

## Introduction

**B**elarus is a country that sometimes puzzles outside observers. For much of its existence as an independent state, Belarus has developed quite differently from most of its neighbors. It is a country in which a majority regards Belarusian as its native language but only a relatively small minority actually does speak it as its first language. Nationalism, the hegemonic political current in most of postsocialist Europe, has never been embraced by more than a minority of its population. Rather, it is a society with two rivaling concepts of “Belarusianness”: against the official one, drawing heavily upon Soviet tradition, stands an unofficial one, associated with the nationalist opposition.<sup>1</sup> The two camps have their own historiographies and competing foundation myths, as well as two seemingly irreconcilable traditions of statehood. Referred to by some as the last European dictatorship, Belarus remains the only country in Europe with a government in exile.

During most of its existence, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), allowed for one narrative only. It emphasized Belarus’s historical links to Russia, and to varying degrees presented the outside world as hostile. Alternative narratives existed in West Belarus and among political émigrés in the interwar era, but were counteracted by the Polish authorities. Following the Soviet annexation in 1939 Stalinist rule was extended to all of Belarus. Unlike the neighboring Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania, Belarus lacked a significant diaspora to work as a repository for political narratives that were alternative to the official Soviet version.<sup>2</sup> When alternative narratives did appear, they received a mixed reception. The least “national” of the former Soviet republics,<sup>3</sup> the Belarusian public had inter-

nalized and identified with the Soviet historical narrative more than any other, and emotional reports of Stalinist atrocities and denunciations of the Soviet past were often met with silence or outright hostility.<sup>4</sup> In March 1991, 83 percent of the BSSR voters were in favor of retaining the USSR, a higher percentage than in any other republic outside Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> On August 25, 1991, independence arrived suddenly and unexpectedly, the result of a failed putsch in Moscow rather than a response to popular demand.<sup>6</sup> In the preceding years glasnost and perestroika had reopened a debate on Belarusian identity and cultural belonging, suppressed since the ascent of Stalin in the late 1920s. Much like in the 1910s and 20s, two main camps formed. One was oriented toward the West, represented by the emerging European Union; the other toward the east, seeking reintegration with Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States. The state that gained independence in 1991 differed significantly from Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, its neighbors to the north and west, but also from its southern neighbor Ukraine.

The first and, to date, only free elections in the republic brought to power a political leadership drawing heavily on Soviet-era symbolism and historical narratives. Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the only president of Belarus, has skillfully utilized nostalgia for the Soviet past as a means to legitimize his regime and its permanent hold on power. From the mid-1990s, the return to authoritarianism was accompanied by the reintroduction of Soviet Belarusian symbolism.<sup>7</sup> The Belarusian government invested significant efforts in the instrumentalization of history, something that has turned the tradition of Belarusian statehood and its symbols into contentious issues.<sup>8</sup> During his first decade in power, Lukashenka was a vocal proponent of the restoration of the Soviet Union and undertook a number of steps in this direction. By the mid-1990s, outside observers described Belarus as a “denationalized state” or even “a state that has a death wish.”<sup>9</sup>

Why does the political landscape in Belarus look so different from those of its neighbors? How do we explain the relative weakness of nationalism and the divided historical memory? At the bottom of these issues looms a larger question: why is there today an independent Belarus, and how did this state appear? To be sure, one deeper cause for these divisions can be traced to Belarus’s geographic location as a cultural borderland between eastern and western Christianity. However, much of the divided

memory and rivaling identity projects are of a relatively recent date, no older than Belarusian nationalism itself, and dating to the years around World War I.<sup>10</sup>

## Historical Background

The Belarusian-speaking region in east central Europe was one of the last regions in Europe to have its borders staked; languages and dialects codified; nationalist symbols, rituals, and traditions invented; and its inhabitants categorized, ethnicized, and socialized into identifying with national projects. With the aim of placing Belarusian nationalism in a larger, regional historical context, this book is a study of the invention of Belarus, tracing it from its imagination at the turn of the century through multiple, rivaling declarations of Belarusian statehood to the construction of national traditions, culture, and institutions.

Other political latecomers, such as Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and secular Jewish nationalisms, had discernable influences on their Belarusian counterpart. Like the two leading Jewish nationalist movements in the region, Poale Zion<sup>11</sup> and the Bund,<sup>12</sup> the early Belarusian nationalists merged class and national awareness into a radical left-wing program. Its similarities with the Bundist movement, which was formed primarily in the mainly Jewish and Polish cities of Belarus, are particularly strong.<sup>13</sup> The editorial boards of the first Belarusian papers were located only a few blocks away from the headquarters of the Jewish nationalist movements in Vilnius, a city both national movements regarded as their intellectual capital. Their leaders often read the same books, were influenced by the same national currents, and experienced similar social dynamics, many having attended the same universities.

In West Belarus, the leading Belarusian national activists were all bi- or trilingual, having grown up in a Polish- or Russian-speaking environment, and were more comfortable writing in Polish, Russian, and sometimes even Yiddish than in Belarusian. As was the case with national activists in other parts of Europe, they learned to master the Belarusian language only as adults.<sup>14</sup> The historian Barbara Törnquist-Plewa describes the cultural identities in the borderlands as “culturally polyvalent,” in that the inhabitants could identify with more than one nation, even choosing their

national identification. As an example of this she mentions the famous Ivanouski brothers, who lived in Belarus in the early twentieth century and became important activists in three national projects:

The three brothers, who grew up together and were educated in the same manner, chose to identify themselves with three different nations. Wacław considered himself a Belarusian and referred to the ethnic roots of the family. Tadeusz saw himself as a Pole because of the culture: mother tongue, religion, etc. of the family. Jan, on the other hand, identified himself as a Lithuanian, motivating it by territory and history, as the estate and title of nobility of the family were linked to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Thus, all three brothers made different choices and were active in different national movements: the Belarusian, the Polish, and the Lithuanian respectively.<sup>15</sup>

This form of “cultural polyvalence” characterized the Belarusian nationalist intelligentsia at the turn of the century. Some leaned toward regarding Belarusians as a branch of the Russian people; others identified with the local, multinational land, or *krai*. They were characterized by their search for allies and associates, and the option of independence appeared late, after Lithuanian nationalists opted to establish a Lithuanian nation-state over a federal option that could have included the Belarusians. This search for allies continued also after Belarus had been partitioned between Poland and the Soviets, as the exiled BNR activists rather unsentimentally continued to switch allegiances between the regional power brokers until the late 1920s.

### States and Proto-States

The history of Belarusian nationalism is unusual in a number of ways. The period between 1915 and 1927 was conducive to the Belarusian nationalists’ aims. During this period old multiethnic empires collapsed, new states appeared, and various parties fought for power and domination over new polities. During a short time span the Belarusian lands saw a succession of rulers: imperial Russia, imperial Germany, Bolsheviks,

Poles, Bolsheviks again. To various degrees, most of these temporary rulers professed themselves committed to the nationalist intellectuals. Indeed, the emergence of Belarusian statehood was, to a significant degree, a result of external actors, less interested in forging a Belarusian nation than guided by the considerations of Realpolitik.

Invoking ethnographic claims and insisting that they acted in the name of the Belarusian nation, a small group of Belarusian nationalists laid claim to enormous territories, from the German border in the west to the cities of Briansk and Viazma and the Volga River in the east, as part of a Belarusian state, which they called the Belarusian People's Republic (Belaruskaia Narodnaia Respublika, BNR), proclaimed on March 25, 1918. This date is at the core of the national mythology of a non-communist political tradition that is today represented primarily by the opposition and the Belarusian diaspora. The German occupation authorities funded Belarusian nationalist activities as a counterweight to Polish nationalism, and the declaration of the BNR would have been impossible without Berlin's tacit support. If the BNR never materialized as a state in any sense of the word, the idea of Belarusian statehood appears to have had an impact on the young Soviet government, which soon thereafter, on January 1, 1919, claimed roughly the same territory for a Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (Savetskaia Satsyialystychnaia Respublika Belarus, SSRB; from 1922 Belaruskaia Savetskaia Satsyialystychnaia Respublika, BSSR). This first Belarusian Soviet Republic was short-lived: already the following month it was merged with the newly established Soviet Lithuania into one united Soviet republic. In turn, this republic proved equally short-lived and was dissolved during the Soviet–Polish War. As the Soviet forces recaptured the Belarusian lands from the Poles a Soviet Belarusian republic was resurrected, over a much smaller territory, in July 1920. With the exception of the latter, none of these republics lasted more than a few months. Though Belarusian statehood was declared and re-declared no less than six times between 1918 and 1920, the attempts at establishing a united Belarusian state failed, and the Belarusian lands were divided between the Soviets and Poland via the Treaty of Riga in 1921. Yet the successive declarations of statehood strengthened those who argued that Belarusian statehood was a legitimate pursuit. In the 1920s the “renewed” Soviet Belarus was enlarged eastwards to correspond largely to the “eth-

nographic” Belarusian territories under Soviet control, to which the Belarusian nationalists had laid claim.

### Partition and Irredentism

The 1921 partition was a serious blow to Belarusian nationalist aspirations. The failure to gain international recognition and the partition of Belarusian lands between Poland and the Soviets also partitioned the nationalist intellectuals, who came to operate under very difficult conditions on their respective sides of the border. At the same time, the 1920s saw a remarkable upswing of Belarusian cultural, political, and intellectual life on both sides of the border. As a means to consolidate Soviet power, the authorities decided to fill the young republic with “national” content. Between 1921 and 1927 significant efforts went into nationalizing activities: schools, libraries, institutes of higher learning, papers, publishing houses, theaters, administration, and bureaucracy were conducted in the Belarusian language. At the peak of this process, there were serious attempts to establish a military apparatus in the Belarusian language. Despite being designated as a national republic and a national home of the Belarusian people, the titular nationality was quite under-represented in the highest echelons of power. The Soviet leadership faced an acute shortage of ethnic Belarusian cadres, and during the first twenty-five years of its existence the leadership of the BSSR was dominated by non-Belarusians.<sup>16</sup>

The situation for the West Belarusians was different. Having failed to establish a Belarusian nation-state, the Belarusians became a marginalized and increasingly alienated national minority in a political entity that the postwar Polish political establishment had intended as a Polish nation-state. The West Belarusian national activists sought to resist the assimilatory pressure of the Polish government. The situation was further complicated by the existence of a Soviet Belarusian republic east of the border, which made nationalist opposition to Polish rule appear not only irredentist, but a political liability to the Polish authorities. Whether they wanted it or not, the West Belarusian activists were forced to relate to the BSSR, and this came to define them politically. The West Belarusian nationalists split into two rival camps, a pro-Soviet and an anti-Soviet

one. The former openly flirted with the idea of unification under Soviet leadership, whereas the anti-Soviet West Belarusian nationalist movement unsuccessfully sought to utilize the local chapters of the Roman Catholic Church as a vehicle to nationalize the population. The options were all laden with significant difficulties. Irredentism risked attracting the attention of the authorities and a crackdown, while working within the Polish institutions would mean a *de facto* recognition of the division of Belarus and legitimization of a political order that would preclude the establishment of a Belarusian state. For much of the 1920s West Belarusian nationalists cooperated with the Polish authorities without rejecting irredentism.<sup>17</sup>

The emergence of the SSRB/BSSR and Lithuania and the return of Poland reduced the Belarusian nationalists' range of options, but not necessarily their agency. A bitter regional political rivalry between the Soviets, Poland, and Lithuania seemed to open up new opportunities for the Belarusian nationalists. In the early 1920s Kaunas housed and sponsored the BNR government in exile while encouraging Belarusian irredentism in an attempt to foment unrest in the Second Polish Republic. After 1923 the Soviets took over the role as the main sponsor of armed resistance in West Belarus. Belarusian nationalism became a pawn in a larger political game in which its success was dependent on its usefulness to other parties. The 1910s and 1920s allowed the Belarusian nationalists considerable agency. They had been playing along with some rather unseemly co-conspirators for the hearts and minds and bodies of Belarus and, in many cases, became quite skillful at political intrigues and covert action.

### **Authoritarian Consolidation and Repression**

Whereas Moscow, Kaunas, and Warsaw saw the potential in weakening their adversaries by exploiting the Belarusian issue, over the course of the 1920s they also became aware of how this issue could be used against them. Piłsudski's coup d'état of May 1926 brought authoritarian rule and radically altered the political conditions in Poland. The emergence of a Belarusian civic society, the contours of which were becoming visible by 1926, was halted, its cultural and political institutions dissolved, its leaders arrested and silenced. In December 1926 a putsch did away

with democracy in Lithuania. In the BSSR, Stalin's consolidation of power in 1927 meant a similarly sharp change in political climate. In this new political situation the Belarusian nationalists' irredentism now appeared as a liability to the regimes with which they had been happy to conspire through much of the decade. The decisions to crack down on organized Belarusian nationalism were made separately by the governments in Moscow and Warsaw, the latter partly aided by a concordat with the Vatican. From 1927 to 1931, the policies were revised and the nationalists repressed as the BSSR embarked on the Stalinist modernizing project. In the BSSR a cautious policy of the linguistic Belarusization of state institutions continued through most of the 1930s, despite the centralization of power in the government in Moscow, the crushing of cultural pluralism, and the stifling of independent political initiative. Belarusian institutions in the BSSR were purged of their former content, but continued to operate. The personal histories of many of the Belarusian nationalists are tragic. Most perished during the Stalinist purges in the late 1930s. Having fought for Belarusian statehood they had agency and a certain influence on the development. During much of the 1920s regional rivalries had allowed—indeed invited—irredentism and clandestine operations. The situation changed in the late 1920s, when the international rivalry, which they had been able to exploit with some success, turned against them. The Belarusian nationalists became victims, but not disinterested victims, of larger processes beyond their control, the scope of which they could not overview or understand at the time.

Essentially, this book is a study of a few hundred nationalist intellectuals and their construction of a new ethnicity east of Poland and west of Russia; it analyzes Belarus as a borderland terrain, social project, and political tool. It surveys not only the development and intellectual history of Belarusian nationalism but also its instrumentalization by various parties, from the nationalists themselves, to imperial Germany and Lithuania, the Second Polish Republic and the Soviets, placing Belarusian nationalism in the context of political rivalry in a contested borderland. It contextualizes Belarusian nationalism into a regional context of German occupation policies, Polish assimilationism, Soviet nationalities policies, and Stalinist political repression.

## Organization and Previous Studies

This study is organized chronologically in chapters that cover the eventful quarter-century between 1906 and 1931, which 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. It surveys assimilationist policies in the Second Polish Republic as well as Soviet nation-building in the BSSR, Belarusization, affirmative action programs, and the Belarusian cultural “renaissance” of the 1920s. It covers political activism and a significant political mobilization in West Belarus in 1926. In other words, it is a study of the rise and fall of organized Belarusian nationalism, ending with its suppression following Poland and Lithuania’s descent into authoritarianism and the onset of Stalinist transformation of the Soviet Union.

The experiences of the 1920s were long overshadowed by the political terror of the Stalinist 1930s and the devastation of World War II, both of which fundamentally reshaped Belarusian society and determined the political environment for the next sixty years. The nationalist ideologues were repressed, their ideas largely uprooted, and living memory was broken. For decades, scholars paid little attention to the Belarusization of the 1920s, which came to be seen as little more than a brief historical parenthesis. The topic of Belarusian nationalism received little more scholarly attention.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the existing literature was polarized. Soviet historiography insisted that the national question had been “resolved,” and that Soviet Belarus was an example of a peaceful and harmonious flourishing of national cultures.<sup>19</sup> In the West, much of the research on Belarus was colored by the politics of the Cold War.<sup>20</sup> The highly charged language of the bilingual *Belarusian Review/Belaruski zbornik*, published by the CIA-funded Munich Institute for the Study of the USSR, describes Soviet rule in Belarus as “the harshest instrument to suppress the freedom [of the Belarusians]. The end goal of this policy is the extermination of the Belarusian people as a nation. To this end, the Kremlin uses different dreadful methods and manners, beginning with the destruction of the Belarusian culture, systematic Russification, mas-

sive persecution and resettlements, and finally harsh physical terror and genocide.”<sup>21</sup>

Only with glasnost, perestroika, and independence was there again a renewed interest in this period. In the past twenty years a number of works have provided a more nuanced and multifaceted picture, not only of the Soviet nationalities policies, but also of the emergence of modern Belarus. The literature includes important works on the experimental Soviet policies of multilingualism in the BSSR, on the role of religion and language to the West Belarusian national activists, and on Belarusian nationalism.<sup>22</sup> Pathbreaking works have appeared on the role of ethnography, race, and affirmative action policies in the USSR, works that have changed our understanding of the Soviet nationalities policies and which partly cover Belarus.<sup>23</sup> In addition, we have seen important works on national minorities in the BSSR.<sup>24</sup>

The complicated international relations during the period between 1915 and 1928 hold much of the answer to the question as to why there today exists an independent Republic of Belarus, why the borders run where they do, and why its development differs significantly from its immediate neighbors.

## Material and Methodology

The main source base for the chapters on West Belarus under Poland consists of the West Belarusian press from the 1920s and 1930s, particularly that which was published between 1925 and 1931. *Belaruskaia Krynitsa* was an influential intellectual venue with a significant impact on the intellectual development of West Belarusian nationalism.<sup>25</sup> While it was the paper of the Belarusian Christian Democratic Party (BKhD), it aspired to be the leading paper of West Belarus and provided considerable intellectual diversity on its pages.<sup>26</sup> The Polish authorities regarded it as subversive, and it was regularly subjected to censorship, and many issues did not appear at all, particularly at the time of elections and other periods of increased political activism. The chapters on language, identity, and the politics of West Belarus in the 1920s are based upon a survey of the 633 volumes of *Belaruskaia Krynitsa* published between 1925 and 1937. Of particular interest for this study is the self-image of the

West Belarusian intellectuals, their reactions to the Belarusization in the BSSR, and their positioning in the rivalry between Moscow, Warsaw, and Kaunas.

Other than *Belaruskaia Krynitsa* and the highly influential prewar paper *Nasha Niva*, the number of Belarusian-language newspapers, journals, and publications in West Belarus were rather limited. To the extent it is possible, the views of *Belaruskaia Krynitsa* are juxtaposed to those articulated by the pro-Soviet and left-wing Belarusian Peasants' and Workers' Hramada (BSRH), the largest and most successful Belarusian nationalist organization of the interwar era. As the Polish authorities feared the radical leftist West Belarusian parties more than they feared the Belarusian Christian Democrats, the press of the BSRH faced even more significant obstacles. Most of its papers were banned, and fewer volumes of its papers have been preserved. The perspective of the West Belarusian left is represented by a number of short-lived publications of radical Belarusian papers and bulletins of the BSRH and the so-called Zmahan'ne factions in the Polish Sejm and Senate. The source base of the West Belarusian press is complemented by records from Polish intelligence services, kept in the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw (Archiwum Akt Nowych, AAN), and newly released legal records from the 1927 trial against the BSRH in Vilnius, kept in the Lithuanian Central State Archives (Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas, LCVA). If the West Belarusian press reflects the public debates, the records of the Polish police, courts, and intelligence service provide an insight to the often conspiratorial and underground activities of Belarusian activists but also to the increasingly repressive political climate in which they operated. These materials are accompanied by quarterly reports from the Swedish embassy in Warsaw to the government in Stockholm. A neutral power, Sweden was assigned by the League of Nations to assess claims of abuse and unfair treatment of minorities at the hands of the Polish government and therefore monitored the interethnic relations in Poland quite closely.<sup>27</sup> The chapters on nation building in the BSSR rely mainly on key policy documents, orders, meeting minutes, and reports by control commissions and local leaders, kept in the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus (Natsional'nyi arkhiv Respubliki Belarus, NARB), but also postwar accounts and personal recollections by émigrés.<sup>28</sup>

### A Note on Transliteration

During the period of this study, several Belarusian orthographies were in use. This book uses the Library of Congress (LOC) transliteration of the Belarusian originals throughout. That means that even texts in łacinka, the Belarusian version of the Latin alphabet, have been transliterated according to the LOC system. Thus, for instance, *Bielaruskaja Krynica* is transliterated as *Belarускаia Krynitsa*. Belarusian names of persons and places, even though they may be better known in their Russian, Polish, or Lithuanian forms, are given in Belarusian. The reader will therefore encounter Lukashenka, Ihnatouski, and Masherau, not Lukashenko, Ignatovskii, and Masherov.