CHAPTER TWO

EX ORIENTE LUX: THE BELARUSIAN NATIONAL STATE
AND THE SOVIET UNION

1. A discordant overture to nationhood (1914–1921)

In the opening years of the First World War, German armies occupied much of the ethnically Belarusian territory, including the cities of Minsk and Vilno.¹ On the Russian side of the frontline, the territory within Belarusian ethnic boundaries was under control of the military administration. The latter was even less inclined to allow independent national development than its civilian counterpart. Germans, on the other hand, did have a stake in supporting national aspirations of the former subject peoples of the Russian Empire. Belarusian national elites (many of them of the Nasha Niva provenance), since their emergence devoid of political power, found that a modicum of influence could be obtained from the occupation authority, which was prepared to be benevolent to the extent that Belarusian nation-building was deemed useful to Germany’s national interests.

According to Nicholas Vakar, the Belarusian national intelligentsia in the territory occupied by the German army did not plan to establish an independent Belarusian state. Belarusian nationalists in Vilno, headed by Ivan and Anton Lutskevich, two brothers who were among the founders of Belarusian national movement in the Russian Empire, had

¹ Today Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania. It was known as Vilno in prerevolutionary Russia and Wilno in inter-war Poland. It is hard to characterize Vilno as a Belarusian city. Demographically, it never had a substantial plurality of ethnically Belarusian population. Before 1939, the intellectual life of the city was dominated by its Polish and Jewish communities. Economically, the presence of Belarusians was negligible. Political power was in the hands of Lithuanians, then Poles, then Russians. As Belarusian nationalism started to emerge in the late 19th century, its founders tended to congregate in Vilno, then the administrative and cultural center of the region. The city continued to have the highest concentration of national Belarusian organizations in non-Soviet Belarusian lands between the wars. It was transferred to Lithuania by the Soviet authorities in 1939. As Belarusian nationalists considered the Grand Duchy of Lithuania an ancient Belarusian state, they treated Vilno (Vilnia in Belarusian), the largest and most important of all Ducal cities, as the focal point of the “Golden Age” of Belarusian national development.
realistically limited aspirations. They approached the German occupation authorities asking for protection of the interests of Belarusians in the occupied zone. It was the Germans who suggested to the Belarusian nationalists in Vilno that formation of an independent Belarusian state, under German tutelage, might be a possibility. Interestingly enough, at the time Belarusian national leaders were reluctant to proceed alone, even with the clearly stated German support. Instead, they planned to resurrect the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a political structure that, in addition to Belarusians, would include Lithuanian, Polish and Jewish ethnic communities. Consultations among Belarusian, Polish, Lithuanian and Jewish national activists in Vilno led to a joint declaration issued on December 19, 1915. The signatories stated their intention to form a Confederation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, in which Lithuania and Belarus would be independent member states. The Germans, while conferring equal rights upon all languages on the occupied territory and approving the idea of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, had developed a somewhat different vision of the prospective new state. Perhaps impressed by the strength of the Lithuanian national movement, they now suggested a Lithuanian state that would also include Belarusian lands under German occupation. Belarusians requested that the Germans include those ethnically Belarusian territories that had not yet been conquered. The number of Belarusians in the proposed state, and therefore the political power of Belarusian elites, now depended on the battlefield success of the German army.

While the Belarusian national intelligentsia negotiated particulars of the future Belarusian national statehood with Polish, Lithuanian, and Jewish nationalists, as well as with German occupation authorities, on the Eastern side of the frontline another center of nation-building was taking shape. The Bolshevik message of radical and bloody social change was spreading among the masses of illiterate, confused and demoralized soldiers of the Russian imperial army. At first, this process seemed to be unrelated to the future of the Belarusian nation. Few Bolshevik agitators were of Belarusian origin, and those who were worked for the world revolution, not for Belarusian national independence. Some local peasant organizations had a vague national aspect, but the Bolsheviks did not seek cooperation with them (Nedasek, p. 47). On those rare occasions when the Bolsheviks found it useful to spread their message among the peasants, they did so in Russian (Nedasek, p. 49), which was just as well as the majority of peasants was illiterate in any language.