Bazan, Lubov


There are few books on contemporary Belarus in English, and even fewer on the history of Belarus, which is often treated as an appendage to Russian or Polish history. Despite being published more than fifty years ago, Nicholas Vakar's Belorussia: The Making of a Nation (1956) has remained thus far the definitive English-language survey-style introduction to Belarusian history. More recent publications on Belarus have failed to provide readers with an updated historical overview. The pre-nineteenth-century history of this region is covered in Jan Zaprudnik's Belarus: At the Crossroads in History (1993) and more recently in Andrew Wilson's Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship (2012), but in both instances, they function primarily as a preamble to the political history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Moreover, while there are several comprehensive histories of Belarus published in other languages, such as Hienadz Sahanovich's Belarusian-language Narys historyi Belarusi: ad starazhytnasti da kantsa xviii stahoddzia [A short history of Belarus: From ancient times to the end of the eighteenth century] (2001), the German-language edited volume by Dietrich Beyrau and Rainer Lindner, Handbuch der Geschichte Weissrusslands [Handbook of the History of Belarus] (2001), Zachar Szybieka's Polish-language Historia Białorusi, 1795–2000 [History of Belarus, 1795–2000] (2002), and Szybieka and Sahanovič's Czech-language Dějiny Běloruska [History of Belarus] (2006), these works have been largely inaccessible to a Western readership. The publication of Bazan's book comes at a time when increasing attention is being paid to Belarus and its role between the EU and Russia. Bazan therefore fills a major gap in the Anglophone historiography of Eastern Europe, and this book will surely become a starting point for general readers interested in the history of Belarus today.

Bazan presents readers with a lucid and rich “essay” on the genesis and metamorphoses of the various proto-Belarusian states – Polotsk, Belarusian-Lithuania, Polish, Russian, USSR, and post-1991 Belarus – and their inhabitants over the course of two millennia. The discontinuities in Belarusian history constitute the overarching theme as she documents the resilience of the Belarusian people under foreign “Polish” and “Russian” rule. In addition to recounting the main political and economic events, the first half of the book is especially rich in cultural history, a reflection of Bazan's background in art history. In particular, the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, presented as a Belarusian-Lithuanian medieval empire, is
portrayed as the great incubator of Belarusian “spiritual culture and national identity” (131). The narrative weaves lesser-known topics such as the Reformation and spread of Lutheranism and Calvinism in the region with rich descriptions of the Renaissance and the luminary Francis Skaryna (c.1487–1551), one of the first book printers in Eastern Europe, which makes for compelling reading. Unlike in the Polish national narrative, which glorifies the Rzeczpospolita and its “golden liberties,” a shadow is cast over the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795). In this respect, the Belarusian narrative of this period is much closer to the Lithuanian interpretation which views the 1569 Union of Lublin as a national tragedy after which the Grand Duchy of Lithuania lost its independence to Poland and its territory was halved. Likewise, Bazan presents the Commonwealth as a time of political and economic turmoil and cultural stagnation for the Belarusians.

Thereafter, the narrative somewhat loses its way. With the incorporation of the Belarusian lands into the Russian Empire as a result of the Commonwealth’s first two partitions (1772, 1793), the focus shifts to political history, and the lack of rich cultural insights that so enhanced the earlier chapters leaves a void. The nineteenth-century sections of the book chronicle the series of uprisings and political movements within the Russian Empire as well as the Belarusian “national awakening.” A prominent place is given to Tadeusz Kościuszko, leader of the uprising against Russia in 1794, while other important cultural figures are surprisingly absent, such as Vintsent Dunin-Martsinkevich, seen by many as the founder of the Belarusian literary tradition, and the Jewish artist Marc Chagall (Shagal). To an even greater degree, the narrative of the twentieth century morphs into a rather conventional but unsubstantiated political narrative of war and victimization during World War II and the key political developments of the Soviet period, all of which have been dealt with in far greater detail elsewhere, such as in the recent book by Beorn (2014). A social and cultural history of the Belarusian SSR has yet to be written in English. Bazan’s book finishes on the sombre note of Lukashenko’s rise and consolidation of power and Belarus’s continuing ties with Russia.

The book falls into the not altogether unexpected trap of being laced with Belarusian Romantic nationalism, something that the title does not attempt to hide. References are made to the Belarusian “territory” (13), “ethnic group” (14), and “language” (68) from the beginning, despite the dramatically changing borders of all the chronicled proto-Belarusian states, and the absence of an ethnolinguistic group which regarded itself as a coherent “Belarusian” entity up until the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Snyder 2003; Rudling 2015). The Ruthenian (commonly referred to as “Old