

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.



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“People must be carefully and attentively cultivated the way a gardener tends a favorite tree,” believed Josef Stalin (pp. 209-210). And if his metaphor sounds more benign than the way it was historically applied, we can certainly say that the amount of experimental “gardening” that Belarus received in the early twentieth century has made it a rather exceptional case in the European orchard of nations. Given that Stalin the gardener did not refrain from brutal pruning, Per Anders Rudling’s story of the slow birth and rapid decline of Belarusian nationalism in the first decades of the twentieth century is also a fascinating history of collective traumas that continue to shape Belarusian society till this day.

The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906-1931 is “a history full of paradoxes,” as the author puts it (p. 317). And indeed, the Belarusian nationalist project initiated under the aegis of the Soviets was based on such admirable multicultural principles that one can only wonder how it could have failed so badly. Stalin himself, in 1913, was of the opinion that a “minority is discontent-

ed ... because it does not enjoy liberty of conscience (freedom of religion), liberty of movement, etc. Give it these liberties and it will cease to be discontented” (p. 126). And so, Soviet Belarus (BSSR), in its inception, promised equality for all of the country’s ethnic groups and carried out the policy of quadrilingualism (with Belarusian, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish as official languages). Not only was education, the militia, the legal system, the post, and the telegraph to be operational in all four languages, but the policy of *sbližhenie* (rapprochement) also was to ensure that each ethnic group had a chance to acquaint itself with the languages and the cultures of the others. Stereotypes, ethnic animosities, and ignorance were thus to become the past.

That a multicultural utopia could have ended in a wave of brutal repression against the very national activists who had been carrying it out is not the only paradox in this story. Belarusian nationalism developed from the very beginning in rather uncondusive conditions. Already at the turn of the twentieth century, some observers

were declaring Belarusian a dead language, and, in the first decades of the twentieth century, anthropologists tasked with mapping ethnically Belarusian lands faced a real puzzle. The surveyed peasants identified themselves as *tuteishyia* (from here), some of them explaining, in perfect Belarusian, that they speak only Russian. The question of the Belarusian capital was equally complex. Although most national activists saw Vilnius, the historic seat of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, as the principal symbolic reference point, Belarusians constituted only a tiny minority of the city's inhabitants, and, apart from short episodes in 1918 and 1919, the city was never to form part of the Belarusian state.[1] Minsk's population, in turn, was only 9 percent Belarusian, while 51.2 percent of its inhabitants spoke Yiddish (data from 1897, p. 17). Adding a very high illiteracy rate to the picture makes the nationalist project in Belarus appear doomed from the beginning.

Rudling's research question of how to explain the relative weakness of nationalism in Belarus and the particularities of its "political landscape" brings him to illuminate all these paradoxes. He tries to pinpoint the motivations and agendas of different actors, including Belarus's neighbor states, its exiled intellectuals, various political groups in and outside of the country, and its ethnic minorities. After having set the stage by providing the definitions of key terms, such as "nation," "state," and "nationalism," Rudling moves on to the case study at hand.

Chapter 2 spans the time frame from the Kalinouski Uprising (1863), through the tsarist repressions in its aftermath, to 1906, when *Nasha Niva*, the first legal paper in the Belarusian language, appeared. Chapter 3 addresses the most turbulent period for the Belarusian nationalist movement (1917-20), in which dramatic geopolitical changes brought about no less than six different declarations of independence in just three years. Rudling sketches here the rivaling visions for the country's allegiances and political system against the back-

ground of constantly shifting borders that the emergent Belarusian state (or rather, states) were adopting. The next chapters focus on the policies that both the Soviet Union and the newly reborn Polish state applied vis-à-vis Belarusians. While the BSSR encouraged a nationalist revival of the different ethnic groups within the country to generate support for the Communist government and the new social order, Poland abandoned the initial ideas of a multiethnic federation, expecting its Belarusian minority to Polonize.

Chapter 6 returns to the ambitious Soviet project of Belarusization in the phase of its decline, as an increasing number of people opposed the nationalizing measures imposed by the state. Rudling discusses here why the affirmative action policies did not reverberate in the way the Soviets had hoped for and how the Communist authorities eventually realized that supporting local nationalisms did not serve the internationalist goals of world revolution. Chapters 7 and 8 picture the end of the Belarusian nationalist endeavor on both sides of the Polish-Soviet border. Following the 1926 coup, Poland intensified its attempts to curtail Belarusian nationalism, closing down Belarusian papers, extending Polonizing policies (especially via the Catholic Church), and prosecuting Belarusian political activists. At the same time, the so-called War Scare of 1927 triggered a similar turn of events in the BSSR, marking the end of the policy of quadrilingualism, the beginning of tighter party control over Belarus, and the start of a brutal wave of repression.

Rudling's monograph is an important contribution to the debate on Belarusian nationalism because it sheds light on a period that generated myths that prevail in the collective political imagination to this day.[2] Looking at the Belarusian nationalist movement in a comparative perspective, and in relation to other nationalist projects in the region (in particular, the Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Jewish ones), Rudling's monograph is the best compendium on Belarusian na-

tionalism in the English language to date and a must-read for anyone interested not only in Belarusian history but also in its current political situation, memory politics, and identity building processes.

The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism will also be an eye-opening position for Polish readers, as it addresses some difficult subjects that still remain under-researched in Polish historiography, such as pogroms of Jews by the advancing Polish troops in the Polish-Soviet war (1919-21) or repressions of the Belarusian minority in interwar Poland. Now that the mythologizing narrative of the Polish eastern borderland is once again ascendant, Rudling's book, which ruthlessly debunks the nostalgic myth of the *Kresy*, should be obligatory reading for every historian of the region. Having said that, it seems that in investigating how the concept of national identity is being instrumentalized by different political actors, Rudling does not fully avoid the pitfall of essentializing the categories he is analyzing. Going to lengths to explain the difficulty of establishing the eastern boundaries of BSSR, where border shifts based on ethnographic research met with resistance of the local population, when it comes to the territories that found themselves within the boundaries of the Second Polish Republic after the Treaty of Riga in 1921, he seems to be rather unequivocal, operating with the term "West Belarus."

Moreover, Rudling's examples clearly demonstrate that ascribing national identities to people inhabiting the multiethnic and multidenominational area of the former Great Duchy of Lithuania was a rather precarious endeavor. At the same time, the author speaks of *the* Jews, *the* Belarusians, and *the* Poles (interestingly, featuring the latter at times also as "Poles," as on p. 210). In doing this, he makes the problematic assumptions that, first, the national identities were superior to others, second, the categories were clearly delineated, and, third, some national identities in the

region were less volatile than others. At times, this essentializing approach brings the author some difficulty, for example, while referring to Kastus' Kalinouski, one of the leaders of the anti-Russian uprising of 1863, venerated as a national hero both in Belarus and in Poland (where he is known as Wincenty Konstanty Kalinowski). On page 37, for instance, Rudling claims that Kalinouski "never referred to himself as a Pole" but, on page 132, states that he was "of Polish nationality." Perhaps, if the author had not adopted the policy of providing all proper names exclusively in Belarusian transliteration, the seeming contradictions, ambiguities, and simultaneities of identities in this fascinating region would have come more to the fore.

While the study of nationalism (as nationalist discourse itself) rests on the assumption that nationalist discourse can generate clear dichotomies of "us" and "them," the study of identities (whether national or ethnic) calls for a finer grain of description. National identification in early twentieth-century Belarus was no doubt a dynamic category that embraced hybridity, simultaneousness, and perhaps also what Jonathan Y. Okamura labeled "situational identity." Okamura observed, for instance, that individuals might choose between a number of ethnic categories "in accordance with their belief that such a selection of ethnic identity will be to their advantage." [3] The dramatic shifts in the national censuses, in which the size of a given ethnic group differed depending on how one formulated the questions, or the curious case of the 1926 Soviet poll, in which only every third person who declared their nationality as Polish could also speak the language, clearly point to the possibility that national identities in the region not only were multilayered but also may have been adopted and discarded out of opportunistic motives. The story of forging the Belarusian national identity therefore cannot be complete without taking into consideration these individual, often subversive or situational, negoti-

ations of identities beyond the rigid dichotomies imposed from above.

Notes

[1]. In December 1918, the exiled government of the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) signed a treaty to unite Belarus with Lithuania. Roughly two months later, the Soviets created the equally short-lived "LitBel": Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania and Belarus.

[2]. Other recent English-language publications on identity politics in Belarus include: Nelly Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: The Official and the Alternative "Belarussianness"* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010); Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); and Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

[3]. Jonathan Y. Okamura, "Situational Ethnicity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 4, no. 4 (1981): 454.

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