

Revival of the Poland and Belarus Issue as Reflected in the Western Belarusian Press, 1920–1921

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The article focuses on relations between the revived Polish state and the Belarusian minority in Poland during 1920–1921 as reflected in the Western Belarusian press. While initially the press in Western Belarusian press was mostly positive about the revival of Poland and expected support for Belarusian national aspirations from Polish democracy, later this attitude changed for the worse as the Western Belarusian press and public became increasingly dissatisfied with the national policy of the Polish authorities towards the Belarusian minority.

Key words: *family; Paderewski; biography; early experiences; restoration of Poland's independencerevival of Poland; Belarusian minority; national policy; culture; education*

In the course of the First World War, the standpoint of Belarusian politicians regarding the future political status of Belarusian lands evolved from the autonomy of a Belarusian region inside Russia to an independent Belarusian state. To a major extent, such an evolution resulted from the First World War and German policy on occupied Belarusian territory. As far as Belarusians and Lithuanians were concerned, the German occupational administration “supported their national aspirations as a counter-balance to Poles, who dominated in this region. During the German occupation a network of Belarusian educational institutions embracing a significant part of youth was created....”¹ When elaborating the model of a future Belarusian state, Belarusian politicians kept in mind the declaration of German Chancellor T. Bethmann Hollweg, who stressed that “occupied lands would never be returned back to Russia.”²

Fully aware of the insufficiency of their own resources and of the importance of foreign support for the creation of an independent Belarus, Belarusian politicians initially hoped to acquire a powerful and influential ally in Poland, which successfully revived its independence. Leaders of the Central Belarusian Council of Vilnius and Grodno regions established in Vilnius stated in their declaration of July 12, 1919 that “only with the support of fraternal Poland can we

¹ Miranovič, J. (2010). *Belarusy u Polščy (1918–1949)*. Vilnja, Belastok, p. 17.

² Luckevič, A. (2003). *Da historyi belaruskaha ruchu*. Minsk, p. 14.

achieve our ultimate goal – the independence of Belarus. Poland should help Belarusians liberate their land from Bolshevik and Moscow despotism.”³

The Grodno-based Belarusian periodical “*Belaruskae slova*,” arguing the necessity for an independent Belarus on the European political map, emphasized that “Belarus should be independent not only because of Belarusia’s population, but also to create stability in Eastern Europe. Polish democracy, which plays an extremely important role in the Belarusian question, should understand our aspirations better than anybody else. Just 2 or 3 years ago, Polish democracy was in our position – she was offered merely a modest autonomy inside Russia. But true Polish democracy led by Pilsudski did not accept this compromise. This example has great educational importance for us...”⁴

Initially “*Belaruskae slova*” demonstrated a sympathetic approach towards Poland, especially when writing about hostilities between Poland and Soviet Russia. Thus, “*Belaruskae slova*” published an article on October 2, 1920, which stressed the positive attitude of the inhabitants of Grodno towards J. Pilsudski. The newspaper wrote that the “leader of the Polish army, J. Pilsudski, arrived in Grodno right after Bolshevik troops had to leave the city. Crowds of people greeted the savior of Grodno from Bolshevik occupation.”⁵

However, all the hopes of Belarusian politicians that “true Polish democracy” headed by J. Pilsudski “should understand Belarusian aspirations better than anybody else” proved to be absolutely unfounded. From the very beginning, plans to create an independent Belarusian state did not meet a positive reaction in Warsaw, which had its own calculations regarding Belarusian lands. As it turned out, “a tolerant and positive attitude towards some Belarusian demands was only temporary, lasting from August until December 1919. But even during that period, the Polish authorities distanced themselves from those who supported an independent Belarus.”⁶ When the Council of the Belarusian People’s Republic split into a group of Polonophiles and supporters of an independent Belarus headed by V. Lastouskij in December 1919, the Polish authorities arrested Lastouskij and his followers, accusing them of anti-Polish activities.⁷

The policy pursued by Warsaw was quite predictable and stemmed from traditional Polish political thought, which considered the Polish ethnic element on ethnically Belarusian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian lands as “the dominant civilizational factor, capable of political organization of those lands.”⁸ In the words of Roman Dmowski, leader of the Polish national democrats, “Poland has the right

³ Nacionalnyj Archiv Respubliki Belarus (NARB), f. 878, op.1, ed.chr.10, l.48.

⁴ *Belaruskae slova. Palityčnaja, literaturnaja i ekanamičnaja gazeta* (1920), no. 1, p. 1.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Hamulka, K. (2008). *Pamiż Polščaj i Rasijaj. Belarus u koncepcyjach polskich palityčnych farmiravannjau 1918–1922*. Vilnja, p. 88.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 94–95.

⁸ Dmowski, R. (1926). *Polityka polska i odbudowanie państwa*. Warszawa, p. 17.

to spread beyond Polish ethnic borders to realize the civilizational potential of a great nation.”⁹ The political opponents of the national democrats – Polish socialists – shared their view on that issue. Thus, J. Pilsudski considered all Eastern neighbors of Poles as “non-historical” nations and thought that Polish “political tutelage” over them was a quite natural phenomenon.¹⁰

Another crucial issue that caused overall disappointment among Belarusian politicians was the behavior of Polish troops and administration in Belarusian-populated lands. One of the leaders of the Belarusian national movement, A. Luckevič, published in Vilnius in 1920 a booklet under the title “Polish Occupation in Belarus” characterizing the Polish occupational regime in Belarusian territories as “a terror against the Belarusian population,” which culminated during a Polish offensive when Polish troops occupied “Grodno, Vilnius and Minsk.”¹¹ A. Luckevič accused the Polish administration of wide-scale repressions against Belarusian organizations and of mass terror against Belarusian civilians. As an example, A. Luckevič cited the shooting of 36 peasants and the arrest of around 200 local civilians in Slutsk region, the mass torture of peasants in the village of Dedovo near Mikaševiči station and the burning of 7 Belarusian villages in Bobrujsk region in Central Belarus.¹²

These actions of the Polish administration on Belarusian ethnic lands led to a growing disappointment of Belarusian politicians and public figures with the policy of Warsaw. The Chairman of the Belarusian Committee in Warsaw, A. Dubejkovski, in his open letter published by the Vilnius-based Belarusian newspaper “Belaruskija vedamasci” in September 1921 characterized the situation of the Belarusian population in Grodno as a tragedy. In his words, “anybody who considered himself to be a Belarusian, for this reason alone became a criminal in the eyes of the local Polish administration. Any Belarusian organization – cultural, educational, Christian, economic – is consigned by the administration to their death... Every Belarusian and Belarusian organization is suspected of being Bolshevik...”¹³ Dubejkovski thought the essence of Polish policy in the Belarusian lands was “to discriminate against Belarusians and to provoke them into committing various misdeeds in order to provide the authorities with an excuse for their repression.”¹⁴

Belarusian newspapers were very critical about what they perceived as the arrogant attitudes of the Polish authorities towards Belarusians and Belarusian culture. The Vilnius-based Belarusian periodical “Belaruskija vedamasci”

⁹ Ibidem, p. 17.

¹⁰ Mironowicz, E. (2007). *Białorusini i Ukraińcy w polityce obozu piłsudczykowskiego*. Białystok: Trans Humana, p. 10.

¹¹ Luckevič, A. (1920). *Polskaja okupacija u Belarusi*. Vilnja, p. 7.

¹² Ibidem, p. 11.

¹³ *Belaruskija vedamasci* (1921), no. 1, p. 1.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

complained in October 1921 that “attitudes towards Belarusians on the part of many Polish officials and a certain section of Polish society are very neglectful... We are considered to be either Muscovites or Bolsheviks or just second-rate citizens...”¹⁵ In the words of J. Zaprudnik, Polish public opinion at that time tended to perceive Belarusians merely as “ethnographic material, which should be swallowed and digested.”¹⁶

Belarusian politicians and public figures expressed their dissatisfaction with what they perceived as “anti-Belarusian passages” in Polish media. Thus, “*Belaruskija vedamasci*” often criticized the Vilnius-based Polish newspaper “*Rzecz Pospolita*” for describing Belarusians as “savage, wild and uncultivated people, who should not be educated in their mother tongue, but exclusively in the Polish language.”¹⁷ “*Belaruskija vedamasci*” reacted emotionally, characterizing these comments as “inhuman insults against the Belarusian and Lithuanian peoples.”¹⁸

The peace treaty between Poland and Soviet Russia signed in Riga in March 1921, which confirmed the incorporation of Western Belarusian lands into the Polish state, aroused a lot of critical comments among Belarusian politicians and press. The Vilnius-based newspaper “*Krynica*”, the organ of Belarusian Christian Democracy, when commenting on the Riga peace treaty on 3 April 1921, stressed that “this treaty is not based on justice, since it divided our Belarus... The border line, which cuts up Belarus, has no justification. Is it possible to base a border line merely on waterways? In our opinion, this is impossible.”¹⁹ The situation in the Belarusian lands following the signing of the Riga treaty in 1921 was considered by the Western Belarusian press as a tragedy. “*Belaruskija vedamasci*” wrote that “Belarus was divided and totally devastated. The most nasty and terrible methods of politics were applied towards Belarus...”²⁰

Overall disappointment with the policy of the Polish authorities in Western Belarusian lands was also characteristic of the Grodno-based periodical “*Belaruskae slova*”, which initially demonstrated favorable attitudes towards Poland. In particular, “*Belaruskae slova*” was concerned about the schools policy of the Polish administration, which demonstrated an obvious trend aimed at the polonization of the whole educational system in Western Belarus. The Western Belarusian press was full of complaints about the numerous bureaucratic pitfalls and barriers against establishing Belarusian schools, discrimination against

¹⁵ *Belaruskija vedamasci* (1921), no. 5, p. 2.

¹⁶ Zaprudnik, J. (1993). *Belarus at a Crossroads in History*. Boulder-San Francisco-Oxford, p. 86.

¹⁷ *Belaruskija vedamasci* (1921), no. 1, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Krynica. Bielaruskaja Chryścijanska-Demakracyčnaja hazeta* (1921), no. 10, p. 1.

²⁰ *Belaruskija vedamasci* (1921), no. 1, p. 2.

Belarusian teachers and the mass liquidation of Belarusian educational institutions.²¹

Quite often Western the Belarusian press voiced criticism of the anti-Belarusian stance of the Polish Catholic church towards Belarusian Catholics. Thus, Vilnius-based “Krynica” noted in December 1921 that “the Polish Catholic clergy make the church life of Belarusian Catholics in Vilnius simply terrible...”²² complaining especially about discrimination towards the Belarusian language in the ecclesiastical sphere.²³

The Western Belarusian press paid great attention to the Polish census of 1921, expressing skepticism about the census results and predicting numerous administrative abuses to show a higher number of the Polish population at the expense of Belarusians.²⁴ The mechanism of conducting the census confirmed all the fears of Belarusian politicians. The Western Belarusian press indicated numerous examples of administrative abuses by the local Polish authorities. Thus, “Belaruskija vedamasci” pointed out that “in rural areas the census was conducted by mostly Polish teachers who were doing their best to turn Belarusians into Poles... Thus, in the village of Dziagili the local teacher, Mr. Čiž, registered all peasants – both Catholics and Orthodox – as Poles without even asking them about their nationality. It should be noted that the number of Catholics in that village is very low...”²⁵

In the words of Polish historian E. Mironowicz, “attempts by the Polish government to solve the Belarusian problem by the assimilation of Belarusians turned out to be counter-productive... and caused the rise of anti-government opposition among Belarusians.”²⁶ Analysis of the Western Belarusian press in 1920–1921 shows that the Belarusian minority started demonstrating discontent and dissatisfaction from the very beginning of the incorporation of the Western Belarusian lands into the Polish state.

²¹ *Belaruskae slova. Palityčnaja, literaturnaja i ekanamičnaja gazeta* (1920), no. 58, p. 1.

²² *Krynica. Bielaruskaja Chryścijanska-Demokratyčnaja hazeta* (1921), no. 1, p. 1.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Belaruskija vedamasci* (1921), no. 3, p. 1.

²⁵ *Belaruskija vedamasci* (1921), no. 8, p. 2.

²⁶ Mironowicz, E. (2007). *Białorusini i Ukraińcy w polityce obozu piłsudczykowskiego*. Białystok: Trans Humana, p. 125.

Modern Scholarly Biography in the Humanities: its Teaching Potential and Possible Pitfalls in Post-totalitarian Czech Society

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This paper describes the changing role of biography in the context of historiographical methodology and the historian's approach to research. The primary focus is on biographies by history scholars, though the same developmental tendency may be observed in contemporary biographies of prominent literary historians, historians of the creative arts and music, ethnographers, archaeologists, pedagogues and so on. There is a description of certain methodological problems, the potential and the pitfalls of research in the field of modern historiography and other social sciences which have arisen as a result of changes in academic discourse during the 20th century, including specific restrictions in the availability or usability of sources, or the classical limits of ego-history as such.

Key words: family; scholarly biography; developments in historiography; didactics of history and historiography; life history; oral history

It is now 30 years since the Velvet Revolution took place in Czechoslovakia, marking the end of government by one political party. Society, and with it education and research, have undergone – and continue to undergo – a complicated journey of transformation. Before attempting here to review the current situation regarding scholarly biographical works in Czech in the humanities, particularly in historiography, as well as in the teaching of these disciplines, it is necessary first to compare its level with that of world standards and examine specific ways in which the Czech situation is different. The extent to which it is possible to name and quantify these specific features is open to discussion; the current paper will focus primarily on those features of Czech scholarly biography which are shared with biographies of similar type in other post-totalitarian states. For comparative purposes, examples of changes in the academic discourse need not be limited to countries in the former Soviet bloc: equally pivotal changes have occurred relatively recently, for example, in South African historiography following the fall of apartheid, or a significant section of German or Italian historiography in the first half of the twentieth century.