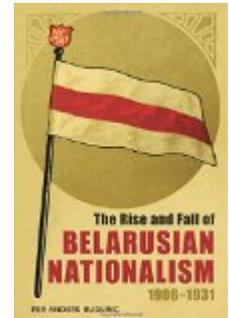


Per Anders Rudling. *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906-1931.* Pitt Russian East European Series. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015. Illustrations. 448 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8229-6308-0.



Reviewed by Alexander Pershái

Published on H-Poland (March, 2016)

Commissioned by Paul Brykczynski

Per Anders Rudling's *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906-1931* is a new study that offers valuable insights into the history of Belarusian nationalism. Often overlooked, Belarus occupies a special place in Eastern European studies: between the second half of the nineteenth century and World War II, the nation did not conform to common historical patterns of nationalism and statehood. The Belarusian nation emerged between other, stronger political forces, namely, Russia and Poland, while Belarusian lands were divided and re-divided between different states. Roughly speaking, Western Belarus was incorporated into Poland while Eastern Belarus was incorporated into the Soviet Union. Rudling's study shows how wars, territorial divisions, disintegration of the Russian Empire, and emergence of new states shaped the formation of Belarusian nationalism between 1906 and 1931. The author points out that this time period "marks the invention of a Belarusian nation, the beginning of Belarusian nationalism—and the establishment of Belarus as a political unit—but also the division of

the Belarusian-speaking lands between two antagonistic states" (p. 9).

The book is eight chapters long. In chapter 1, the author explains key concepts like nation, ethnicity, class, and collective memory, while chapter 2 clarifies the historical context of the early stages of Belarusian nationalism that preceded the crucial 1906-31 period. Chapters 3 through 8 offer a detailed analysis of political events and their nationalist intellectual interpretation on both Western and Eastern sides of Belarusian lands. This includes six declarations of Belarusian statehood, the *Belarusification* politics in Eastern Belarus during the early Soviet years, suppression of Belarusian nationalism in the Second Polish Republic, and the deconstruction of the Belarusian nationalist movement during Joseph Stalin's repressions in the USSR in the 1930s.

Rudling offers a scrupulous investigation of historical data involved in the nation-building politics of every state that took over different parts of Belarus at different times. His thorough

approach clarifies why certain political groups and nationalist ideas were more successful than others, and why many nationalist innovations did not take root as expected. At the same time, such attention to detail can be overwhelming for non-historians or political scientists: some humanities and social sciences scholars might get lost in the long lists of names, places, events, political decrees, and nationalist publications that represent at least four different ethnicities and were published in the four state languages of then-Belarus—Belarusian, Polish, Russian, and Yiddish. However, this study is a great resource for specialists in regional history.

The strength of the book comes from the author's attention to social actors involved in various political events. Rudling connects "historical evidence" to larger social structures. For example, every "new" political rule that took over Belarusian lands privileged the official use of some language over Belarusian. The author traces the repercussions of language politics in education reforms, in other words, what kinds of schools were open and closed in Belarus under a given government. Rudling also analyzes which newspapers, in which languages, emerged in response to such linguistic reinforcements and how Belarusian nationalist groups reacted to them. Therefore, the author sees political parties, ruling governments, nationalist media, and social institutions in relation to each other and more importantly as an entity that took an active part in the production of a specific type of social agency and political subject in Belarusian lands.

Rudling seems to follow "established" models of nation building, such as the stages A, B, and C suggested by Miroslav Hroch (one of the key figures in nationalism studies), and applies them to Belarus. This approach forces the scholar to search for the specific, "recognizable" blocks of nation building, including territory, borders, language, mass media, consolidation of nationalist elites, and manifestation of national belonging.

Rudling looks at the development of Belarusian nationalism, compares it to the "neighbour" nationalisms in Lithuania or Ukraine, and calls attention to what did not happen; he shows, for example, where Belarusian nationalism "failed" to produce traditional nationalist features. This approach is problematic because many markers of traditional nationalism do not apply to Belarus or were expressed differently there. For instance, it is difficult to talk about the territory and borders of Belarus because different parts of Belarusian lands were included and excluded in various states. As well, Belarusian as the only "mother tongue" is questionable—so many Belarusian people were (and still are) polylingual, or could master another language if necessary, that the notion of "native language" is understood differently in context. It would be beneficial to clarify whether the "altered" characteristics of Belarusian nationalism served a different purpose in the borderlands and whether various Belarusian nationalist groups understood nation building the same way.

Rudling's study makes an important contribution to the field of Belarusian studies. The book features important archival data together with insightful interpretation of events that happened in dynamic and complicated times in Belarusian society.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland>

Citation: Alexander Pershái. Review of Rudling, Per Anders. *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906-1931*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. March, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46168>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.