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## BELORUSSIANS IN THE EYES OF THE POLES, 1918 - 1939

Few sources exist which would allow one insight into what the average Pole living in the central and western voivodships, or in the southern ones, too, knew or thought about the Belorussians. We must therefore consider a somewhat different problem : where could this average Pole, who in general never came across Belorussians, acquire information about them, and how were they presented in such information sources ?

Knowledge could come from publications (in the press and in books) or from the accounts of other people. In all likelihood one is free to suppose that verbal accounts did not basically vary from published accounts. Many a time, I dare say they were more simplified in nature, since the views which found their way into the columns of the press and into books were generally given shape after a certain amount of consideration of one's observations and experiences. With one exception, which should not be ignored. Thus, in third-rate novels, especially of a lightweight nature, popular notions and views found expression which were treated as padding to fill out the real action, and to which the author did not attach much importance.

Representatives of the Polish intelligentsia coming directly from gentry circles played the most important rôle as imparters of information to Polish society about the Belorussians and conditions prevailing in the lands inhabited by them. Only in the thirties did a new generation of writers and journalists grow up who departed from the gentry tradition, but at this time they did not have much of a following amongst the readers. Within Belorussian society on the other hand, peasants and agricultural workers were decidedly predominant ; the other classes formed an

extreme minority.<sup>1</sup> The above statement is of great significance for an understanding of the nature of the knowledge of the Belorussians conveyed to Polish readers. The authors who published this information were evaluating the subject of their observations not only from the point of view of another nation, with different traditions, but also from the position of the ruling class, socially. Only exceptionally did such an informant draw his knowledge from experiences of living and working with Belorussian country people. Such was Czesław Pietkiewicz, the celebrated scholar of popular culture, but his works and accounts were known only by ethnographers. Such were certain figures of the Polish left, but their voices for the most part carried only to their ideological comrades, and even then not to all of them.

Two authors must be regarded as particularly important in the formation of Polish views on the topic of Belorussians. Above all one must mention Maria Rodziewiczówna, born into a gentry family in the vicinity of Grodno in 1863, owner from 1881 of an estate in Polesie, and author of numerous novels and tales whose action is set in those parts. The number of editions of her works and the condition of copies kept in the libraries, indicating masses of faithful readers, testify to the influence she exerted on society. Melchior Wańkowicz, born later than Rodziewiczówna—into a gentry family in Kalużytsa in Belorussia in 1892, wrote about his home surroundings in some of his reminiscent works, very popular amongst readers even today. From the point of view of the present considerations, one can pass over the question of the literary merit of the two authors' works. On the other hand, it is important that their popularity during the inter-war years played a rôle in the shaping of the popular image of Belorussians. To some degree their influence can still be felt today.

In other popular works references to Belorussian themes are rather hard to come by. Worthy of attention are certain newspaper reports and sketches, scattered amongst the weeklies in particular. One should also ascribe some significance to travel publications

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<sup>1</sup> For a social and national breakdown of the peoples of the Belorussian lands forming part of Poland cf. Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Robotnicy przemysłowi w Polsce. Materialne warunki bytu 1918-1939* [*Industrial Workers in Poland. Material Living Conditions, 1918-1939*], Warszawa 1971, pp. 97 ff.

and children's literature. Political literature, of a programmatic nature, influenced the more active Polish circles.

I have already mentioned that the Belorussian community of inter-war Poland was made up above all of farming people, especially peasants. It is only natural that the image of the Belorussian peasant occupies a particular place in Polish literature. Interest was generally evoked in Polesie—the lands on the border between Belorussia and the Ukraine—owing to its exotic forests and marshes, the almost primeval nature, and the primitive life of the people living there. So that the Belorussian peasant was mostly regarded through the prism of conditions in Polesie, the more so that it was this land which Rodziewiczówna described.

In the majority of publications the image came to the fore (fashioned during the period of the partitions and Russian rule) of the civilizing rôle of the Polish nobleman's estate, fostering the old traditions, patriarchal, and justly deciding all local problems without resorting to the aid of state bodies. "The estate did not recognize the courts, and as far as possible did not apply to them. Administer your own justice, do your own recompensing, inflict your own punishment—that was the rule. Beatings were rare, but when someone was beaten, he was beaten till he dropped," wrote Wańkowicz.<sup>8</sup> A similar image was shown in the works of Rodziewiczówna. One literary critic wrote of them: "In her numerous works Rodziewiczówna placed particular emphasis, in fact, on the national significance of the Polish borderland estate [...]. On the other hand, she saw clearly the obscurantism of the Polesie peasant, his civic and social immaturity, and moral and intellectual neglect. The beneficial influence of the Polish estate could not take proper effect, for even this educational or moralizing mission was systematically paralysed by the Russian authorities. Despite this, however, although the task was considerably hindered in addition by the differences in religious faith between the Catholic estate and the Orthodox village, this influence was the only one to lead to any cultural and ethical improvement. But above all, this Polish borderland estate was the frontier bastion of the Commonwealth,

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<sup>8</sup> M. Wańkowicz, *Szczeniące lata* [*Salad Days*], Warszawa 1934, p. 126.

a defensive entrenchment against the approaching wave of barbarity from the east.”<sup>3</sup>

Before the partitions the Polish nobility dominated here—politically and economically. In the 19th century numerous representatives of this class took part in the insurrections, the aim of which was the rebirth of the Commonwealth within the old borders. When the armed struggle failed, they did their best to keep hold of their possessions, often not so much—or not only—from motives of personal interest, but in the conviction that the Polish nobleman’s estate was the corner-stone of Polish influence in these lands. Edward Woyniłłowicz—a landowner from the Minsk area, recalls the year 1906: “[...] the Polish gentry [...] gave away all the most valuable things they had, just so as to keep hold of their landed assets [...]; if any land there slipped out of Polish hands, there would not be any chance of retrieving it again.”<sup>4</sup>

The Polish estate also cherished patriotic traditions, memories of the past greatness of the Commonwealth and of the national insurrections, as well as a belief—concealed from the wrong people—in a future revival. A deep belief in the national mission of the Polish nobleman’s estate, consolidated throughout the 19th century, was still alive in the inter-war years amongst a considerable—and perhaps major proportion of the Poles inhabiting Belorussian lands. The local peasants were regarded in this light, as was their place in society.

The traditional Belorussian village appeared in the works of Polish writers above all as a stronghold of conservatism, recognizing without question the authority of the estate and the hierarchy sanctioned over the centuries. Wańkowicz gave a penetrating description of it, and added: “The entire appearance, all the bows and smiles of the Belorussian went to prove that he was overflowing with joy, that he was sufficiently rewarded by the sheer happiness entailed in serving ‘his lordship’”; “the peasant loved to

<sup>3</sup> K. Czachowski, *Marja Rodziewiczówna na tle swoich powieści* [*Marja Rodziewiczówna Against the Background of her Novels*], Poznań n.d., pp. 190–191.

<sup>4</sup> E. Woyniłłowicz, *Wspomnienia 1847–1928* [*Memoirs, 1847–1928*], Part I, Wilno 1931, p. 149.

feel the presence of a strong hand behind him, he understood this "lordliness" and fell in love with it."<sup>5</sup>

Wańkowicz' recollections, coloured with sentimental feelings for childhood years spent on a Polish estate on Belorussian land, without doubt idealized the picture of conditions in those parts. First and foremost he saw the picturesqueness of the rural community's conservatism, and the positive features proper to stabilized social and behavioural relations. He was not alone in this. The landowners of the Novogrodek voivodship presented local conditions in a similar way in discussions held with members of a tour organized in 1923 by the Farmers' Christian and National League, the course of which was reported by the publicist Władysław Wydźga: "The Belorussian, good-hearted, with a gentle look in his eyes, quiet, stands on a very low rung of civilization and is consequently full of mistrust [...]. And so it is difficult to probe his political beliefs. It seems that the foundation of his beliefs is a very conservative sentiment regarding respect for authority and to this end the need to maintain a proper hierarchy. Against this background, by comparison the present-day organization of the Polish authorities gives rise to doubts on his part as to the stability of Polish government."<sup>6</sup> For in the author's opinion—and that of his informants—the democratization of the system of government, general elections, freedom of political campaigning, ushered in the disintegration of the traditional social system.

Other authors frequently placed at the forefront the negative aspects of this conservatism. In their interpretation it was bound up first and foremost with ignorance, superstition, and the primitiveness of living conditions. Such an image was shown in some travel publications<sup>7</sup> and reports on Polesie. So that Michał Marczak wrote: "The Polesie people are the least cultured people in Poland."<sup>8</sup> While Henryk Uziembło commented: "a people on first

<sup>5</sup> M. Wańkowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 129.

<sup>6</sup> W. Wydźga, *Z wycieczki na kresy (województwo nowogródzkie)* [From a Tour of the Borderlands (Novogrodek Voivodship)], Warszawa 1923, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> M. Marczak, *Ze spostrzeżeń nad Poleszuzkami* [Some Observations on the People of Polesie], "Ziemia", 1935, No. 6/7, pp. 132 - 136.

<sup>8</sup> M. Marczak, *Przewodnik po Polesiu* [A Guide-Book of Polesie], Brześć nad Bugiem 1935, p. 25.

contact sullen, suspicious, mistrustful and apparently ignorant. The shaggy peasants, moustached and bearded, look askance at you, scratch their heads and make an excellent show of being stupid"; "Their present-day robber-knight streak, their proclivity to brigandage and plunder, together with a romantic predilection for freedom, unfortunately synonymous in their understanding with anarchy, provide much food for thought. Might these not in fact be the atavistic proclivities of a people accustomed since time immemorial to the business of war?"<sup>9</sup>

Polesie fascinated newcomers from other parts of the state with its exoticism, perturbed them with the inscrutability and secretiveness of its inhabitants, astounded them with skills in utilizing the gifts of nature elsewhere forgotten, and inclined them to sympathy with the destitution of the countryside. This is particularly evident in the books of Ferdynand Antoni Ossendowski, a popular travel writer in his time. In a monograph destined for the Polish intelligentsia he wrote: "[...] an unkind fate has forced the Polesie people into mistrust, which has become second nature to them, and into the habits of plunderers, since these gave assurance of another day and dispelled the pale spectre of hunger, disease, and death [...]"; "[...] the Polesie people became mistrustful and stubbornly passive, and when this did not help—vindictive and bitter."<sup>10</sup> In a travel monograph of a similar nature to the one quoted above, Tadeusz Łopalewski wrote in a similar vein on the inhabitants of the Novogrodek voivodship—though without such fascination for the exoticism and primitive state of life: "this conservatism, this mistrust and recalcitrance in respect of any kind of modern innovation, is typical of the mentality of the local peasant."<sup>11</sup>

The element of exoticism also came to the fore in certain local Polish publications, issued in the Belorussian area. This was accompanied by a particular idealization of the inhabitants. So that in a periodical issued in Pińsk, we read: "Accustomed by the

<sup>9</sup> H. Uziembło, *Błoto ... bajeczne* [The Fabulous ... Marshland], Kraków 1934, pp. 12, 19.

<sup>10</sup> F. A. Ossendowski, *Polesie*, Poznań n.d., pp. 20, 73.

<sup>11</sup> T. Łopalewski, *Między Niemnem a Dźwiiną. Ziemia Wileńska i Nowogródzka* [Between the Nemen and the Dvina. The Vilna and Novogrodek Region], Poznań n.d., p. 40.

nature of things to spending whole days in solitude, and having to contend only with nature in the daily struggle for their hard-earned bread, the Polesie people became taciturn and reticent, which features are wrongly interpreted by some as representing sullenness of disposition, deceitfulness and a feeling of hostility. Only someone completely unfamiliar with country life could maintain that "the Polesie people have a dubious look about them" [...]. Only if one listened of an evening to the conversations in the low Polesie huts, [...] if one heard the soundness of the straightforward reasoning, could one appreciate what great significance peasant common sense might have for the state."<sup>12</sup> Doubtless such sentiments were also prompted by hopes that the Belorussian people would support the government system established by Józef Piłsudski in May, 1926.

These and similar appraisals, emphasizing the conservatism and primitiveness of the Belorussian country people, and failing to notice political changes in their perception, led to the generally prevailing view that they were extremely open to outside influence.

The experiences of the revolution in 1917 and the several years' fighting within the Belorussian lands which followed it, inclined Rodziewiczówna to a very pessimistic view of the Polesie peasants. In contrast to Wańkowicz' sentimental optimism, she wrote: "[...] a Chinese wall of musty prejudice, envy and mistrust separated the village from the estate. The peasants served on the estate, but with ill will; they did their work, but badly and lazily."<sup>13</sup> A similar motif appeared in many of her other works written after Poland regained independence. This was the point of departure for the thesis that the local peasants succumbed easily to all kinds of evil suggestions, especially those emanating from behind the eastern border. In another novel *Rodziewiczówna* showed the Polesie peasants as primitive passive tools in the hands of barbaric Bolsheviks.<sup>14</sup> Neither did she spare the local authorities

<sup>12</sup> *Poleszuk a zagadnienia państwowe* [*The People of Polesie and State Issues*], "Ziemia Pińska", 1926, No. 1.

<sup>13</sup> M. Rodziewiczówna, *Hrywda. Powieść*. [*Hrywda. A Novel*], 3rd ed., Warszawa n.d., p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> M. Rodziewiczówna, *Florjan z Wielkiej Hłuszy* [*Florjan from Wielka Hłusza*], Poznań n.d.

set up by the government of reborn Poland, shown as being under the control of sundry sharp operators, Russians contemplating the restoration of tsarism, and as being hand in hand—from selfish motives—with local Jewish speculators.<sup>15</sup> The one bright spot remained the Polish nobleman's estate, upholding the Polish way of life in spite of everything. So that we read of one of the heroes: "When the sower turned towards the east, he saw a mental picture of the satanic eyes of a Bolshevik, lying in wait to snatch up his work; when he turned towards the west, he saw smoke from the huts of the envious village, stirred up and ready to plunder the property of others."<sup>16</sup>

From this picture of conditions in Polesie, usually extended to include the whole of the Belorussian lands, the conclusion emerged that it was necessary to protect the local population from evil outside influences and expose them to the good Polish influence. In Rodziewiczówna, this was exerted first and foremost by the estate, which could moralize the peasant and educate him in the desired spirit in so far as the external forces of the authorities would allow. In such an interpretation, land reform meant ruining the chances of Polonization effects on the Belorussian countryside. So that Woyniłłowicz argued: "Apart from the fundamental protection of property rights, we could not overlook the incontrovertible fact that in the borderlands area nationality issues also had to be taken into account, that the dispossession of the gentry altogether diminished Polish possessions in the borderlands."<sup>17</sup>

Other writers, particularly in the thirties, raised doubts about the chances of the gentry producing any effect on the peasants. The rightist journalist Alfons Tuskiewicz remarked that the primitive peasants trusted the Jewish traders more than the estate, no matter how much—in his view—the former profited from

<sup>15</sup> M. Rodziewiczówna, *Niedobitowski z granicznego bastjonu* [*Niedobitowski of the Frontier Bastion*], Lwów 1926, *passim*. The motif of the corrupting influence of Warsaw also cropped up in other publications. Cf. e.g. *Szkice z Puszczy Białowiezkiej* [*Sketches from the Białowieża Forest*], 14 cartoons by A. Kamiński, text by Z. Bartkiewicz, Warszawa 1912, pp. 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> M. Rodziewiczówna, *Niedobitowski z granicznego bastjonu*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> E. Woyniłłowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 283.



exploitation of the peasants.<sup>18</sup> In this connection he sounded an alarm, since "the smuggler and USSR agent [...] received permanent protection, free board and lodging" amongst Jewish people.

So that in contrast to Rodziewiczówna, the beneficial influence of the Polish authorities was emphasized. Ossendowski wrote: "The excellent conditions of service and the circumstances prevailing in the army allow Polesie people to totally assimilate themselves more rapidly than other soldiers of non-Polish nationality—they begin to speak in Polish, and in amazement and often outright indignation they perceive the intense meanness of the false rumours and slander directed against Poland by her enemies, and write about this to their families [...]"<sup>19</sup> And in a book intended for young people he stated: "The Polesie people willingly attend school and are grateful to Poland for their education, although, unfortunately, it is difficult for the time being to attract peasant children from the surrounding villages."<sup>20</sup>

The Belorussian thus described did not have any national consciousness—according to the writers of these accounts; it is not surprising that the local population were described by means of various regional terms, or simply as the "local peasants", avoiding definition of their nationality. The conviction prevailed that the overwhelming majority of country people speaking Belorussian did not consider themselves to be Belorussians, although this does not mean that they were Poles or Russians; evidence of this was to be provided by the results of the 1931 census. Łopalewski wrote: "Practically every Belorussian uses Polish fluently, which does not, however, mean that he considers himself a Pole. Similarly, Orthodox religion, the faith of most believers amongst the mass of the Belorussian people, is absolutely no criterion for numbering all those of such persuasion among conscious elements alien to Polish culture."<sup>21</sup>

Some authors emphasized regional differences, which sup-

<sup>18</sup> A. Tuszkiewicz, *Meldunki z Polesia [Reports from Polesie]*, "Prosto z mostu", 1938, No. 5.

<sup>19</sup> F. A. Ossendowski, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>20</sup> F. A. Ossendowski, *W polskiej dżungli [In the Polish Jungle]*, Warszawa 1935, p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> T. Łopalewski, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

posedly prevented treating the entire Belorussian population in terms of one people. This occurred especially in the publications of adherents of the concept of national democracy, though not only here. Zygmunt Czerwijowski wrote: "Ethnographically and from the point of view of character, the Polesie people differ markedly from the Belorussians and the Ukrainians. Life in the middle of the inaccessible Polesie marshland gave rise to the development of a typical social passiveness amongst the region's inhabitants. Reticent, less active than the Belorussians and the Ukrainians, they have a nature outwardly submissive, but hard, secretive and obstinate. Cunning, wily in respect of their enemies, religiously indifferent, but superstitious and conservative in their beliefs, lazy at work, not fond of any great effort, and stubborn, in their own circle they often reveal profound practical sense, and a particular sense of humour and wit. Born individualists, they are opposed to collective work and strangers to its discipline. The notion of title to property is highly developed in the Polesie people. This they will obstinately defend for themselves, and are not inclined to infringe as regards those close to them. In relation to outsiders, however, greed and the desire to make a quick profit often get the better of them [...]. In respect of nationality the Polesie people are very little informed. Their language differs from the Belorussian or Ukrainian languages."<sup>22</sup>

The beginnings of Belorussian national consciousness were universally regarded not only as a historically late phenomenon (dated to the second half of the 19th century), but also as the result of outside influences. Some authors considered it to be the result above all of the activity of Polish landowners and writers anxious to prove to the "natives" that they were something separate from the Russians, and to tie them to Polish traditions. The embryo of Belorussian literature was seen exclusively in Adam Mickiewicz' circle of friends. Eventually, "the end of the 19th century brought with it the finest film of a Belorussian intelligentsia—highly Polonophile in their beliefs—appearing on the surface of the nationally indifferent peasant mass."<sup>23</sup> In the view of those who

<sup>22</sup> Z. Czerwijowski, *Zagadnienia oświatowe w województwach wschodnich* [Educational Problems in the Eastern Voivodships], Warszawa 1929, off-print from "Oświata Polska", pp. 5 - 6

<sup>23</sup> T. Łopalewski, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

supported this opinion, a change came about only during the First World War, when the political struggles of Germany and the Russian communists led to stimulation of the Belorussian nationalist movement of a predominantly transitory and improvised nature, susceptible as the movement was to outside influences, and deprived of real support from within Belorussian society. But it was then, some people indicated, that the policy of the local Polish community took effect. The above-quoted Woyniłowicz recalled some meetings of Polish landowners from the Minsk District, held in 1917: "Our principal thought was to stimulate in the Belorussians a nationalistic frame of mind, so as to isolate them from Moscow, and deliver the peaceable Belorussian people, sound in their ideas, from the anarchy which even then was striking root deeper and deeper in Russia proper. These meetings for the most part bore a character of protest against the recently fallen tsarist régime. Priests also took part, amongst whom the movement gained numerous adherents, whilst Duchess Magdalena Radziwillowa became one of the most chauvinistic members [...], founding Belorussian country schools and giving generous financial support to the Belorussian movement. The latter, like all other Belorussian organizations come to that, having been started for nationalistic purposes, slowly began to adopt socialist slogans, which of course was bound to alienate the landowning elements [...]." <sup>24</sup>

It would appear, however, that another attitude was much more common, especially amongst the Polish community of the eastern borderlands. Belorussian national consciousness was regarded as a product of Russian bureaucracy, aiming to cut the Belorussians off from Poland. Echoes of this sort of view can still be met with today, although it might have seemed difficult to treat such a view seriously. One of the consequences of this kind of outlook on the Belorussian question was the regarding of Belorussians who undertook political activity, deputies to the Sejm alike, as "Russkis disguised in Belorussian overcoats." <sup>25</sup>

It is not only in relation to the Belorussians, and not only in Poland that one encounters the treatment of historically overdue nationalist movements and independent national consciousness as

<sup>24</sup> E. Woyniłowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>25</sup> W. Wydzga, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

phenomena artificially created by external forces. Such appraisals arose—and still arise—within circles for which the nascent consciousness of a young nation was undesirable, since it called in question the traditional territorial postulates. The process of change in social consciousness was then treated as the result of outside activity (sometimes simply of some sinister plot), since this justified ignoring it and ruthlessly opposing anyone propagating these undesirable ideas.

Rejection of the view that the arisal and development of national consciousness could come about exclusively or mainly under the influence of outside agitation, regardless of actual political and ethnic relations, is not meant to imply a complete denial of the significance of various influences. Adherents of the view that the origins of Belorussian national consciousness were autonomous and independent also drew attention to Russian influences, seeing in them the source of anti-Polish attitudes amongst the peasants, but often overlooking the social causes of the antagonism between village and estate. So that on 28 February, 1923 the voivod of Polesie, Stanisław Downarowicz, wrote in a memorial of programmatic character: "The peasant masses are becoming a weighty and almost decisive factor. Predominantly Orthodox and non-Polish in three voivodships, and trained in hostile spirit towards Poland for well over a hundred years. Fortunately for us, in this case the masses are as a rule passive, little informed and—most important—heterogeneous."<sup>26</sup> Woynilłowicz on the other hand, giving an account of an attack on an estate by some peasants in February, 1918, put it down exclusively to the effects of long-term efforts on the part of the tsarist authorities to set village and estate at odds.<sup>27</sup> The various views on the underlying reasons for the growth of the Belorussian movement and of national consciousness were summarized by a Polish Polesie journal: "the Belorussian movement in its current form is not a normal national movement, it is rather a struggle between Polish influences and influences from the east—no longer by way of the Orthodox Church, but by way of communism."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereafter AAN) (Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw), Ministry of Internal Affairs (hereafter MSW) 938, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> E. Woynilłowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>28</sup> *Nasze stanowisko* [Our Standpoint], "Ziemia Pińska", 1927, No. 1.

The view that Belorussian national consciousness was an external phenomenon, introduced by the Russians or the Poles to a nationally indifferent peasant environment, consistently led to the conclusion that the Belorussian village would easily succumb to Polonization influences, provided such influence was exerted consistently and that outside inspiration was cut off. So that Wydźga wrote in the report already quoted: "Belorussian elementary schools are scarce. Those which existed are disappearing. There is no real demand amongst the population in this direction. Demands put forward for Belorussian schools are usually the work of particular individual agitators, and are underpinned by Russophile tendencies. In any case the complete absence of Belorussian textbooks is the deciding issue. Two or three "Belorussian" grammar schools exist within the area of the voivodship, with Russian as the teaching language. The permanence of these outgrowths is dependent on the development of Polish education, and they will disappear as soon as our schools prove equal to the task."<sup>29</sup> A similar conviction was expressed in 1935 in an internal paper of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, entitled *Zagadnienie Ziemi Wschodnich w świetle bezpośredniej obserwacji terenu* [The Eastern Lands Issue in the Light of Observation in the Field]: "[...] there is no desire amongst the Belorussian national minority at grass-roots level to set themselves apart ethnically, on the contrary—they want to merge with the Polish majority. We can see this phenomenon in the area of elementary education, where the Belorussian peasant not only does not demand Belorussian schools to be opened, but, faced with a choice of two schools—Polish or Belorussian—himself opts to send his children to the Polish one."<sup>30</sup> The above statements took as their starting-point various actually observed phenomena, but generalized them without cause and took them to be permanent trends favouring the political designs of the Polish authorities.

Many authors spread the view that the average Belorussian peasant was far from being aware of his national distinctiveness. So that in one of the publications of the Polish Touring Society we read: "Awareness of national distinctiveness amongst the local

<sup>29</sup> W. Wydźga, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> AAN, MSW 948, p. 38.

Belorussians is poorly developed ; in recent years social consciousness has grown, under the influence of agitation on the part of Belorussian activists and of trends spreading from Soviet Belorussia. But as a rule the Belorussian peasant is indifferent to national and political slogans, mistrustful and not very amenable to organizational work. He is more susceptible to the slogans of social radicalism, especially on the land question, which elements hostile to the Polish state adroitly turn to account, adding fuel to aversion to the Polish administration and attraction to Bolshevism."<sup>81</sup>

In the context of such considerations, the question even arose whether the Belorussian language was separate in character, or whether it was merely a local dialect.<sup>82</sup> The publicist and activist of the National League, Jędrzej Giertych, stated : "With constant effort (after the Czech and other examples) the Ukrainians and even the Belorussians undoubtedly have all the makings of developing into independent, fully-fledged nations [...]. But at the present time neither the one nor the other are nations in the full sense of the word."<sup>83</sup> Wojciech Wasiutyński, an activist within the extreme nationalist organization of the National Radical Camp—"Falanga", wrote in similar vein : "The Belorussians are not a nation. They might become one with a great deal of effort... on our part. Acknowledging the Belorussians as a nation, or affording them assistance so that they can set themselves apart as a nation, is doctrinairism [...], the sacrificing of the future of the Polish Nation for a doctrine."<sup>84</sup>

For the eminent conservative publicist Stanisław Mackiewicz, from the Vilna region, the conclusion to emerge from such a position was that Polish policy regarding the Belorussians should rest on, "1. clearing the way for assimilation of those Belorussians

<sup>81</sup> E. Lisiewicz, *Stosunki narodowościowe i administracyjne w województwie nowogródzkim* [Nationality and Administrative Relations in Novogrodek Voivodship], in: *Nowogródzkie*. A collective work issued through the efforts of the Polish Sight-Seeing Society, Warszawa 1926, p. 16.

<sup>82</sup> S. Mackiewicz, *Kropki nad i* [The Dots over the i's], Wilno 1927, p. 121.

<sup>83</sup> J. Giertych, *O program polityki kresowej* [For a Borderland Policy Programme], Warszawa 1932, p. 30.

<sup>84</sup> W. Wasiutyński, *Zagadnienie ziem wschodnich* [The Question of the Eastern Lands], Warszawa 1936, p. 11, off-print from the monthly "Ruch Młodych".

who are eager to be assimilated [...], 2. on an extensive programme of economic investment and improvement of our administration in Belorussian territory, 3. on not alienating from Poland those Belorussians who are openly anti-Bolshevik—and 4. on a passive, observational standpoint in relation to the building-up of Belorussian consciousness and culture, a favourably neutral standpoint.”<sup>85</sup> Giertych went further in his reasoning: “The rights emerging from their numerical strength, supplemented by rights based on past service and cultural superiority, and on the tradition of cultural hegemony—provide the Poles with moral justification for postulating the supremacy of the Polish way of life in the borderlands”; “We must come out and compete with the separatist groupings for the souls of the borderland population masses—uninformed nationally—and win these masses over to the Polish way of life. In other words we must cut the borderland people off from contact with those of the intelligentsia and half-educated classes professing a separatist ideology.”<sup>86</sup> Whilst Wasiutyński proposed concrete tactics: “The Belorussians do not have the requisites for creating a full national life of their own. They can fall within the orbit of Moscow or of Warsaw. We have the right and the duty, justified ethnically, historically and in terms of civilization, to offer them our superior and better culture, and to acknowledge them as a fully-fledged part of the Polish Nation [...]. Instruction should commence in the local language, i.e. Belorussian, but using, of course, Polish orthography and the Latin alphabet. A gradual transition should be made, in step with the child’s development, to the Polish literary language exclusive in official work and Polish education.”<sup>87</sup>

A controversy developed over tactics for Polonizing the Belorussian people. Various forms of agrarian policy were considered, in connection with which criticism arose of the Polish gentry, and a demand for land reform.<sup>88</sup> The possible Polonizing influence of various organizations was discussed. The paper of the Ministry of Internal Affairs quoted earlier stated: “Part of the Belorussian

<sup>85</sup> S. Mackiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>86</sup> J. Giertych, *op. cit.*, pp. 7, 9.

<sup>87</sup> W. Wasiutyński, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> Article *Morituri*, “Ziemia Pińska”, 1927, No. 8; AAN, MSW 946, pp. 44, 46.

and Ukrainian population is waking from its stupour and wants to take up organizational and social work. When there is a Belorussian or Ukrainian organization in the vicinity then some of these people wishing to work in the social sphere go to those organizations ; when, however, they are not to be found, but Polish organizations exist in the vicinity, they turn to the latter. They are then greeted with disappointment. Polish organizations will not take these applicants." <sup>40</sup> The author of the paper asked for an end to such practices and quoted instances of Polonization activity on the part of the Związek Strzelecki (a socio-political organization subordinate to the ruling party) in some Belorussian villages.

However, other voices had been raised as early as the 1920s. The national independence of the Belorussians had been acknowledged by groupings on the Polish left, both communist and socialist. One expression of this sort of standpoint was the separate organizational status of the Communist Party of Western Belorussia. The Nestor of the Polish socialist movement, Bolesław Limanowski, underlined the existence of a Belorussian culture (including literature too), and pointed to independence in political life.<sup>40</sup> This line of reasoning was continued by Zygmunt Żuławski, who in 1946 criticized the WRN (Freedom—Equality—Independence) wing of the Polish Socialist Party—which was then operating illegally in Poland—for rejecting the Treaty of Riga frontier revisions in respect of Belorussia and the Ukraine.<sup>41</sup> Certain representatives from Catholic circles also viewed the Belorussian issue more soberly. In mid 1924 Father Jan Urban wrote : "Although they represent a minority, the Polish population in the eastern borderlands are not anyone's guests, and neither are they strays, but they are at home in their own place and do not have the slightest intention of falling under anyone else's yoke again [...]," but added : "For people who pay homage to theories neither of national egoism, nor of the supremacy of the state, nor of power as a source of law, it is quite clear that the satisfaction of certain

<sup>40</sup> AAN, MSW 946, p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> J. Bardach, *Inflanty, Litwa i Białoruś w twórczości Bolesława Limanowskiego. Studium z dziejów kwestii narodowej* [Livonia, Lithuania and Belorussia in the Work of Bolesław Limanowski. A Study from the History of the National Question], "Przegląd Historyczny", 1974, No. 3, pp. 497 - 498.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 501.



demands from foreign nationalist groups is not a sad necessity merely, nor a favour, but a moral obligation of the state." Consequently he stated that the languages of the national minorities (Ukrainian in Lvov, and Belorussian in Vilna) ought to be introduced not only in elementary and secondary schools, but also in colleges.<sup>42</sup> Subsequently, however, the Catholic journals did not evince much interest in Belorussian issues. Perhaps this came about under the influence of the Archbishop of Vilna, Romuald Jalbrzykowski, who opposed Belorussian nationalist aspirations.

In the 1930s it would appear that interest in the Belorussians grew in the Polish literary and political press. These questions were raised in particular by the Vilna press. The periodical "Poprostu", representing the left, described the process of Polonization in education; particulars were quoted after the "Kurier Wileński" concerning the drastic consequences of using the Polish language to teach children who knew nothing but the Belorussian tongue.<sup>43</sup> Vinceś Sava, writing about the fruitless efforts to found private Belorussian schools, concluded: "despite their short-lived existence, Belorussian schools have left behind them a certain myth within society which will not perish [...]"<sup>44</sup> However, this periodical had a limited circulation and limited social impact, so that one cannot regard it as being representative of wider Polish circles. Of greater significance for Polish intellectual circles were the reports contained in "Wiadomości Literackie", where it was possible to find often factual information and appraisals of the plight of the Belorussians.<sup>45</sup>

Although they only reached a narrow circle of readers, academic publications were also characteristic. Worthy of attention are the valuable works of the historian of state and law Seweryn Wyslouch, who *inter alia* stated towards the end of the 1930s—

<sup>42</sup> J. Urban, *Po uchwaleniu ustaw językowych* [After the Passing of the Language Laws], "Przegląd Powszechny", vol. CLXIII, August 1924, pp. 114, 117, 120.

<sup>43</sup> *Dzieci, którym każe się zmieniać skórę* [The Children Who are Told to Grow a New Skin], "Poprostu", 1935, No. 2.

<sup>44</sup> V. Sava, *Walka o szkołę białoruską* [The Fight for a Belorussian School], "Poprostu", 1935, No. 10.

<sup>45</sup> E.g. K. Pruszyński, *O wóz i konia* [For a Cart and a Horse], "Wiadomości Literackie", 1936, No. 41; W. Wasilewska, *Szukam antysemityzmu* [Searching for Anti-Semitism], "Wiadomości Literackie", 1937, No. 40.

notwithstanding the opinions quoted above—that it was only for fear of reprisals that the Belorussians did not come out with mass demands for the founding of Belorussian schools.<sup>46</sup>

Information about Belorussian literature appeared in one of the journals of the Polish peasant movement. Piotr Łastówka presented profiles of seven poets (including Maksym Tank) and wrote: "As a national minority within Poland, the Belorussians represent a peaceful element on the whole. After the World War they quickly began to develop culturally, socially and politically. The young literary generation, drawing on the treasure-house of the national soul, is introducing native cultural elements. The main features of this work are melancholy and longing, imbued with the spirit of rebirth and concern for cultural enlightenment and the development of social life."<sup>47</sup>

However, such voices did not alter the fact that there still persisted the notion of the primitive state of the Belorussian community, of the absence of national consciousness and social refinement, whilst, such being the case, the majority of individuals who appreciated that such a national group existed in Poland thought that an effective Polonization policy could be implemented. The Belorussian intelligentsia—numerically modest, it is true—were not regarded as serious partners.

Such attitudes also found their way into the columns of the journal "Płomyk", intended for young readers at school. Every so often the journal published texts presenting the various provinces of the state, including the voivodships inhabited by the Belorussians. Still, the exotic came to the fore. For instance a short

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<sup>46</sup> S. Wyślouch, *Świadomość narodowa ludności prawosławnej, zamieszkującej wschodnie i północno-wschodnie powiaty Wileńszczyzny* [*The National Consciousness of the Orthodox Population Inhabiting the Eastern and North-Eastern Districts of the Vilna Region*], Warszawa 1939 (according to S. Maurerberg, *Szkolnictwo powszechne dla mniejszości narodowych w Polsce w latach 1918 - 1939* [*Elementary Education for National Minorities in Poland during the Years 1918 - 1939*], Wrocław 1968, p. 114); cf. also S. Wyślouch, *Rola Komunistycznej Partii Zachodniej Białorusi w ruchu narodowym Białorusinów w Polsce* [*The Role of the Communist Party of Western Belorussia in the National Movement of Belorussians in Poland*], Wilno 1933.

<sup>47</sup> P. Łastówka, *Powojenni poeci białoruscy w Polsce* [*Post-War Belorussian Poets in Poland*], "Młoda Myśl Ludowa", 1938, No. 11/12, pp. 25 - 26.

verse on Polesie published in 1932 presented a marshy and wooded landscape and stated :

*"Lud zaś prosty i ubogi  
nie wyżywi jego rola,  
ziarna skąpo rodzą pola,  
las go karmi więc i rzeka  
cieplą wełnę dają owce.  
I na jutro owo czeka,  
co dni lepsze mu przyniesie.  
A kraj ten — to jest Polesie"*<sup>48</sup>

(But its soil does not feed  
the people, simple and poor,  
the fields barely yield grain,  
so that the forest nourishes  
them, and the river, sheep  
provide warm wool. And they  
wait for the tomorrow that  
will bring them better days.  
And this country is—Polesie).

The young reader might have got the impression that the inhabitants of Polesie only differed from the populations of other regions of the state in poverty and the particular living conditions determined by climate and geography. Similarly, from the texts published in "Płomyk" in 1934 it would have been difficult to gather anything beyond the exoticism of the landscape and popular customs. It is true that the original text of the chants for St. Andrew's Day was quoted, together with a Polish translation, but with no reference to the fact that this was the Belorussian language.<sup>49</sup> Only in two places in a special number of the journal devoted to the Vilna District do we meet with incidental references to the Belorussians.<sup>50</sup> In subsequent years reports concerning the north-eastern voivodships again confined themselves to the exotic, without mentioning the Belorussian nationality of the inhabitants.<sup>51</sup>

It was the same in works of fiction intended for wider circles of less demanding readers. For instance, Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz' widely read novel, also reprinted after 1945, used the exoticism of primitive Belorussian surroundings as the setting for the action, but with no indication of its national character. This became even more evident in the film based on the novel. The hero of the title, an eminent physician who has lost his memory after a severe shock and practices as a country quack, becomes the

<sup>48</sup> J. Lisowska-Teatycka, *Polesie*, "Płomyk", 1932, No. 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Odwieczne zwyczaje ludowe* [Age-Old Country Customs], "Płomyk", 1934, No. 12; *Na Polesiu* [In Polesie], *ibidem*, No. 33.

<sup>50</sup> "Płomyk", 1934, No. 16.

<sup>51</sup> "Płomyk" annual 1938/39.

benefactor of a primitive people, coming to them from the outside.<sup>52</sup> The author of novels for young ladies, Emma Jeleńska, showed the Belorussian people in a similar light; exoticism served as a pretext for presenting the primitiveness of the Belorussians and the kind heart of a girl from a Polish estate.<sup>53</sup> Popular reading consolidated the stereotypes fashioned over the preceding decades.

Consequently, a large part of Polish society did not know much about the Belorussians, and thought that the borderland country was inhabited by Poles, or possibly by a people ethnically Polish, but—under the influence of the Russian annexation—susceptible to outside influences and deprived of national consciousness. Whilst in circles involved in the exercising of power, the conviction prevailed that there was no Belorussian problem in Poland. The majority of the reading public formed their views chiefly on the basis of literature emanating from the sphere of influence of the Polish borderland gentry. It was only with difficulty that the other picture, drawn by the leftist press, and to a lesser degree by the journals of the peasant movement, was able to compete with the view that the Belorussians were a primitive mass without aspirations of their own, and susceptible to outside influences—sinister Russian ones, or possibly charitable Polish ones. From this came the logical conclusion that Poland had historical and moral claims to the eastern borderlands, since she had carried the torch of learning and civilization there. In this interpretation Polonization was a charitable activity, and opposition to it—irrespective of the motives—clashed with the interests of the Belorussian people. One cannot be surprised that such an attitude led to the slighting of Belorussian political initiatives, so blatantly evident in the years 1918 - 1921, and to varying degrees too, throughout the entire inter-war period.

So that it is worth noting an article which appeared in January, 1939. An anonymous author stated that the Belorussian problem in Poland had become overshadowed for the time being by the Jewish and Ukrainian problems, but “[...] the time will come for a solution to be sought to the Belorussian question, which un-

<sup>52</sup> T. Dołęga-Mostowicz, *Znachor* [*The Quack*], 1st ed. 1937.

<sup>53</sup> E. Jeleńska, [*Dmochowska*], *Dwór w Haliniszkach* [*The Estate at Haliniszki*], Warszawa 1929.

doubtedly exists and will become more glaring from year to year"; "since there is a Belorussian language, which has left historical and literary monuments, and since there are people who speak in this language in their everyday lives, then the Belorussian problem must exist and does exist"; "we wanted to settle the Ukrainian issue by crying out in one great voice: there are no Ukrainians! Are we to repeat the very same blunder with the Belorussians?"<sup>44</sup>

However, this was a voice crying in the wilderness. Only with the experiences of the Second World War did there come a modification of attitudes in some at least of the Polish communities. Recognition of the separate national character of the Belorussians and of their political aspirations began to be seen as an essential condition for opposing the political influence of the USSR and for salvaging eastern borderland links with Poland. On the other hand, communist activists and politicians disposed to co-operate with them learnt from the attitude of the left during the inter-war years. They pronounced themselves in favour of uniting the Belorussian lands within the borders of Soviet Belorussia and thus of acceptance of the shifting of the Polish-Soviet border to the west.

In the inter-war years and during the Second World War a new Polish generation grew up, some of whose representatives at least came in contact with Belorussia without the mediation of the nobleman's estate. A chance encounter which the now well-known Polish writer Marian Brandys had with some Belorussian officers in Łódź in 1920, when he was a few years old, together with a reference he heard at the time to a plan for a "Kingdom of Belorussia", sparked off an interest which was to last for many years to come. In 1981 he wrote: "Today I cannot conceive why the name of the Kingdom of Belorussia, never before heard, had such an effect on my imagination then and induced such a state of prolonged fascination in myself and my brother (Kazimierz) along with me. No doubt there was some fabulous element in it, the enchantment of something remote, mysterious, and at the same time strangely familiar."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Problem białoruski już istnieje* [The Belorussian Problem Already Exists], "Zespół", 1939, No. 3.

<sup>45</sup> M. Brandys, *Moje przygody z historią* [My Adventures with History], Londyn 1981, p. 13.

Younger than Brandys, Tadeusz Konwicki, the contemporary Polish writer, who was born in the Vilna region, also felt a fascination for Belorussia and its society. He wrote: "When I recall a Belorussian word, when the wind blows from the north-east, when I see a linen shirt with sad embroidery, when I hear an uncomplaining cry of pain, my heart always beats faster, a gentle longing always bobs up from somewhere, there is a sudden flowing shiver of undefinable pangs of conscience, of a sense of complicity and shame. Belorussia, grey-green Belorussia with the huge sky over your flaxen head, you are too good, too gentle, too noble for our times."<sup>66</sup>

With these words, however, we enter a different historical era, contemporary times, when a process of change has begun in respect of the traditional way in which Belorussians have been regarded by Polish society, which has started to acquaint itself with their culture and traditions.

*(Translated by Phillip G. Smith)*

<sup>66</sup> T. Konwicki, *Kalendarz i klepsydra [The Calendar and the Sand-Glass]*, Warszawa 1976, p. 32.