THE CROSSROADS
Raymond Krushchyanas

Linking up Russia’s railways with those of Europe at Brest is not an easy task, perhaps because the track widths do not match. Train delays are caused by the change from the European railway gauge to the wider Russian one, a choice made in the 1840s in a conscious attempt to prevent the possibility of western attack by railway. The history of the region suggests that the precaution was far from paranoid. But even in peacetime, the bustling railway station in Brest has always been the major entry point into Russia from the West. Around the battered trains bound for Warsaw or Minsk swarm crowds of luggage laden characters, whose clandestine border trade activity bears witness to close links between Poland and Belarus. There also are elegant trains of uncrowded sleeping cars, bound for Paris or Berlin. For their passengers, Brest with its unnerving delays and even Belarus itself is but a nuisance on the trunk road between Russia and the West. A short ride from the station is one of the major symbols of Soviet resistance to Germany in the Second World War the famous border fortress of Brest which was besieged and defended to the last man under German attack in 1941. This defense earned Brest the distinction of being called the premier Hero city, but also left it fully destroyed. Aside from the gloomy ruins of the fortress and the frenzy of the station, it was the ultimate Soviet city of standardized apartment blocks that could have been anywhere in the USSR.

THE CROSSROADS
Stanley D. Brunn

The waters of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers near Cairo, Illinois do not blend smoothly. To a towboat captain pushing a tightly strapped barge up river, the Mississippi’s thicker brown waters become distinct from the thinner and creamier Ohio, supporting writer Jonathon Raban’s observation that the mixing of the waters from the two rivers was “a confluence of thick machine oil and rosewater...so different that it was hard to believe they could fuse into a single element without curdling.” At the junction itself, the tow will head one way or the other, but this is only the first of many channel choices the pilot will make. Within a few hundred miles, more channels appear as the Missouri and Illinois flow into the Mississippi, while a shorter reach along the Ohio would encounter the Tennessee, Cumberland, and Wabash. In fact, decisions made along this stretch of streams could ultimately lead boaters in all compass directions because at this mid-continent meeting point, north meets south and east grades into west. But the crossroads where the waters mix in an uneasy union is a truly a place of transition, and the primary bonds of the people here are to regions on the outside.
BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST

Some atlases have a two-page spread of Europe out to the Urals, and there is one section of the map that usually ends up in the page binding. Perhaps this fact is symbolic of the mixed identity of the Crossroads: its history, political boundaries, and exchanges of dominant ethnicities all bear witness to a place with a turbulent location. The story of the Crossroads is that of Russia’s borderland, for centuries caught in a devastating tug of war between Russia and the West. With fortunes of the contending sides shifting many times, their overlapping imprints created a region where the transition from Russia to Belarus to Poland is nearly imperceptible, a violent playing field facilitated by a lack of physical barriers to movement.

The fortress of Brest guards what is in fact a narrow bottleneck opening the easiest road from Europe into Russia. To the south along the river Pripet’ are formidable marshes and forests, nearly impassable for mass movements of peoples and armies. To the north, ancient glaciation erected barriers of barren sandy hills covered with dense pine forests and surrounded with thousands by lakes. Between lies an elevated watershed known as the Belaya Russian Ridge that goes all the way from Brest to Smolensk. In this amphibian land of rivers, lakes and marshes, the Ridge offers the only convenient dry route from the West into the Core of Russia. Not surprisingly, ever since the first Russo Polish conflicts in the 16th century, the Crossroads has been a veritable theater of war, and the axis from Brest to Moscow became the corridor of overland invasions.

While the Crossroads includes portions of western Russia and northern Ukraine, Belarus takes up much of the region. The heroic role of the Crossroads as first line of defense against invaders from the West is epitomized by the popular image of Belarus known to all people of the former USSR: that of the indomitable “Partisan Republic” which withstood so much abuse from Hitler’s forces. But geography was no friend to the Crossroads, and the landscape allowed armies to roll relatively quickly even over

BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

The Crossroads of the United States pops up all over the place in an atlas: smaller sectional maps may have portions of it variously in the Northeast or the Central region or the Southeast. Because it is a region which is everywhere and nowhere at once, it has a poor identity for many Americans. Sometimes, the area has been called “The Border South,” presenting the image of a transition zone, particularly during the Civil War when it was torn between the Union and Confederacy. Culturally, the region is definitely more southern than northern. On the other hand, its economic orientation is North, not South. Agricultural and industrial economies in southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio as well as central Kentucky are tied strongly to urban centers in the Northeast. Yet to say this region is merely a transition zone would do disservice to its full identity. Perhaps the Crossroads is just a place of leftovers and “between-ness” for it does indeed borrow from each of the surrounding regions. The Crossroads does not have the far more prosperous economy of the Heartland or the Breadbasket, and the irregularity of its meres and bounds land survey contrasts with flat geometric terrain north of the Ohio river. It is culturally close to the Old Mountains, but is far more densely settled and less marginal economically. Even the Ozarks, which many geographers would regard as an outpost of Appalachia, are far better suited for agriculture, are more actively farmed, and enjoy higher educational standards, to say nothing of the recent influx of amenity-seeking transplants (tourists and retirees) from the north. Perhaps the Crossroads is exactly as the name implies: a transition or “fusion” zone where transportation lines criss-cross the territory of mid-America - a region smack in the middle, a bridge for the country’s traffic, both literally and culturally.

The truth seems to be that the Crossroads is all of these, and yet the sum is much more than the parts merely added up. If the region is a cultural transition zone and a
geographic “borrower,” it is because its neighbors to the north and south were engaged in a back-and-forth interplay of cultures and politics across the region, leaving deep footprints on the Crossroads landscape. Each imprint of the crazy dance pattern of North and South stayed, and somehow, when the dust settled, a distinct region emerged.

The Crossroads straddles the confluence of the country’s three greatest rivers - the Mississippi, Ohio, and Missouri - and in the pre-railroad era this was the natural transportation intersection for the continent’s interior. This water route’s northern section is the St.Lawrence waterway opening up into the Great Lakes, while the southern channels are the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. The role of the link between the two is the easy portage between the headwaters of rivers flowing respectively into the Great Lakes and the Ohio-Mississippi system. Until 1763 both terminals of this great river arc were controlled by the French, who were firmly established in Montreal and New Orleans. Realizing early that the region held the key position on the St. Lawrence-Mississippi axis, the French established trading outposts within the Crossroads as early as 1701-1703. Finally they founded Saint Louis, which was to eclipse its predecessors as the great midway city, near the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri in 1763, the same year that France lost all of its American territory: Quebec to Britain and the Louisiana territory to Spain.

But by that time a new player was emerging in the fight for the interior - the thirteen British coastal colonies. The French were spread too thinly across their huge territory and their trade was almost exclusively with the indigenous populations. The coastal colonies, on the other hand, had built up sufficient demographic pressure to make westward colonization relentless once they could bridge the Appalachians. In the early 19th century, the decisive role in the fight for the continental dominance belonged not to the old French North-South trade axis, but to the East-West axis of American frontier movement along the Ohio-Missouri line.
and Lithuania (which included Belarus) as early as the 14th century. A geographer attempting to draw the boundaries of the Crossroads in other directions may well decide it is a “leftover” region, less distinct than its neighbors with more precise characteristics. The region includes small portions of adjacent Lithuania, Russia, and Ukraine, all marked by dense forests and peculiar, in-between cultures. The identity of these three interfaces is so fuzzy that native residents define themselves simply as “locals,” rather than by any ethnic label.

A certain “watery” elusiveness of the region’s character seems to mirror its amphibian environment. Plenty of rain, a water-retaining forest canopy, and widespread marshes account for an extremely dense network of rivers and lakes. Spring floods inundate large areas and are frequently of catastrophic dimensions. But if rivers endanger life in the Crossroads, they also once provided an excellent network of natural roads. The Belorussian Ridge that forms the spine of the region is the watershed between river basins that empty into the Baltic, Black, and Caspian seas. Since the watershed is low, the rivers here were easily linked by portages, forming the great interior waterway system. In the times of Kievan Rus’, the region found itself in the very middle of the Varangian-to-Greek waterway that had been so important to the development of the Russian hearth in the North, and the system of portages opened access to Novgorod, the Baltic and Muscovy. In the western direction, the Dniester’s tributaries nearly interlock with the tributaries of rivers that penetrate the heartland of Poland. Hence the region was the roundabout in the movement of people and trade between all parts of the Slavic realm.

The Wilderness Road through the Cumberland and Pine Mountain gaps and the Ohio’s southern tributaries served as natural access roads for expansion westward, and it was also the line of least resistance. The entire territory between the Ohio and Tennessee rivers had no permanent Native American settlement and was used as neutral hunting ground. As early as 1763, the Proclamation line that elsewhere limited white settlement to the Atlantic coast and eastern Appalachian slopes traced a sharp inland wedge into the lands between the Ohio and Cumberland rivers ceded by the Indians. By the 1790s the area roughly corresponding to the Kentucky Bluegrass was the only continuously populated region west of the mountains, and Kentucky (originally part of Virginia) became the first state west of the Appalachians. Mounting pressure by American colonists helped Thomas Jefferson persuade France to sell the Louisiana territory (which it had only just retaken from Spain) to the United States in 1803. Jefferson then commissioned Lewis and Clark to explore the lands beyond the Mississippi. Saint Louis soon became the gateway to the western lands they mapped and described.

As population growth and the political call to extend the United States’ control across the continent propelled westward expansion, the Crossroads, once at center stage of continental geopolitics, was increasingly bypassed and soon appeared to be little more than a borderland between North and South. Yet during the Civil War both sides considered control of the Crossroads crucial. For the Union, the Mississippi, Cumberland, and Tennessee rivers offered easy corridors into the very heart of the Confederacy. Likewise, the Confederates considered the Ohio to be a vital line of defense. Kentucky was torn asunder, its declared neutrality ignored by the invading Union. The region’s internal fragmentation came sharply into focus when Kentucky sent volunteers and recruits to armies of both sides, while Tennessee joined the southern cause only after long hesitation. Remarkably, the Union and Confederate leaders, Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, were both born in Kentucky within 50 miles of each other. While the Midwestern states were Northern supporters, their
Both blessed and cursed by its "in-between" location, Belarus had little chance to shape a distinctive culture and identity. Russia and Poland alternately dominated the region and developed a falsified view of Belarus as a cultural desert: the Russian perspective focused on the subjugation to Poland and the aping of alien western cultural forms; whereas the Polish perspective saw all Eastern Orthodox Slavs as barbarian pagans unless civilized by Polish ways and the adoption of Catholicism. At a cursory glance, the dearth of Belorussian cultural figures of wide renown would seem to support such pejorative views. As the Belorussian language was reduced to the role of peasant patois, and upward social mobility depended on learning first in Polish and then in Russian, Belorussians themselves came to be known under Polish, Russian, or Lithuanian labels. For example, the American Revolutionary War hero, Thaddeus Kosciuszko (often identified as a Pole) was Belorussian by birth, as was the great poet Adam Mickiewicz, who wrote in Polish and Lithuanian and is claimed by both cultures. Under Polish rule both the language and faith of Belarus withstood severe onslaught. Between 1620 and 1654 the Jesuit order unleashed religious wars against non Catholics which cost Belarus 55 percent of its population. Because the use of Cyrillic characters in the Belorussian language ensured a strong bond with the Russian language and church (in contrast to the Latin based Catholic Church), even the public use of Belorussian was prohibited in 1696.

And yet, far from being culturally sterile, Belorussia developed into a relay station for western culture movement into Russia. Thus in the 16th and 17th centuries, Belorussia became the easternmost participant in the European Renaissance. It was through the mediating offices of educated Belarus that the faint wisps of western humanism reached 17th century Russia and paved the way for its opening up under Peter the Great. Well into the 18th century the Crossroads preserved its role as cultural mediator. Between 1700 and 1760 Belorussians and Ukrainians outnumbered Russians among the southern sections (included in the Crossroads) had "Copperheads," who were Southern supporters. The war was a bitter civil one indeed in Kentucky and Tennessee, the two states which suffered the greatest losses of civilian population.

The majority of original Crossroads settlers came from the South. These were not the representatives of Coastal South plantation-based culture, but poor yeomen of the Upper South. From the Virginian and Carolinian Piedmont, these people retreated west into the isolation of Appalachia and then moved beyond, where they found a similar forested environment. In this fashion, Upper South culture spread all the way to the Ozarks, ensuring a degree of cultural unity across the region. Many early migrants into Kentucky later moved across the Ohio river. While Cincinnati with its Kentucky suburbs is a typical industrial metropolis of the Heartland, southern Illinois and Indiana with their rolling hills and marginal economies are not typical of the richer agricultural Midwest. In fact, the southern portion of Illinois was in the past a northern extension of the cotton belt stretching along the Mississippi, and large African American populations were brought into the area for work on the plantations.

Mid-Atlantic culture was carried into the Crossroads by migrants following the Ohio River, a major route used by settlers from Pennsylvania. From the 1840s numerous Germans from their European exodus moved into the Ohio valley where they frequently still outnumber residents of Anglo-Saxon heritage. Although most Germans in the area were Catholics (traditionally more conservative than German Protestants), they brought a whiff of fresh liberal air into the Crossroads, including the virulent rejection of slavery. These overlapping patterns of past migrations are evident in the region today in the dilution of typically southern cultural traits. Thus travelers from the North will begin to note slightly slower speech and a distinct "southern drawl" once they cross the Ohio River, but those traveling north into the Crossroads from the
hierarchy and theologians of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the literary movement known as Latinism, western educated Slavs composed orderly and imitative verses and odes in Latin. The authors were frequently Catholics, since church sponsored education was the Belorussian's rare opportunity for upward progress, but, ironically, the topic of the odes was likely to be the glorification of the ancient splendor of Orthodox Kievan Rus. Himself a Latinist, Franciscus Skorina worked on the revival of Russian/ Belorussian as a literary language by cleansing it from Polonisms. The first printed books and Bible in Russian were published in Minsk, showing the deep respect for learning among Belorussians, a characteristic which still serves them well today.

In many ways Belorussians seem to be western Europeans in Russian guise, and the Crossroads to be the easternmost West. But then, the opposite is true as well; if language is the greatest element of self identification, the Crossroads is the westernmost bulwark of things Russian. The extreme proximity of the Russian language to Belorussian (far more so than to Ukrainian) and the role of Russian as the language of science and vehicle to high social achievement explain the Belorussians' near universal adoption of Russian. Russian language schools have numbered three out of every four in the republic, even though Belorussians account for 78 percent of their state's population. Attempts to revive the Belorussian language are supported only by a handful of Minsk literati in obvious contrast to Ukrainian linguistic revivalism. Perhaps due to a history of Polish oppression and the devastation of the Second World War, the Crossroads is understandably wary of the West, and looks more toward Russia. Belarus never knew secessionism or possessed a nationalist movement comparable to the Ukrainian one, and the separate Belarus state was twice created by external forces: after the Revolution by Moscow's desire for a buffer state on the boundary with hostile Poland, and in 1991 by the dissolution of the USSR. The region's dramatic resurrection after the complete destruction of the Second World War encouraged allegiance to the Soviet Union as well. In many ways, Belorussia (along with Lithuania, Estonia, and South) will note that the drawl is less pronounced. The pace of life is not as fast as in the urban areas of the Core or the Heartland, nor is it as slow as one might associate with the South.

In national politics the region is never consistently associated with either liberal or conservative votes. Legislators and officials at all levels are more likely to prefer taking a "wait and see" attitude before acting. To the northener the wait may seem too long, while to the southerner it may not be long enough. While conservatism (especially in rural areas) can be seen in the large number of dry counties (not selling alcoholic beverages), in opposition to gambling, and in support for teaching creationism and prayer in schools; conservative sentiments are far from uniform within the region. Newcomers, especially from the north, tend to broaden the region's somewhat parochial outlook, and sometimes the urban social and political climate is very distinct from the traditional rural atmosphere. During the 1980s, Lexington twice voted on whether restaurants should be able to sell liquor on Sundays. In much of "dry" Kentucky, such sales were considered an unacceptable and unwelcome innovation. In Lexington the vote passed the second time, in what some residents consider proof that the city's newcomers from the north and reformed native Kentuckians vote in tandem.

The North and South mix together at the Crossroads, creating a surprising mosaic within a relatively small region. For example, Little Egypt (around Cairo in Southern Illinois) with its acute rural poverty is to our day something of a deep southern enclave within the region. The Bluegrass area with its physical beauty and rich soil seemed fit for establishing plantations, and once attracted many aristocrats from Virginia and Maryland. This "aristocratic" outlook is evident in its social life and unique landscape, as well as in the noble mainstays of the local economy: horse farms, bourbon distilling (the area used to account for 85 percent of national output), and tobacco production introduced from Virginia. These traits are no less pronounced in middle Tennessee in the Nashville Basin, which along with the Bluegrass remains something of an oasis of
Latvia) evolved into a showcase of socialist success, the more efficient “westernized” brand of Soviet socialism, and has therefore been much less reform-minded than some other USSR successor states. There could not be a greater contrast than that of Belorussian allegiance to Russia (and later to the Soviet Union) with strong anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiment in Western Ukraine or Lithuania adjoining the Crossroads.

What an irony, then, that it was Lithuania which in a sense preserved these lands for Russia. The very survival of Belarus as an entity in the Russian-Polish tug of war is largely due to its historic association with the Grand Principality of Lithuania, where Russian was long used as official language and the regime tolerated Orthodox culture. Belorussians therefore were able to remain Orthodox, and peasants called themselves simply “Russian;” the name “Belorussian” only came into use in the late 18th century.

Even today, some traits of Belorussians resemble those of Lithuanians and other Baltic nations: industrious, disciplined, and lacking the anarchist bent of both Poles and Russians, who see these qualities as docility and submissiveness. Rational and level-headed, Belorussians shun the mysticism and religious fervor of their neighbors, which the latter certainly interpret as a lack of spirituality. With a reputation for being honest, reliable, quiet, and soft spoken people, they once again contrast with ebullient Russians and Poles.

The identity of the Crossroads is a sum of contradictions. While hardly distinguishable from Russia in language, proud of its role as Russia’s defender and faithful to socialist ideals, the region also somehow shares a superiority complex about belonging to the West. It is not merely a blurred zone of overlap between Russian and Polish cultures with no identity of its own: in fact, the most distinguishing feature in Belorussian character may be stubbornness and resilience. People in the region simply know they are different.

If the Crossroads is tugged between North and South culturally, it at least faced westward. The westward dynamic of the region is symbolized by the life of that legendary pioneer, Daniel Boone, who grew up in North Carolina, led the first settlers into Kentucky, and died in Missouri. Frontier leaders like Boone left a lasting imprint on the region. In the opinion of Ellen Churchill Semple, a geographer from Louisville who wrote about Anglo-Saxons in Eastern Kentucky in 1901, those who grew up in the westward-facing Crossroads were the first genuine white Americans (the seaboard population were but Europeans, transplanted across the ocean). In 1796 a traveling Frenchman remarked that the inhabitants of the Atlantic coast called the lands beyond Appalachia the Back Country, but the new, trans-Appalachian Americans applied the same name to the Atlantic coast. The region became the earliest embodiment of traits that later came to be considered the generic American frontier heritage: democratism, vigor, enterprise and independence. The region does indeed seem all-American in self-identification by many of its residents, with a high proportion of persons claiming their ethnic identity as simply “American”, rather than German-, Irish-, or some other hyphenated American group.
Torn asunder, the Crossroads found peace and calm only within the Russian Empire, but it was a deadly calm. The dynamic industrial regions of the Empire surrounded the Crossroads on all four sides: St. Petersburg and Riga to the North, Donbass to the south, Moscow and the Central Industrial region to the east and the well-industrialized Kingdom of Poland to the west. The region was crossed by transit railways that linked the industrial areas with each other and effectively prevented any significant industrial growth in the intervening space of the Crossroads. The region did not even benefit much from the final improvement to the ancient transportation system, when in the late 18th century two major canals were constructed linking the Dnieper with the rivers Nemn and Bug respectively to the Baltic and into Poland. This impressive waterway allowed direct navigation from Ukraine to Germany, but it was useless for Belarus, which it traversed in the least developed Polesye region. The only important commercial centers of the Crossroads (and still its major cities) were those located on the Dnieper axis: Vitebsk, Mogilev, and Gomel. Beyond them the bypassed region lost much of its old cottage industry and acquired a strikingly rural character.

However, the sandy or waterlogged soils of the Crossroads with their ubiquitous birches and peat bogs are barely suitable for farming. The only staple that thrives on these poor soils is the potato, which in the past was the basis of the Belorussian diet and exposed the populace to frequent potato famines. Native Belorussians in particular suffered from rural poverty, as they were practically left out of urban life where Jews and to a lesser extent, Poles, dominated. In 1897 Jews made up 18 percent of the total population of Belarus, but half the urban population. When the Russian Empire acquired its western belt during the partitions of Poland, it also acquired the world’s greatest concentration of Jews. Migration of Jews was limited beyond the so-called Pale of Settlement. The core of this huge territory stretching from Riga to Rostov was former Polish lands: Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Before the great exodus to

The prohibitive costs of transporting produce upstream and across the mountains long focused the commercial interests of the Crossroads on the Mississippi River. Until the railway age, most regional produce was sent downstream to New Orleans and from there by sea to the east coast. So paramount was the role of New Orleans as the de facto regional business capital that in 1799, the federal government had great difficulty preventing an expedition of local militias to capture it from Spanish hands. The route became even more important when, between the 1830 and 1850 the old Louisiana-to-Quebec waterway finally acquired the missing link: a system of canals that connected the Ohio’s major northern tributaries with the Great lakes. It was soon clear, however, that the competition to become “Main Street USA” was won by the Heartland even though the Crossroads controlled the major water thoroughfares and was populated earlier. Prime location proved to be less important than the expanding market and growing industrial muscle of the Heartland. Instead of encouraging local industry, the new canals took the mineral and forest wealth of the rugged terrain to be processed in the urban Heartland.

Today, the economic base of many Crossroads communities remains marginal and dependent on northern control. In parts of southern Illinois, Indiana, and western Kentucky the significant economic enterprise is coal mining. Strip mines produce high sulfur coal which faces stiff competition from better coals produced in Wyoming and Montana, even among utility companies in Kentucky. Forest products industries, including paper and pulp and small furniture enterprises, also face competition with companies farther south and overseas. The marginal nature of many of these enterprises is felt by the small communities for which they are the economic backbone. In terms of average per capita income, much of the Crossroads is near the bottom of state rankings, with Kentucky and Tennessee 43rd and 42nd in the United States. Yet there are exceptions to the marginal rural economies, for example in Kentucky’s “Golden
America and Palestine in the late 19th century, more than half of the world’s Jews were concentrated within the Pale. It was here that the distinctive Yiddish-based Jewish culture of small townships (schtetls) was finally shaped and such important religious developments as Hasidism occurred.

After the emancipation of the serfs, with poverty pressing and opportunities beckoning beyond the region, the overpopulated land of potato famines became the land of emigration. The more enterprising element of the population was washed out of the region in all directions. Between 1896 and 1912 Belorussia generated 16 percent of the settlers who moved to Siberia, although it accounted for only 8 percent of European Russia’s population. The Crossroads did not have a single university, and aspiring youths, many of them sons of Polish nobility or Jewish merchants, had to go elsewhere. Thus, the most feared of the early Bolsheviks, KGB founder Felix Dzerzhinsky, came from a family of impoverished petty Polish nobility in Belorussia, but his life and revolutionary activity were divided between Lithuania, Poland and Moscow; in the 19th century, hundreds of thousands left for the new lands of the Breadbasket and for the port of Odessa, where the tradition-bound Jew of a schtetl finally found open horizons. The sons of the first wave of migrants left through the porous Pale line for the university centers of Russia, becoming doctors, lawyers and industrialists, or radicals who constituted the backbone of either the Bolshevik party (like the famous Leon Trotsky) or the Zionist movement.

In retrospect it seems clear that the central location of the Crossroads was a very mixed blessing. The region has never been more than a dependent pawn of its powerful neighbors, alternately serving as either the thriving hub of interaction between them or a devastated buffer zone. After the Second World War, the ancient role of the region was resurrected as a hub of Slavic lands united within the Eastern bloc. Its locational advantage allowed the Crossroads to return to its status as a relay station, but this time for the adoption of western technologies. Railways which had previously drained life

“Triangle” linking Cincinnati-Lexington-Louisville and in the Nashville Basin. The growth of such cities as Saint Louis, Louisville, and Nashville continues to be helped by busy navigation along the important water arteries, but for the Crossroads as a whole most of the traffic passing through it is strictly transit. In contrast to the Heartland, the Crossroads is not so much a thriving business hub on a busy downtown intersection as a crossing of country roads.

Although cultures meet and cross-fertilize in the region, major migration flows after the mid-nineteenth century largely bypassed it. The Crossroads was not northerly enough for job-seeking migrants from the South, while in recent decades it proved not warm or exotic enough to attract Sunbelt-bound businesses or retirees. Instead, marginal economies encourage massive outmigration, especially toward the nearby Heartland and the Atlanta metropolitan region. Bypassed by the intellectual mainstreams, the Crossroads retained a strong rural flavor that may be seen in the relatively slow pace of political and social reforms.

The region preserves a strongly rural character. The proportion of rural population in Kentucky was 50 percent in 1990, twice the national average, and most urban population lives in small towns. The land, aside from the Bluegrass and Nashville Basin areas, is marginal, and farms are small and not suitable for highly productive agriculture. The farms are seldom specialized to the degree they are in the Heartland, and they often mix beef cattle, hogs, corn, wheat, and (in Kentucky) tobacco. Small farmers cannot compete with large agribusinesses, and many farmers must maintain full-time jobs off the farms. Many will commute seventy or eighty miles to small industrial plants or to seek service employment in county seats or mid-sized cities. Because of the region’s strong agricultural heritage, outdoor living is very popular. Hunting and fishing are favorite pastimes, and many enthusiasts proudly display their guns or fishing poles in the rear window of pickup trucks. Community and church celebrations and civic festivals are an important part of social life, as are family
out of the region now helped develop modern industry in the Crossroads, augmented by pipelines leading into Europe. If Belarus (and Lithuania) entered the postwar years as the least developed parts of the European USSR, they emerged as the most dynamic and successful regions by the time of the country’s dissolution. Since the republic had skilled and disciplined labor but almost no mineral resources, the emphasis was on advanced industries: electronics, automobile building (sturdy agricultural tractors and trucks), engineering, and the chemical industry. In levels of per capita GNP, Belorussia by the late 1980’s was in the leading group of Soviet republics, well ahead of Ukraine. Belarus was the only republic other than Russia to have a positive balance of domestic trade within the USSR in the early 1990s. The frenzy of industrial development rapidly made the region predominantly urban, with the proportion of urban population in Belarus rising from 43 percent to 66 percent between 1970 and 1990. Minsk was the fastest growing of Soviet cities with populations of over a million throughout the postwar years. The very name Minsk means “the place of exchange,” and Belarus was a leader within the Soviet Union in the rate of trade it conducted. But it also meant that the economy was vulnerable: Belarus received almost all raw materials and energy from Russia, and marketed the products of its highly specialized manufacturing beyond its own boundaries. The very economic survival of the Crossroads thus still depends upon unified commerce and the splintering of the economy across the former USSR has hurt the region. Both the need for and the precariousness of Slav unity were dramatically brought into focus by the nuclear catastrophe of Chernobyl which contaminated areas in all three Slav republics of Belorus, Ukraine, and Russia. Although the plant is located in Ukraine, the lion’s share of damage was suffered by Belarus, and both republics blamed Russia for the accident. gatherings. Many communities have developed special “days” during the past decade to bring in tourism or to promote boosterism, local pride, and dollars into the local economy. Metropolitan newspapers carry descriptions of such upcoming small town events as music and craft fairs, outdoor performances, food events (ice cream socials) or local beauty pageants. Although such activities are not unusual for small-town America elsewhere, they round out the image of the Crossroads as an embodiment of poorer rural America with its low budget forms of relaxation and leisure. Maybe it is no coincidence that the famous Kentucky colonel of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame, and the founder of the WalMart retail goods chain were both from the region. In recent decades the drain of the region’s resources seems to be abating. Transportation again proved crucial: as interstate highways opened the region during the 1970s, central location relative to U.S. markets and proximity to the industrial Heartland proved beneficial. The region attracted branch plants of companies with headquarters in large northern cities. Although many such jobs are low paying and demand low skills, the Crossroads also seems to enjoy a peculiar revenge toward the Heartland with location in the region of some major new automobile plants, including General Motors’ popular “Saturn,” the Nissan pickup plant near Nashville, and a large Toyota Camry plant near Lexington. This plant even hired some workers who became unemployed because of closures in Michigan and Ohio. Nashville also has an aviation industry and extensive banking and insurance industry that earned it the nickname “Southern Wall Street.” General Electric operates a huge electric appliances factory in Louisville. IBM in its heyday built a large plant in Lexington in the 1960s, and with its excellent amenities and low unemployment the city became a magnet for out-of-state migrants, including many highly educated professionals. Despite recent upturns, the whole history of the Crossroads suggests that optimism about the future should be tempered with caution. The drawback of its central location is in the volatility of its fortunes being determined by events outside the region. Saint