

Per Anders Rudling. *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906-1931*. Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies. Ed. Jonathan Harris. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014. xii, 436 pp. Notes. Works Cited. Index. US\$ 29.95, paper. E-book.

Aiming to introduce “Belarusian nationalism” to Western scholarship, Per Anders Rudling has written two works under one cover. One is a true believer’s regurgitation of leftist theories of nationalism. The other is an awkward attempt to ram the modern historical experience of the people of Belarus into the ideological paradigm that guides him. The result is a mixed bag of misinterpreted historical gems and predictable postmodernist clichés. The greatest flaw is that the author does not sufficiently know the history of the lands and peoples of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where, in his view, Belarusian nationalism was “imagined.” Despite all of this, the historian, amazingly, distills a sound, if obvious, conclusion, namely that modern ideologies imposed on the denizens of Belarus were calamitous for them.

The narrative part of the book follows a chronological path. From 1918 or so, it alternates between geographic regions in the east and west. After a germinating period, Belarusian nationalism bloomed with the German occupation of the western part of the Russian Empire (“to weaken the Poles” [73]) during the First World War. From then on, “the nationalists became a part in a larger geopolitical game,” with Germany, Lithuania, and Poland participating (307). Following a false dawn of several aborted attempts to proclaim and maintain an independent state, the Belarusian leftist nationalists settled on collaborating with the Soviets, who allowed them initially to establish a realm “socialist in content, national in form” (67). Until 1929 or so, the Soviet government forcibly imposed national identities on the denizens of the BSSR, sometimes against a passive opposition of the majority, who were either clinging to their premodern identities or wishing to Russify themselves. Afterwards, the Soviet Union crushed all Belarusian forms of expression, including the national Bolshevik option, eventually exterminating physically nearly all of those accused, truthfully or not, of Belarusian nationalism.

Meanwhile, in Poland, the authorities left the local people alone with premodern identities. As for the Belarusian elites, a minority of them, in particular the Christian Democrat Belarusian nationalist orientation, vainly expected to be allowed a far-reaching autonomy. Their pro-Soviet majority detractors turned to subversion of the Polish state. “The strategic goal of Soviet foreign policy—to undermine Poland by encouraging Belarusian irredentism—was an important political priority” (139). Consequently, Poland cracked down on both pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet orientations, demobilizing their supporters and suppressing leaders, while permitting

some forms of cultural life to continue, in particular, the anti-Communist ones.

As for Rudling's sources, the monograph is heavily *Zeitungeschichte*, especially concerning Belarusian nationalist thought. The author examined government records, which, in the Soviet case at least, consist mostly of propaganda. Swedish diplomatic records are a welcome novelty. Polish intelligence dispatches and court documents have been accessible for a while, but traditionally underutilized in the English-speaking world. Alas, one is unable to juxtapose all of this with Soviet secret police files. Furthermore, one must exercise great caution when dealing with Soviet records. Unfortunately, the scholar sometimes seems to take Communist propaganda at face value—for example, regarding the predicament of the Jewish community in the BSSR (226-27). In his reading, the Soviet Union was good for the Jews, a view congruent with contemporary anti-Semitic perceptions but long debunked by scholars such as Elissa Bemporad in her urban narrative on Minsk and Merle Fainsod in his seminal study of Smolensk.

The conceptual part of the monograph is quite problematic, confusing, self-limiting, and, sometimes, contradictory. The author is much more interested in the ideas animating a handful of enthusiasts and their actions than in the people they purported to represent. He fails to provide a developed definition of a Belarusian.

This is where the Marxist class scheme comes to the rescue, of sorts. The cliché that the “the Belarusians were peasants” satisfies Rudling (17). Yes, but they were not peasants in a modern sense, that is, free farmers. Theirs was a postfeudal identity. They were peasants with a premodern peasant, religious, and localized identity. They were, as Belarusian nationalists admitted, “the dark people,” “the benighted ones” (*tsemni*, 60), not much different from their counterparts in central, ethnic Poland a generation or two before. The people of Belarus were a social estate.

Conceptually, the author's ignorance of the early modern era, particularly the past of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and its implications for the first half of the twentieth century, prevents him from handling this phenomenon in a multifarious, flexible manner. Thus, Rudling embraces a narrow, ethnic definition of nationality that also tallies with class: “Belarusian peasants.” To buttress his invention, he also anchors his “Belarusians” rustically. They were “overwhelmingly rural.” But if their condition and mentality were premodern, why apply industrial-era nomenclature to them? Why call them Belarusians at all? Why not refer to them as locals?

The problem is that Rudling sticks to the imagination/invention theory, primarily a concoction of the ideas of Stalinist Eric Hobsbawm and other leftists, including Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner (Rudling ignores

practically anyone who disagrees with his leftist perspective, including Hugh Seton-Watson, a classical liberal). Despite its postmodernist veneer, the invention theory has, according to this reviewer, an older pedigree. The Communists “believed that national identities were constructed, a byproduct of modern capitalism” (143). Furthermore, “the Bolsheviks believed it possible to construct a national consciousness of a socialist kind, national in form but socialist in content” (125). In the opinion of this reviewer, this was a *prima facie* attempt by the Marxists to appropriate nationalism.

Quite indicative of Rudling’s prejudices is his “Othering” of the Poles. This concerns not only the conservative *krajowcy* and the nobility, but all Poles across the board as a nationality. Since the Poles are a “hegemonic” and “colonial” power (35), Rudling considers them invariably wrong. Unless they are Communists or other leftists, he automatically dismisses all of their arguments and nearly always sides with their detractors, crafting a narrative that is barely distinguishable from leftist Belarusian nationalist philosophy.

While rather cavalier about Polish victimhood, Rudling is positively contemptuous of interwar Poland. In the author’s narrative, the USSR almost invariably emerges as a preferable entity. This is in stark distinction to such thoughtful scholars of Belarusian nationalism as, say, Andrew Savchenko. While giving the Soviet secret police a free pass throughout much of the monograph, Rudling brazenly hints that, indeed, Warsaw maintained a police state. Treating Józef Piłsudski and Joseph Stalin as virtual identical twins is egregious historical malpractice. “Their parallel ascent was followed by the relapse of the political decision-making process in their respective countries into conspiratorial and secretive workings” (252). Did the government in Warsaw run like the Politburo in Moscow?

Rudling also blames the crushing of Belarusian nationalism equally on the Soviets and the Poles. The Poles crushed “their Belarusian minority’s connections” to the Soviets, just like the Soviets smashed “their Belarusian intelligentsia” because of their links to the Poles (277). Note, that in this narrative, the Poles targeted the entire “minority,” while the Soviets—only the “intelligentsia.” And since the latter was puny, the repression, it is implied, did not amount to much. Still, “Piłsudski’s and Stalin’s mutual distrust of each other constituted a tragedy for the people who inhabited the border areas” (301). This is ridiculous. In the USSR, Belarusian nationalism was exterminated together with its adherents. In Poland, only the Communist *agentura* and its fellow travellers were repressed. Other forms of Belarusian nationalism were permitted to continue, albeit in a limited way.

Perhaps most revealing of the inadequacy of Rudling’s intellectual framework is his surprisingly incisive conclusion. It is as if he got things right despite himself: “For most people in Belarus nationality had little to do with their daily lives, until it was violently thrust upon them; nationality was for

them less a vehicle for liberation than a tool for dominance. The majority of the Belarusian peasantry was indifferent to and resisted that form of control. The new nationalized identities offered to them by the nationalists and the Soviets had little to do with, but often complicated their lives. They dodged this form of control that was imposed upon them, resisting for as long as they could the identities projected upon them by ethnographers, specialists, nationalist intellectuals, Soviet central planners, and German, Polish, and Lithuanian strategists" (315-16). So, nationalism is bad and Communism likewise. It appears that Rudling has finally admitted that the social, political, economic, and cultural arrangements, as generated gradually over hundreds of years under the Polish-Lithuanian-Ruthenian Commonwealth, were preferable to whatever modernity dragged in. If that is what emerges from this muddled, deeply flawed monograph, we can only concur.

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