



Summary

This is the first book on the history of Belarus in the Lithuanian language. Many reasons have caused such uniqueness. First of all, the academic Lithuanian historical approach formed in the interwar period, when there was no sovereign Belarusian state. Looking from the perspective of the young Lithuanian Republic separated from the Belarusian lands with political borders, there had been nothing to study or describe. Second, through the 1950s and the 1980s, when both nations coexisted in the same political body – the Soviet Union – the history of Belarus and especially its national perspective were suppressed, marginalized, and ignored by the communist pro-Russian authorities. In the general context of degradation of historical studies, nobody undertook the job to write about the Belarusian past. Finally, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of independent Lithuanian and Belarusian Republics, paradoxically, there had appeared other reasons not to write about the closest neighbors: the problem of the shared past and the fatal failure to share the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Until now, none of the Lithuanian historians has written any History of Belarus. There have been no translations of Belarusian or any other foreign authors into the Lithuanian language either.

Belarus is the closest historical neighbor to Lithuania: neither Latvians, Russians, nor Poles have had more intensive cultural, social, and political relations. Since the thirteenth century, Lithuanians and Belarusians have coexisted



in one state with only two short breaks: the 1920s through the 1930s and since 1990. Most of the shared history had been related to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a multinational state that dominated in East-Central Europe through the mid-thirteenth century till 1795, where Ukrainians, Jews, Tatars, Germans, and many other nations lived next to Lithuanians and Belarusians. To make it more complicated, the Grand Duchy was in close political and cultural alliance with Poland since the times of Jogaila (Jagiello, King of Poland in 1386–1434), and in a single political body – the Commonwealth of Two Nations – starting from the Lublin Union in 1569 and through 1795.

The legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania has not been easy to share among its successor states and nations through the nineteenth and the twenty-first century. The claimants appeared to be numerous: first of all, Lithuanians, Poles, Belarusians, but also Russians, Jews, and Ukrainians to some specific extend. The most dramatic tension happened between Lithuanians and Poles and between Lithuanians and Belarusians. The Polish case reached its culmination in the interwar period with the international conflict on Vilnius (Wilno). Later, however, the contradicting Polish and Lithuanian narrations have been pacified, retreats made on both sides, though the two nations have not formulated common denominators until now. The Belarusian case has appeared to be much more complicated. The Lithuanian and the Belarusian national narrations remain openly conflicting and not synchronized, whereas all attempts to find a peaceful compromise have failed.

The first Lithuanian book on Belarusian history does not aim to create the narration on the shared past that would fit the two – Lithuanian and Belarusian – conflicting traditions.



It does not favor any single one of them either. The study's main objective is to explain why the two national narrations are so incompatible, to indicate the conflicting points, to present and analyze the argumentation of the two sides. This study deconstructs and exposes the inner logic of the two neighboring visions of the past. The Belarusian perspective of their history, the first time critically presented in length in the Lithuanian language, is being confronted with Lithuanian interpretations and the parallels of the Lithuanian history. The primary addressee of the book is a Lithuanian reader: well-known facts and constructions of the past are confronted with "exotic" and sometimes even "shocking" visions of the Belarusian perspective. The reader critically approaches reality when discussing the same phenomenon from such radically different points of view. The result is a better understanding of the Lithuanian past, especially that of the Grand Duchy. Additionally, such an approach contributes to the better understanding of neighbors – the Belarusians – because analysis of their historical narration helps penetrate their identity issues. Finally, a reader is forced to self-reflect and, hopefully, modify his/her own incarnated notions of the past.

The divergence of Belarusian and Lithuanian historical narrations begins in the first pages of history manuals. It is about the first stages of the formation of the two nations. The Lithuanians start their story from the Baltic people, who formed as a result of Indo-European expansion and their mixture with locals three to two thousand years before Christ. Balts inhabited huge territories of East-Central Europe stretching from Moscow till Berlin. The long and peaceful history had been brutally interrupted by the expansion of Slavs. Starting from approximately the fifth century after Christ, Slavonic people had been penetrating



and assimilating the Baltic lands. The process lasted till the First World War. It appeared to be fatal for the Balts: most of them disappeared, remaining a handful represented by modern Lithuanian and Latvian states. So, the first divergence of Lithuanian and Belarusian narrations is of an emotional kind: the Lithuanian tragedy (rapid shrinkage of the Baltic lands due to Slavonic expansion) confronts the fact of the foundation of the Belarusian nation. The latter is being regarded as a Slavonic one in modern historical narration in Belarus, though parallelly, the considerable legacy and impact of the Baltic culture are being stressed (especially in the historiography of recent years).

The history of Belarusian statehood starts much earlier than that of Lithuania. The story of Kievan Ruś (second half of the ninth through the middle of the thirteenth centuries) is vital in the process of cultural and political consolidation of east Slavonic people, ancestors of modern Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. The medieval state, however, is not ardently favored in modern Belarusian national narration. In contrast to Ukrainians and Russians, Belarusians are pointing to its decentralized nature, inner conflicts, and cultural differences. As a result, Polock, Turaŭ, and Smaliensk (Smolensk) states (also called principalities) emerged as the first political bodies in the modern Belarusian lands starting from the ninth century. Polock has been regarded as a significant early Belarusian state, dominating modern Belarusian lands through the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Its ruler Rahvalod has emerged as the first known Belarusian sovereign (second half of the tenth century).

The formation and the rapid expansion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the middle of the thirteenth century appears to be the main problem in the Lithuanian–Belaru-



sian conflict. The logic behind it is easy to grasp: the nation which controls the foundations and the starting point also controls the rest of the history. In other words, the country belongs to those who created it. This explains why the two national narrations are so ardent and uncompromising about the times of Mindaugas, the first ruler of the Lithuanian state (1240s through 1263). Since the appearance of the first history books, Lithuanians keep repeating the elites and the core territories of the Grand Duchy being Lithuanian. Belarusians, in their turn, claim them being a mixture of Lithuanian and Belarusian ones (with some of them arguing for an exclusively Belarusian nature) with the first capital in an undoubted Belarusian city – Navahrudak. From this point of view, the Lithuanian interpretation is much more nationalistic, though both tend to stress a definitive impact of their proper ethnos. Such practices are expected: almost every country in Europe is looking to lay a patriotic basement for its national narration. At the same time, however, the fact is that there is an apparent lack of authentic sources to provide firm support to any one of the two conflicting sides.

Numerous dramatic and vigorous changes happened through the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries. The Lithuanian side emphasizes the rapid expansion to the modern Belarusian, and Ukrainian lands led by Lithuanian-born military elites. The capital was established in ethnic Lithuanian lands (Vilnius, 1323), and the grand dukes were Lithuanian-speaking pagans, whereas Slavonic-speaking orthodox Christians inhabited most of the acquired territories. The pagan elites turned into Catholic Christians in 1387 to keep the distance from the subjugated east-Slavonic people and change the country's orientation from East to West. To keep the Lithuanian position dominant in the country,



Catholics experienced more or less consistent status of privileged elites throughout the whole period. The Belarusian narration applies different accents to the same story while treating the Grand Duchy as an actual Belarusian state. It emphasizes that pagan Lithuanian elites were keen on assimilating with the Slavs and losing their cultural identity, especially when settling in the acquired east-Slavonic lands. Old Belarusian language became official in the country, whereas, Orthodox religion was dominant from the quantitative point of view, successfully rivaling with the Pagan and later Catholic one among the representatives of the country elites. The sixteenth century, in general, is being treated as a golden one in Belarusian culture with the first printing house (Vilnius), the first Belarusian book publications (again, Vilnius), and the overall development of the genuine Belarusian culture.

The Lublin Union (1569) had considerably impacted the political and cultural development of the Grand Duchy. The traditional national narrations of Belarus and Lithuania, still strong on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, had unanimously agreed that the political center of the Commonwealth had established itself in Warsaw through the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, whereas, Polish language and culture penetrated and started dominating in the Grand Duchy. As a result, Belarusian ones have been marginalized and provincialized; the destiny of the Lithuanian culture and language was even more tragic: they were reduced to the world of peasants. However, the Grand Duchy has preserved its political and cultural identity. There existed in the country its proper army, code of laws, treasure, and other traits of sovereignty that made the Lithuanian state independent from Poland. Moreover, the Grand Duchy



of Lithuania was a rare example of the republican, democratic, and decentralized rule in Europe: the phenomenon can be proud of any twenty-first-century country.

The newly established independent republics of Lithuania and Belarus started to reconsider the “Polish epoch” at the turn of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Both sides have made attempts to regain “the lost centuries” by reinterpreting and reintegrating them into national narratives. This resulted in a rewriting of history manuals and substantial infrastructural projects: rebuilding the Palace of the Grand Dukes in Vilnius (Lithuania) and restoration of Niasviž palace (Belarus). In both cases, the palaces of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries were turned into impressive museums of the countries, aiming to show the Grand Duchy as Lithuanian and as Belarusian, respectively. Characteristically, there is not a word on modern Belarus in the Vilnius museum, and nothing is mentioned about modern Lithuania in the Radziwiłłs’ palace in Niasviž.

There is a question that could arise, why do Lithuanians and Belarusian need the Grand Duchy at all? The motives are a bit different in each case. For Lithuanians, a small nation through many ages lost among and suffered from Slavonic neighbors, the legacy of the Grand Duchy means an essential pillar of the identity and a source of pride, of greatness, and of heroes to follow. For Belarusians, a nation politically and culturally almost swallowed by Russia, the Grand Duchy means an alternative path of development, based on Western values and the friendship with Poles and Lithuanians. Paradoxically, the two nations have not yet found a common language when speaking about the legacy of the once shared state.

The nineteenth century signaled the destined divergence of Belarusian and Lithuanian national paths. The processes,



however, have not been consistent. The representatives of both nations fought against the dominance of the Russian empire in 1794, 1812, 1831, and 1863–1864. Together, they were striving for freedom and aiming at the restoration of the Grand Duchy. The latter revolt produced the first national hero of the modern Belarusian nation – Kastuś Kalinoŭski. There have intensified the formation of modern nations in the middle of the century, based on culture and language. Despite attempts of Russification, most extreme at the second half of the century (the prohibition of Latin script – in Lithuania, and the penetration of West-Rus’ism – in Belarus), the two nations consolidated themselves. On the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, similar to Lithuania many essential developments had occurred in Belarus: the first newspapers appeared (the most prominent Belarusian ones being *Homan* and *Naša Niva*), many books were printed, political parties formed (since 1905, the process became even more intense), cultural and artistic movements consolidated, and classical texts written (Francišak Bahuševič, Maksim Bahdanovič, Janka Kupala, and others). Precisely in this period, Belarusians and Lithuanians started treating themselves as consolidated individual political and cultural entities. On the Belarusian side, however, there still were much more traces of Polish and Lithuanian (in the political sense of the Grand Duchy) identities preserved, in many cases incredibly mixed with local ones, the *Krajowcy* phenomenon serving as the best illustration.

The turmoil brought by the First World War – the conquests by Germans and the followed invasion of Poles and Soviets – resulted in new political borders. For the first time in history, Lithuanians and Belarusians have been separated from one another. Lithuanians appeared to be more suc-



cessful: the independent republic declared on February 16, 1918, managed to survive the two following decades. The Belarusian People's Republic proclaimed on March 25 of the same year had soon been divided between Poles and Soviets. Until 1939, the Polish state governed the western part of the country, with Vilnius, Hrodna, and Brest as the main cities. From the economic point of view, it had remained an impoverished agricultural territory. Western Belarus was inhabited mainly by Belarusian-speaking majority divided among Belarusian, *Tuteyshy*, Polish national identities, and small Jewish, Polish and Lithuanian minorities. The center of Belarusian activities was Vilnius. The Belarusian museum and the Scientific society, as well as various cultural and political organizations (the most numerous being Peasants' and Workers' Hramada) functioned; prominent intellectuals (e.g., Branislaŭ Taraškevič), political activists (e.g., Vlačaŭ Lastoŭski, brothers Luckievič) and artists (e.g., Jazep Drazdovič) lived and acted there. Through the 1930s, the Polish government persecuted many activists and suspended most of the Belarusian national initiatives. The brutality in the east Belarusian lands controlled by the Soviets at the meantime, however, was even more severe.

The October Revolution of 1917 started the rule of the Soviets in Russia. Soon, Soviet activists, followed by the Red Army, penetrated the Belarusian lands. The Belarusian People's Republic, a democratic and nation-orientated country, had not survived the post-World War epoch and, according to the Rīga peace treaty, the Soviets definitively took over the eastern part of the country in 1921. The Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was created. Through the Soviet period, which lasted till 1991, this Moscow puppet state had been regarded as the first and the only Belarusian state denying all previous political experience of Belarusian ancestors.



Josef Stalin contributed to its territorial consolidation and extension by attaching western Belarusian lands (ruled by Poland through 1921 and 1939). The Second World War, the German occupation, the extermination of Jews, and, especially, anti-nazi guerrilla warfare have been made central in Belarusian historiography and public memory. The propaganda has been using the tragedy to mobilize the society for pro-Russian feelings and against pro-Western influences.

The fundamental transformations of Belarusian society marked the Soviet epoch. The agricultural country was remade into an industrial one. The landscape was filled with factories, whereas village huts were replaced by soviet-style multi-store buildings for the new strata of society – industrial workers – to live in. At the same time, there had intensified the processes of Russification contributing to the loss of native language and customs. Though when compared to Lithuania, tendencies were the same, these developments were much more profound and all-encompassing. Sovietization of economics, lifestyle, culture, language, and even mentality had a much more visible effect on Belarus than on Lithuania.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991) and the years of democratic Belarus through 1996 was a period of hope and revival. Economics was in a deep crisis, soviet type culture and Russian language dominated the political elites, and the political situation was unstable. Despite these problems, the country experienced the first epoch of democratic self-governance: own money was introduced, a democratic constitution was written, national symbols (flag and the coat of arms) were implemented. The conjuncture, however, was not favorable, and a reaction happened: Aliaksandr Lukašenka was elected the first President. A new threshold appeared: the second time in the twentieth century, Lithuania and Belarus have started to distance one from another, isolated by



geopolitical borders. The 26 years of Lukašenka's rule can be treated as a tragic misunderstanding. Reform-less economic politics, persecutions of political opponents, strengthening of the authoritarian regime, marginalization of the authentic culture and native language were accompanied by political and economic integration with Russia, most of the discussed time ruled by the authoritarian Vladimir Putin. The worsening economic situation and the moral degeneration of the authoritarian rule have resulted in massive protests against the regime since the Presidential elections in August 2020.

Belarus is an obscure and enigmatic country for a Lithuanian observer. In the modern Lithuanian language, there are two major competing words to name the country – *Baltarusija* and *Gudija* – and many alternative ones (*Baltarusia*, *Belarusia*, *Baltoji Rusia*). Since Autumn 2020, there has intensified discussion on replacing the most frequently used *Baltarusija* (a word implemented into the Lithuanian language by the Soviets) with some other word. There is no defined system of writing Belarusian names and localities in the Lithuanian language. Next to these terminology issues, Belarusian identity is being regarded in Lithuania as hovering between East and West, between Russia and Poland (and Lithuania). The authoritarian regime has been leaning towards Russia, whereas democratic opposition to the opposite direction. There remains unclear to a Lithuanian spectator which path the country will pursue in the future. However, the major problem remains Belarusian stance towards the issues of the common past – the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Is the Belarusianisation of the Grand Duchy a threat or a chance for Lithuania? Do Lithuanians need to fear the Belarusian interpretation of the past, or do they need to address it with friendship and hope?