CONCLUSION

WHITHER BELARUS?

In the late 16th century, the time frequently described by the national Belarusian historians as the “Golden Age” of Belarusian cultural, political, and social achievement, Sir Jerome Horsey, an English diplomat traveling from Warsaw to Moscow, stopped in Wilno, capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which nationally-minded Belarusian intellectuals from the late 19th century onwards regarded as a proto-Belarusian state. He was received by “the great duke voivode Ragaville (Nicholas Radziwill the Red), a prince of great excelencie, prowes and power”, who entertained the visitor in a truly royal fashion (Horsey, 1856, spelling of the original). While impressed by the pomp and circumstance of the reception, which he describes in great detail in a report to his sovereign, Horsey took great care to emphasize that this was not a diplomatic function, just a private reception, however splendid. The Radziwills, who owned large tracts of the territory of today’s Belarus, could not conduct foreign policy on behalf of their clan, or even the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This prerogative was vested in the person of the King of Poland, ex officio Grand Duke of Lithuania. It would be more than four hundred years later that a political leader claiming legitimacy within the Belarusian territory would receive credentials of foreign ambassadors. This ruler, of course, would be Alyaksandar Lukashenka, the first president of the Republic of Belarus. That Western diplomats are unlikely to write glowing reports about the entertainment provided by this potentate is beside the point. Whatever the “excelencie, prowes and power” of Mr Lukashenka, he is definitely a more fitting personification of independent Belarus than any of the Radziwills, Sapiehas, Oginskis or other Polish-Lithuanian magnates.

Indeed, the time since 1991 has been the first period in the history of Belarus when it possessed all the attributes associated with a sovereign nation. The country conducts its own foreign policy, is free to choose trade partners, is represented in various international organizations (including the non-Aligned Movement, where Belarus is the only European country), all three branches of Belarus’s government are formed according to laws of the country and based on decisions taken by its citizens.
Perhaps more important is the presence of nationally defined social institutions associated with the modern nation-state. Those include the patterns of social interaction associated with social mobility, the formation of national elites, attitudes to political participation and economic activity, and relations between the individual and the state. These institutions existed in Belarus for seventy years before independence, but they had not emerged until ethnic Belarusian territories have been incrementally incorporated into the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Until then, Belarusian nationality was almost incompatible with upward social mobility, political participation of any kind, or involvement in modern economic activity. In other words, until the advent of Soviet Communism, Belarusians had to choose between their nationality and social mobility. For all but a very few, these two were incompatible.

Most European countries consolidated their national institutions before Belarus. The period stretches from as early as the 16th century for France and England, through the 19th century for the majority of the states on the European continent, to the interwar years for the Baltic states and the Mitteleuropa nations. When the Soviet empire spread westward, nations from Estonia to Poland to Hungary already had non-Soviet experience of modernity. Belarus did not. Its history, modernity and national awareness are inextricably linked with the Soviet era.

The nascent Belarusian nationalism of the early 20th century was not incompatible with the Communist ideology. Left Social-Democratic nationalism of the Nasha Niva circle (circa 1906) had roots in pre-political demotic nationalism of the literary figures of the late 19th century. From its inception, the Belarusian national idea had been culturally demotic, socially populist, politically left-wing Socialist, economically statist. Ideas associated with conservatism, individualism, or liberalism were almost completely absent in Belarusian national discourse. Thus, from the very beginning Belarusian national thought was confined to a small segment of political spectrum.

For the intellectuals who ushered in Belarusian political nationalism, upper-class Belarusians existed only in the distant past. In the present, the Belarusian nation was composed exclusively of poor, simple, toiling multitudes, ready to be led to a brighter future by a group of well-meaning intellectuals. This populist national ideology was eminently compatible with Communism, a more powerful, and more sinister, political philosophy created by well-meaning intellectuals for the benefit of the toiling masses of the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that the founding fathers of the Belarusian national idea found it easy