respondent 8**, who is also a Polish academic scientist, likewise supported the symbolism and importance of this event for the historical memory of Poles: *"However, in history, Brest of Poland has also been remembered in various ways. For example, during the interwar period, we had the so-called 'Brest elections' ['Brest trials'] where in the Brest Fortress the leading Centrolew politicians were imprisoned... And creating a museum display of this, I think, would also make it more attractive for the Polish tourist."* Belarussian historian also extended and generalized this path: *"For [Polish] tourists, it is important to see the area that belonged to Poland in the interwar period. There is a sense of nostalgia, not so much among the younger generation, but an awareness that this area once belonged to Poland." (R 7).*

## Symbolism and the place of memory depending on nationality

In this chapter, the aim is to analyze perceptions of Brest Fortress as a comprehensive tourist product and a place of memory from the perspective of its contemporary symbolic image. It is also worth highlighting and comparing various significant modern historical and cultural events that are relevant to tourists from Poland, Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Germany, Austria, Israel and other countries.

Recreating the history of Brest Fortress is challenging due to its capture by three different forces during the Second World War. Initially, the Germans seized it from the Poles in September 1939, only to hand it over to the Soviets under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In Jun-July 1941, the Nazis (including German and Austrian military units) captured it again. Finally, in July of 1944, the USSR retook the fortress as the Red Army advanced westward across the former Polish border.

### For Poles

An interesting historical moment was that the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły, was located in Brest-on-the-Bug before its defense, from September 7 to September 13, 1939. Then, Polish soldiers (about 2000 to 2500) commanded by Brigade General Konstanty Plisowski valiantly defended Brest Fortress against the German XIX Panzer Corps (about 5000) of General Heinz Guderian from 14 to 17 of September. Despite being outnumbered and outgunned, Polish defenders held their ground for several days (Szafran, 2007). The resilience and bravery of the Polish soldiers in Brest became a symbol of their resistance against the German invasion. Ultimately, after fierce fighting, the fortress fell on September 17 and the Polish garrison left the town, but the defense efforts delayed the German advance and demonstrated Polish determination. The Poles lost about 1000 soldiers killed and

around 1300 taken prisoner. *"The defense in September 1939 took place on the other side and there was no defence here, but locals remember that Guderian's German troops massacred a withdrawing [Polish] medical convoy in Terespol, and that soldiers from the fortress's defense are buried here in the Orthodox cemetery."* (R 1). Additionally, on September 22, before Brest was transferred to the USSR, a joint German-Soviet military parade, led by General Heinz Guderian and Soviet Kombrig Semyon Krivoshein, was held. This event also symbolizes for visitors from Poland the negative commemoration *"of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, when Poland was divided. Brest belonged to Poland for 18 years... Many Polish families had lived in Brest..."*, as well as some tourists visiting this place in order *"to learn more about their ancestors. I have noticed exactly that Poles are more knowledgeable and interested in history, each of them creates their own narrative"* (R 5). Referring to the period of easing the Polish-Belarusian border regime before 2020 (Więckowski & Cyargeenka, 2019), it is worth noting the respondent's words: *"For Poles, Belarus was an exotic country, and they wanted to visit it... There is still a stereotype that the East is "wild," undeveloped, mysterious — a place of peace and nature. The Brest Fortress definitely attracts tourists. Many Poles wanted to come to the Brest Fortress, even just for a short while... occasionally for one or two hours during cycling rallies"* (R 3).

### For (Post)-Soviet people (Russians, Belarusians etc.)

In Soviet post-war historiography, the aforementioned events were rather omitted, and the Red Army's offensive into Eastern Poland started on September 17, 1939, was justified as defending brother Belarusians and Ukrainians from Nazi enslavement, without mentioning the Nazi-Soviet Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Akinchits, 1962; Naumenko, 1970). In contemporary official Belarusian historical discourse, the events of September 1939 are seen as having positive symbolic significance.

They marked the integration of Western Belarus, formerly part of the Second Polish Republic, with the Belarusian SSR, uniting the majority of the Belarusian people under one state entity for the first time in modern history, albeit within the framework of the USSR and under complete dependence on Moscow communist authorities. However, there is one hall in the Brest Fortress Museum dedicated to the defense by the Poles in 1939 and the "liberation march" of the Red Army and near the citadel lies a cemetery of Polish soldiers (Ganzer, 2011; 2017b). Yet, in contemporary literature, tourist guides, and websites, there is limited information about these events because this topic is somewhat not in trend of historical discourse in Belarus, Russia, and Poland alike.

The most significant aspect for tourists from Belarus, Russia, and some other former USSR countries is the symbolism of the defense of Brest Fortress in 1941, marking the beginning of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet people against Hitler's forces. The legendary Soviet version of the heroic defense in June and July 1941 highlights the perseverance of Red Army soldiers who resisted the numerically superior German forces for over a month. Despite lacking water, food, and ammunition, the Soviet patriots, driven by an indomitable will, fought to the last bullet, inflicting significant losses on the enemy. The exhausted and wounded surviving defenders, often unconscious, were either killed or taken prisoner. On 23 July 1941, the 32nd day of the war, Major Piotr Gavrillov, the last defender of the fortress, was captured. This symbolic narrative is largely based on the memoirs of Soviet citizens from that era, which were collected, edited, published, and popularized in the mid-1950s through novels by the writer and historian Sergey Smirnov (Smirnov, 1957a; 1957b; 1964) and through the war film *"The Immortal Garrison"* by the screenwriter Konstantin Simonov.

However, there are scholarly works that question the official legendary (post-)Soviet narrative regarding the existential significance of the fortress's defense. As evidence, they cite the relatively low number of German

casualties, with approximately 430 killed and around 580 wounded (Ganzer, 2017b). It is argued that within the first 10 days of the defense, between 6700 and 7800 soldiers out of the over 9000-strong garrison were taken prisoner by the Nazis, while the exact number of Soviet soldiers killed is unknown but estimated to be at least 2000 (Ganzer, 2014). After 8-9 days of intense fighting, the fortress fell. This is supported by the fact that on July 2, 1941, the 45th Wehrmacht Division, which had stormed the fortress, left Brest, leaving behind only about 130 men as a protective garrison. These remaining troops immediately began executing Jews (about 4000) as well as non-Jewish communists and Soviet officials, approximately 400 people in total (Ganzer, 2011).

It's crucial to ask, why did the Soviet authorities choose Brest Fortress and turn it into a place of remembrance? Firstly, the answer is provided by the main popularizer of the subject, Smirnov, who states that the military-strategic significance of this battle was small compared to the defense of Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad, etc. However, the writer emphasizes the symbolism of this defense, noting that in the first weeks and months of the war, there were hundreds of similar incidents where Soviet soldiers and border guards, besieged by the enemy in various cities and points of resistance, did not surrender but defended to the last breath (Smirnov, 1964). This delayed the German forces and their rapid advance. Local defeat in defense of the Brest Fortress long outdated both militarily and geostrategically may be compared even to the narrative of the Greek legend of the 300 Spartans: *"It was a manipulation made long ago, but many people support it for their own purposes – the heroism of men who fought for the Fatherland"* (R 5)

On the other hand, the Brest Fortress was located directly near the west national border, and its Cholm and Terespol Gates, with their red brick walls and gates, symbolically represent the entrance to the USSR, where the color red was highly admired. Lastly, the most important military memorial sites like Kursk, Stalingrad,

and Sevastopol, etc. did not reveal the questions: What happened at the beginning of the war? What was the Red Army doing? How did the Nazis manage to reach Moscow? The example of Brest Fortress gives the spectacular answer (Ganzer, 2011). Furthermore, this negative event, defeat, was reinterpreted in positive terms, leading to *“the narrative perception of the Fortress as a Monument of Victory in the Great Patriotic War”* (R 5). Emphasizing the symbolic case study of the fortress’s defense—that it is one case among thousands—is similar to the narrative found at the Khatyn Memorial Complex near Minsk, which commemorates the thousands of villages destroyed by Nazis both in Belarus and throughout the occupied USSR areas (Marples, 2012: 444-45). A similar, subsequent example of collective recognition was the awarding of the title *“Hero City”* to Minsk in 1974, which further acknowledged the contributions and sacrifices of thousands of Belarusian partisans and underground fighters.

A decade earlier, in 1965 Brest Fortress was included in the list of Hero-Cities not so much due to lobbying by leaders of BSSR, although its temporarily resolved the issue of Belarus’s representation, but rather as a concession to the public’s desire to remember the war not only in geopolitical terms but in a local, familial, and personal scale (Boltunova & Yegorova, 2022: 91-92). In this case, the post-Stalin authorities aimed to satisfy clear needs of society by attempting to soften the collective trauma associated with wartime occupation and captivity, including the rehabilitation and heroization of the Brest Fortress defenders (Kamenir, 2024). Indeed, it was Smirnov’s books that vividly brought the personal stories of the interviewed veterans, civilians, and their family members to Soviet readers, portraying their experiences in rich detail (Smirnov, 1957b).

Differences in the symbolic perception of the Brest Fortress between contemporary Russian and Belarusian tourists were instanced by **informant 5**: *“Russians try to appropriate this site of memory as a symbol of their glory. In Brest, there are many Russians who proudly walk around with flags, trying to mark*

*someone else’s territory, not even during demonstrations, but at bus stops, markets. Belarusians would not behave in this way at a site of memory in Russia, carrying the Belarusian flag.”* Belarus is a smaller state without imperial tradition and clearly articulated politics of memory, and conversely *“In Russia, propaganda functions more effectively. Tourists come in order to feel directly a sense of nostalgia for the past, even if that past was destructive and dark. The Brest Fortress is perceived as an object of nostalgia, in a negative sense. From my own experience working in the Museum, I saw that after the release of the film “Brest Fortress” (2010), crowds of people came and asked: “Was it here that people were killed?” And I would answer that this was more an invention, an artistic element, something that did not happen in reality. For all, it did not matter whether it was true.”* (R 5) The symbolism of the Brest Fortress also began to serve as an element of the state’s restoring post-communist ideology and propaganda: *“This theme, I would say, has been instrumentalized by the authorities. And therefore, part of the tourists consists of staged groups, such as those sent from Russia on ‘memory trains,’ mainly youth, to reinforce Belarus-Russia binding. It is a highly integrating site on a political and patriotic level, where the message is that we all fought together”* (R 6).

The Brest Fortress Memorial has also been a symbol of Belarus on the international stage, attracting numerous foreign delegations and political leaders even during Soviet times, including Yasser Arafat (1971) and Raul Castro (1976). Twenty-first-century visits included also the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II in 2001, former Russian President Boris Yeltsin in 2002, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in 2010. Therefore, it can be said that the Brest Fortress symbolically underscores Belarus’s deep-rooted historical connections with Russia, portraying them as essential elements of Belarusian geopolitics, history, and culture (Marples, 2006).

Interestingly, the official narrative highlights that the heroes of the defense of the

Brest Fortress included not only Belarusians and Russians but also other Soviet peoples. For instance, the Tatar Major Piotr Gavrilov, who survived the war and the Jewish Red Commissar Efim Fomin, who was captured by the Nazis and executed. (Marples, 2012: 443). Notably, there are even several contemporary academic works regarding a couple of hundreds of Kazakh defenders from the 125th Regiment and the 131st Light Artillery Regiment of the Red Army (Akhmetova 2018a; 2018b).

### For Ukrainians

For Ukrainians, the defense of Brest Fortress is not a significant national memorial, resonating mainly with those who share a post-Soviet mentality (Fedor et al., 2017a). However, prior to the events of 2020-2022, Ukrainian tourists ranked fourth (more than 2000 persons) in 2018 in visiting the fortress after Belarusians, Russians and Poles (Vladimirow, 2019). For some radical nationalist Ukrainian scientists, Brest, along with the Polesia region (southern Belarus), is even considered a historically Ukrainian area – ethnically, linguistically, and otherwise – citing its strong connection to Kievan Rus and later to the Galician-Volhynian principality (Leoniuk, 1996; 2010). This extreme viewpoint is supported by the fact that Brest and the region belonged *de jure* to the Ukrainian People's Republic (1918-1919), and later to the Nazi's Reichskommissariat Ukraine (1941-1944).

From the perspective of **Jewish and Holocaust** research, the memorial complex does not sufficiently address this issue, although Brest has a small museum "Jews of Brest" outside the fortress. Nevertheless, during the war up to 20,000 Jews, including residents of Brest and Terespol as well as those deported from other regions, fell victim (Ganzer & Paškovič, 2010: 92-94). Moreover, for visitors this area is of symbolic significance, evoking history through local and familial memory: *"We also have British and Americans, who are searching for their Jewish roots, as their ancestors left before the First or Second World War"* (R 1).

### For German speaking tourists

Among European tourists, the most prominent group comprises German-speaking visitors, whom respondents identified simply as "Germans," without distinguishing whether they were citizens of Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scandinavian. Respondents confirmed their interest in both the Polish and Belarusian sections, including historical significance as well as family and business ties: *"From outside Poland, Germans are definitely the most numerous tourists, because groups travel to visit the forts of the Brest Fortress [on the Polish side]. Previously Germans would always go to see the Fortress and the Citadel [in Belarus]. They could leave their car in Terespol, take a scheduled bus that went right to the fortress, or use trains"* (R 1). Likewise, for the Belarusian section: *"From my experience, Germans also stand out, as many of them have either familial connections in Belarus or business interests there."* (R 9). As for German-speaking tourists visiting the museum complex in Brest, *"in fact, they make up a rather insignificant share of all visitors. It appears that they tend to perceive the site in its current form primarily as a Soviet memorial, reflecting the events and historical narrative of 1941"* (R 6). For Austrians interested in World War II history, the defense of Brest Fortress may be of particular interest due to the military fate of the 45th Wehrmacht Infantry Division, which directly besieged the Brest Fortress in 1941 and initially was formed in Upper Austria in Linz (Ganzer, 2017b).

### Tourist traffic to the "Brest Hero Fortress" memorial and museum complex and to the heritage and memorial sites of the Terespol Bridgehead

Firstly, the Museum of the Defense of Brest Fortress was opened on November 8, 1956. In 1965, the Brest Fortress was awarded the honorary title of "Hero Fortress," an unusual exception amid the trend of naming cities such

as Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk, Odessa, Stalingrad, and other cities of military glory in the USSR as “Hero Cities” (Naumenko, 1970: 129). Consequently, the construction of the war memorial complex “Brest Hero Fortress” began in the late 1960s and was completed in 1971. The memorial is located on the Central Island of Brest Fortress – the Citadel, and in the eastern part of the Kobrin fortification, covering an area of 70 hectares. Works of monumental sculpture and architecture harmoniously blend with the ruins of the fortress. The main elements of the complex are the Main Entrance, the sculpture composition “Thirst,” the main monument “Courage,” the Bayonet Obelisk (Fig. 6), the three-tier necropolis, the Eternal Flame of Glory, and the Ceremonial Square, which adjoin the building of the Museum of the Defense of Brest Fortress and the ruins of the White Palace (Felix & Tuzik, 1988: 31).

Since 1999, the “5th Fort” Museum has been a branch of the memorial. On June 22, 2014, a new exhibition, “Museum of War – Territory of Peace,” was added to the memorial in the South-Eastern Barracks. From 1997 to 2011, and again from 2018 to 2020, the Brest Fortress underwent major renovations, restorations, and museification of its structures. The complex has been offering both

permanent and traveling thematic exhibitions as well as thematic and sightseeing excursions, which have been changed multiple times throughout the museum’s operation.

First of all, returning to the past, some interesting mentions of attendance were found in literature from the USSR era. For example, one guidebook highlights that every day, two Berlin-Moscow tourist trains arrive at the Brest station. Additionally, in 1960, over 40 special trains with tourists arrived from East Germany, Poland, and France, and some European countries (the UK, Belgium) established bus routes to the USSR through Brest (Akinchits, 1962: 112-113). The museum complex of the Brest Hero Fortress attracts thousands of domestic and international tourists, symbolizing Soviet soldiers’ bravery and patriotism. The historical and economic review of Brest from 1970 reported that over the past ten years, about 4 million people had visited the Heroic Fortress (Naumenko, 1970: 131). Tourists from all republics of the USSR and more than 70 foreign countries visited the site. Another tourist guide from the early 1980s stated that approximately 10 million people visited the Brest Fortress over the past five years, including youth and Komsomol members laying flowers (Pokidov, 1982: 26). There are also confirmations from later researchers that the

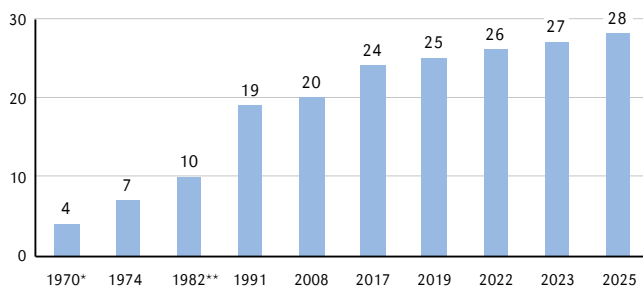


**Figure 6.** The Brest Fortress Memorial in Belarus honors the heroic 1941 Soviet defense against Operation Barbarossa. Known as a “Hero Fortress,” the site preserves the original ruins and features towering Soviet-era monuments – including the 33.5-meter Courage Monument and a 100-meter Bayonet Obelisk

museum, becoming a new “Soviet pilgrimage site” in the 1970s, attracted between 600,000 and 700,000 visitors annually (Ganzer, 2017a).

By the summer of 1974, the Brest Complex had welcomed 7 million visitors from over 100 countries, rising to 19 million by 1991 (Beshanov, 2009). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, visitor numbers diminished more than thirteen-fold in three years, and funding was nearly cut off. Once a prominent USSR landmark and a soviet wide center for patriotic education, the Brest Memorial Complex became just another oversized museum in Belarus,

actually unnecessary at that time due to the decreasing curiosity about the Soviet past and the growing interest in Belarusian national history and culture. Before 2008, it had attracted around 20 million visitors from 130 countries (Beshanov, 2009). Media reports also indicate that the Brest Complex was visited altogether by 24 million tourists in 2017, 25 million in 2019, 26 million in 2022, and 27 million in 2023 (Vladimirov, 2019). According to official state statistics, in 2022 the memorial complex was visited by 520,000 people, and in 2024 by more than 600,000 (BELTA, 2025) (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). But these



**Figure 7.** Total number of visits to the Heroic Brest Fortress Museum Complex in the years 1970-2025 in millions

\* Total number of visitors during the last 10 years, before 1970

\*\* Total number of visitors during the last 5 years, before 1982

Source: author's own elaboration on the base of literature and data from the tourism industry media



**Figure 8.** Tourists viewing a schematic map of the entire fortress

Source: All photos taken by M. Więckowski.

figures are questioned: *"I think the number is quite realistic, but with an asterisk. The number of tickets sold and the number of visitors are different things. Our economy is planned, and the visitation plan is set by the Ministry of Culture, while the administration of the Brest Fortress tries to achieve it."* (R 5). This leads to the suspicion that the reported number of tourists is artificially enlarged: *"part of them are definitely not tourists, they are just visitors: schoolchildren obliged to attend, participants in military parades and oaths, some gatherings and rallies..."* (R 6).

Information about the seasonality and structure of foreign tourist traffic can be derived from a journalistic interview with the Director of the complex, Grigory Bysuk, who provides data from 2018. *"We welcomed over 4000 groups from Russia, which accounts for approximately 40 percent of all foreign visitors. Poland ranks second with 1066 groups. Interestingly, despite the events in Ukraine, 112 groups visited us from there, totaling more than 2000 people. Next are Latvia and Lithuania, with over 500 visitors. China also actively visits us, with more than 300 visitors. Germany had 217 visitors, and the United States had 172 visitors. And so on. We even had tourists from Australia, in three small groups"* (Vladimirow, 2019). This is also confirmed by **Expert 5**, with an interesting remark: *"Most likely, so. By feel, there were slightly more Poles than Ukrainians. But I could have mistaken Ukrainians for Russians... When I was still working, there were many Poles and Germans, not individually, not in twos or threes, not in families, but indeed entire buses!"*

Many visitors of various nationalities pass through Brest in transit to or from European countries. Additionally, the museum complex in Brest Fortress sees the highest attendance from May to late autumn. There is a small tourist season in December and January, coinciding with the New Year holidays in Belarus and Russia. The Memorial and Museum Complex experiences peak daily visitor numbers on May 9th, the anniversary of the Victory Day, with around 70,000 visitors in 2017,

and on June 22nd, the anniversary of the start of the Great Patriotic War, with up to 15,000-20,000 visitors.

On the Polish side of the border, only two heritage sites of the so-called Terespol Bridgehead which currently houses the local Halls of Memory, are officially opened to tourist visitation, and visitor numbers there are significantly lower compared to the Brest Complex. The former Powder Depot in Terespol city has, over the past five to six years, attracted between approximately 700 and 2100 visitors annually (R1). Another site, the Inter-Fortification structure – Defensive Barracks in Kobylany, is visited by around 900 to 2200 people per year (R 4). The majority of visitors are Polish, followed by tourists from German-speaking countries, while Belarusian and Russian visitors are relatively few.

## Discussion and conclusions

The research conducted, both conceptual and empirical, provides a basis for better understanding. Comprehending the variability of borders, territorial affiliation, and its impact on the perception of places remains an under-researched phenomenon. Preparing for this variability, which is important for understanding heritage, both for education and tourism, can also support justifications for the value of Brest Fortress as a heritage site at any spatial scale. This may also be important in exploring this value in the context of applying for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The changes of meaning, perception, and even memory play an important role in this phenomenon. However, consequently, the region's name – serving as a vessel for shared values and collective imagery – becomes a key element in fostering internal regional cohesion (Wysocka-Niemiec et al., 2025).

The area of the contemporary Brest region has always been situated at a borderland. On the one hand, there were the advantages of being near the border – interactions, culture, trade, transportation, transit, foreign capital, and more. On the other hand, there were

drawbacks – destruction brought by numerous armed conflicts and wars, colonial policy of the powers leading to the destruction of heritage (Grybko, 1996: 14-15). Brest is also an interesting tourist destination, with a rich history, changing identity and memory.

After conducting thorough research and analysis, combining conceptual and empirical aspects, we can propose a table combining the specificity of the issues discussed (Tab. 1).

Additionally, to summarize the most important aspects in the specific understanding of tourist use and heritage and memory for individual nationalities, Table 2 has been proposed.

**Firstly**, when discussing the limitations of the conducted research, it is important to underline the human factor in the perception of reality, as reflected in the narratives of the respondents. Their accounts inevitably carry elements of personal engagement and

subjectivity, which, despite efforts to supplement them with additional data, introduces a degree of uncertainty in the analysis of how tourists perceive the symbolism of the Brest Fortress. As one of the informants accurately noted: *“It’s hard to assess the exact visitor profile just by looking at a car with German or Swedish plates – it could be a local, a Belarusian, or a tourist from somewhere abroad.”* **(R 2)** This observation underscores the challenge of delineating clear categories of visitors and the interpretative complexities inherent in studying symbolic and heritage sites located on the borderland.

**Secondly**, the research revealed a clear dichotomy in the narratives collected from the Polish and Belarusian sides concerning the interpretation of the Terespol fortifications and the Brest Fortress Memorial Complex, respectively. This divergence was evident both in the analysis of in-depth interview

**Table 1.** Thematic differences in understanding between the sides of the border

| Categories   | Terespol (Bridgehead facilities)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Brest (Fortress Memorial Complex)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Heritage     | Local, familial level                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Domestic and International levels                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Symbolism    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predomination of the commemorative, victimizational and local historical narratives</li> <li>• Part of Russian Empire Fortress</li> <li>• Important symbol of shared, though difficult, Polish-Soviet history</li> </ul>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predomination of the heroic and victorical narratives</li> <li>• Crucial part of (post-)Communist ideology in Belarus and Russia</li> <li>• Place of beginning the last “Big War”</li> <li>• Shocking effect for modern children and youth through brutal death-related and military narratives</li> </ul>                                                             |
| Memory       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ancestors built this fortress</li> <li>• Military events of September 1939</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heroic dependence of Brest Fortress by soviet warriors in June-July 1941</li> <li>• “Polish” interwar period of Brest Fortress, – “Brest trials”, political prison in 1930th?</li> <li>• Place of Holocaust</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                 |
| Border(land) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not a cross-border product</li> <li>• Border restrictions, bad image of Belarussian border</li> </ul>                                                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From the beginning site exists not being cross-border product</li> <li>• International tourists’ frequency strictly depends on border regime</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Tourist Hub  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional dimension</li> <li>• Tourist movement contains about a several thousand visitor per year</li> <li>• Since 2020-2021 local tourism hub on axis “north-souhs”</li> <li>• Green Velo Eastern Bicycle Route</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International and domestic levels</li> <li>• Huge tourist flow with hundred of thousands visitors per year</li> <li>• “Gate to Europe”</li> <li>• Good connection with other tourist destination in Belarus – Białowieża Forest, Mir, Niesvizh UNESCO sites, and capital Minsk</li> <li>• Good connection with tourism emission areas in Belarus and Russia</li> </ul> |

**Table 2.** National differences between the sides of the border

| Nationality                | Terespol (Bridgehead facilities)                                                                                                                                               | Brest (Fortress Memorial Complex)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Polish tourists            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1st place in tourist frequency</li><li>• local brand</li><li>• place for various local cultural and commemoration activities</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3rd place in tourist frequency before 2020</li><li>• Polish tourists are more knowledgeable and interested in history</li><li>• Exotic, mysterious “Wild East” area</li><li>• Nostalgic tourism</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                |
| Belarussian tourists       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extremely low tourist frequency</li><li>• Few Belarusians know about these objects</li></ul>                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1st place in tourist frequency</li><li>• “Incorrect tourists”, or rather visitors, ideological forced tourism</li><li>• Site of patriotism, state ideology and propaganda</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Russian tourists           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extremely low tourist frequency</li><li>• Most Russians don’t know about these objects</li></ul>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2nd place in tourist frequency</li><li>• Centrum of patriotism, former USSR</li><li>• Place of the Beginning of the Great Patriotic War</li><li>• Incorrect and perversive perception created by fictional literature and cinema</li><li>• object of nostalgia in a negative sense</li><li>• Try to appropriate this site of memory as a symbol of their glory</li></ul> |
| “German-speaking” tourists | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2nd place in tourist frequency</li><li>• Fortifications and military sites</li></ul>                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• insignificant share of all visitors</li><li>• perceive the site in its current form primarily as a Soviet memorial, reflecting the events and historical narrative of 1941</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                     |

data – reflecting respondents’ direct perceptions of the studied issues (the first level of perception) – and in their accounts of how visitors perceive these sites (the second level of perception). These findings were further complemented by the author’s own observations and secondary data analysis (the third level of perception). The results, summarized in the accompanying Tables, provide a synthetic but discussible overview of the identified symbolic interpretative differences between the two sides of the border.

**A third issue** concerns the question of whether the Brest Fortress can genuinely be regarded as a cross-border tourist product. Under current conditions, however, multiple barriers limit this potential. As **respondent 9** observed, *“The Brest Fortress is rather a site for the Belarusian public and for children. It is not a cross-border product. The language barrier is our key issue. Cross-borderness is important for tourists. ‘Visa-free’ somehow helps, but nevertheless, the general political situation and the war [in Ukraine] don’t help.”* At the same time, other perspectives highlight

the symbolic and experiential value of the border itself. As noted by another **informant 8**, *“The border between two political systems, with all its restrictions, may itself be perceived by many as a tourist attraction. The border can actually be something that makes a tourist product more appealing, enhancing its attractiveness. The borderland as such possesses a certain mystery and a sense of uniqueness.”* It is therefore important to underline that, despite its geographical position and symbolic potential, the Brest Fortress cannot currently be classified as a genuinely cross-border tourist product, primarily due to the difficulty of crossing the Polish–Belarusian border (Kon-dratova & Shlapenko, 2021; Studzieniecki et al., 2022). Nonetheless, between 1 January 2018 and 2020–2021, the introduction of the *Brest Tourism and Recreation Zone* with a visa-free regime marked an initial attempt to ease border restrictions and foster limited forms of cross-border mobility (Cyargeenka & Więckowski, 2020; Cyargeenka, 2023).

**Fourthly**, both the actual number of visitors and the symbolic significance of the

Brest Hero-Fortress Memorial Complex as a flagship site of heritage and memory remain subjects of debate. Many of its visitors cannot be regarded as real tourists but rather as individuals compelled to visit the site for ideological or educational reasons (Cyargeenka, 2025). Therefore, it is difficult to accurately assess how the site's symbolism is perceived within the authoritarian context of Belarus and Russia, where collective memory is shaped under ideological pressure. For some Russian visitors, this perception is superficial and trend-driven: *"It's fashionable now to say, 'I went to the Brest Fortress,' but they don't attach any deeper patriotic meaning to it. They stop by the Fortress, then head to the shopping mall."* (R9) Moreover, many Russian tourists seek experiences modeled on the patriotic film "Brest Fortress" (2010), explicitly requesting guided tours that *"follow the movie – show us the gates and scenes just like in the film."* (R 6) Another issue concerning perception and symbolism among younger generations can be described as follows: *"For visiting school students, it is often a shock, as they live in a completely different, digital world, while museums remain in another one. The form of presentation is outdated."* (R 5).

**Fifthly**, it raises many controversial issues and demonstrates the applied nature of the research. This is particularly significant in light of the 2024 application submitted by the Belarusian and Russian authorities to UNESCO to recognize the Second World War Memorial Complexes of the Brest Fortress and Mamayev Kurgan in Volgograd as trans-boundary World Cultural Heritage sites. Thorough examination of the initiative launched in 2024, together with the earlier initiative from 2004 to 2015/2016, when the Brest Fortress was included on the UNESCO Tentative List, may provide an important foundation for further research and scholarly debate, expert evaluation, with important implications for tourism and heritage management, and trans- and cross-border cooperation.

**In conclusion**, the article presents substantial conceptual and empirical material that brings the researched area closer

to the reader. The research results indicate that heritage and symbolism in historical, cultural, geopolitical, and especially war and military contexts constitute key elements of tourists' interpretations of the Brest Fortress, confirming the importance of memorial sites in shaping both national and cross-border historical narratives in neighboring (Poland, Belarus, Ukraine) as well as more distant (Russia, Germany etc.) countries, often viewed through different conceptual lenses.

The paper indicated that military heritage sites situated in border regions can function as typical "touristic hubs of memory," where regional, national, and geopolitical symbols intersect and overlap. Brest Fortress depicts a heritage object where the historical memory shapes the perception of the border not only as an administrative or political boundary located on the external borders of the EU but also as a symbolic space. The findings suggest that tourism functioning in the Brest Fortress area should take into account the multilayered character of memory and the diverse symbolic interpretations of visitors and stakeholders from different nationalities. Owing to the limited number of IDs and the nature of the study area, the results should be taken into account exploratory. Future research may integrate a wider spectrum of attendees and compare perceptions of analogous locations in other border regions of Europe.

Editors' note:

Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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## Appendix 1. Information about Respondents

| N  | Citizenship | Sex | Interest area                   | Sector                        | Institution & Affiliation                                                                                                 | Interview date | Interview place | Heritage | Symbolism | Memory | Border(land) | Tourist Hub | PL | BY | RU | GER | Others |
|----|-------------|-----|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|----------|-----------|--------|--------------|-------------|----|----|----|-----|--------|
| R1 | PL          | M   | Terespol Bridgehead             | Museum/<br>Local government   | Hall of Memory in Terespol Powder Magazine                                                                                | 18.10.2024     | Terespol        | +        | +         | +      | +            | +           | +  | +  | -  | +   | +      |
| R2 | PL          | M   | Terespol Bridgehead             | Local government              | Terespol city office                                                                                                      | 18.10.2024     | Terespol        | +        | +         | -      | +            | +           | +  | +  | -  | +   | +      |
| R3 | PL          | F   | Terespol Bridgehead             | Culture /<br>Local government | Municipal Center of Culture, Sports and Recreation in Terespol                                                            | 18.10.2024     | Terespol        | -        | +         | -      | +            | +           | +  | +  | -  | -   | -      |
| R4 | PL          | M   | Terespol Bridgehead             | Culture/<br>Local government  | Terespol Commune Cultural Center / Hall of Memory in Kobylany Inter-fort Defense Barracks                                 | 18.10.2024     | Kobylany        | +        | +         | +      | +            | -           | -  | +  | +  | +   | +      |
| R5 | BY          | F   | Brest Fortress Memorial Complex | Culture / NGO /<br>Museum*    | Project "Atlas of the Brest-Litovsk Fortress" / Brest Fortress Development Fund* / Museum Complex "Heroic Brest Fortress" | 03.12.2024     | on-line         | +        | +         | +      | +            | -           | +  | +  | +  | +   | +      |
| R6 | BY          | F   | Brest Fortress Memorial Complex | Culture / NGO                 | Cultural&Creative management / Brest Fortress Development Fund*                                                           | 13.12.2024     | on-line         | +        | +         | +      | +            | +           | +  | +  | +  | +   | +      |

| N  | Citizenship | Sex | Interest area        | Sector             | Institution & Affiliation                 | Interview date | Interview place | Heritage | Symbolism | Memory | Border(land) | Tourist Hub | PL | BY | RU | GER | Others |
|----|-------------|-----|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|----------|-----------|--------|--------------|-------------|----|----|----|-----|--------|
| R7 | BY          | M   | International expert | Science / Tourism* | PhD student in History / tourist guide*   | 12.09.2024     | Warsaw          | +        | +         | +      | +            | -           | +  | -  | +  | -   | -      |
| R8 | PL          | M   | International expert | Science            | Professor of Geography                    | 04.10.2024     | Warsaw          | +        | +         | +      | +            | +           | +  | +  | -  | -   | -      |
| R9 | BY          | F   | International expert | Tourism            | Co-founder of a travel company in Belarus | 16.10.2024     | on-line         | -        | +         | +      | +            | +           | +  | +  | +  | +   | +      |

\* - Previous experience

Respondents' citizenship and Tourists' origin: PL - Poland, BY - Belarus, RU - Russia, GER - "German-speaking"