Per Anders Rudling


English-language monographs dedicated to Belarus in the early 20th century remain scarce. Per Anders Rudling’s study is an ambitious and timely project, which has the potential to fill this void and to become a new, trend-setting study in the field of Belarusian history. This impressive volume explores the origins of modern Belarusian nation-building, analyzing Belarus from various angles: as a borderland region, a social project, and a political tool. It traces how Belarus was used in political games, manipulated, and instrumentalized by various parties, including Belarusian national activists, the Soviet state, Germany, Lithuania, and the Second Polish Republic (p. 8).

The book’s particular value lies above all in the parallel analysis of the development of the Belarusian national project under the patronage of the Soviet state in the 1920s, as opposed to the situation encountered by the Belarusian national activists in interwar Poland. While perceptions of a nation by various political actors are constantly in focus, the broader context of international rivalries between the newly established states in Eastern Europe, present throughout the study, uncovers the merciless mechanisms of *Realpolitik* in the region. Yet in essence, it is a study of the invention of modern Belarus by a group of nationalist activists between 1906, when the first newspaper in Belarusian language was allowed to be published, and 1931, when the USSR abandoned its liberal nationalities policies of the 1920s and conducted wide-scale repressions, aimed at the elimination of Belarusian communists. The chronological organization, regional contextualization, and influences from neighbouring national movements, among them Jewish, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian, allow the reader to keep a bigger picture in mind. At the same time the international situation in 1915–1928 is defined as the key factor explaining the existence of an independent country called Belarus (p. 10).
The book is based on Rudling’s doctoral dissertation, featuring some interesting additions and incorporating more archival sources. The latter are represented by a variety of materials: collections of Belarusian newspapers, including the West Belarusian press from the 1920s and 1930s, records of intelligence services of the Second Polish Republic, documents from the Lithuanian and Belarusian archives, personal memoirs, émigré accounts as well as reports from the Swedish embassy in Warsaw, providing an additional perspective from a neutral power. Secondary literature utilized in the study includes titles in six foreign languages from different time periods; nevertheless, sometimes the reasons for the author’s choice to rely on such studies as Eugen von Engelhardt’s Weissruthenien, published in 1943, or Nikolai Zen’kovich’s popular history book (see Chapter 3) could be at least explained in further detail.

Rudling meticulously introduces his readers to the concepts of state, nation, and identity; ethnic and civic nationalism, collective memory and national identity, class and nationality. With regard to the latter set, he points out that Eastern European intellectuals often combined nationalism and socialism in their worldviews, yet chose to prioritize a democratic Herderian vision, giving historical legitimation to national movements over Marxism, which presented Eastern Europeans as “non-historic” people. Belarusian national activists were no exception to this rule, as they developed the project of a modern Belarusian nation based on the assumption that language defined and delineated a nation. Their task in the future would be of course complicated by the fact that the population was more aware of social differences and saw the language primarily as a class marker (pp. 24–28). In this regard Rudling correctly notes the problematic character of an emerging national movement opting to choose language as an identity base, especially in a borderland, multinational region with fluid dialects and stronger competing nationalisms (p. 65). However, it is surprising that his analysis of this early Belarusian nationalist paradigm in the 19th century fails to mention the personality of Frantsishak Bahushevich, who is generally considered to be the founding father of modern Belarusian ethnolinguistic nationalism.

The tumultuous time of the First World War and October Revolution is summarized in Chapter 3, organized around six declarations of Belarusian statehood during the period 1918–1920, an eventful and in many respects crucial time, when two different and mutually exclusive Belarusian foundation myths originated (p. 67). These represented different state traditions: one was embodied in the concept of national activists and the first Belarusian state, the BNR (Belarusian People’s Republic), while the other one was the Bolshevik-backed Soviet version of the Belarusian state in the form of the BSSR. The author is correct in noting that adherence to either of these foundation myths still