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## **Wojciech Śleszyński, *Historia w służbie polityki. Zmiany polityczne a konstruowanie przekazu historycznego na ziemiach białoruskich w XX i XXI wieku*, Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2018, 468 pp.**[1]

The monograph *History in the service of politics. Political changes and the shaping of historical narrative in the territory of Belarus in 20th and 21st century* of Wojciech Śleszyński can be considered fundamental due to the importance of the issues it addresses as well as its quality and capacity. In a similar vein to other countries, it has been the elites of Belarus that have been building the picture of its history. However, in the case of our Eastern neighbour, the power elite exerting a disproportionate impact on explaining history was not only of Belarusian but also of Russian (Soviet) origin. The dissertation explores the impact of social and political conditions on the interpretation of recorded history from the turn of the 20th century until recent years. Over the last hundred and several dozen years, this narrative in Belarus has been extremely varied, incoherent, and subject to current political needs. The author begins the monograph by formulating the research questions elaborated on in his extensive work:

> What were the political conditions at the turn of the twentieth century in which the Belarusian vision of the past was formed? What was the role of the tsarist authorities in this process? Was there a real possibility for the BSSR to develop a national Belarusian version of history? What was the formation process of the Soviet account of the past in the BSSR of the 1930s? To what extent was it possible to build the independent Belarusian history within the nationalist policy pursued by the Second Polish Republic? How was the historical narrative constructed during World War II? To what extent could the view of the past created by Belarusian collaborator environments compete with the Soviet view? Was the account of history presented by the Soviet authorities in the post-war period accepted by the local community as their own? How was this process related to the changes in Belarus in the 1960s and 1970s? Was the Belarusian society ready to re-evaluate the communist interpretation of the past during Gorbachev's period of perestroika? To what extent did the Belarusian society

[1] Wojciech Śleszyński, *History in the service of politics. Political changes and the shaping of historical narrative in the territory of Belarus in 20th and 21st century*. Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku.

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> accept the historical narrative built by nationalist environments shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union? What has been the role of the history dispute in the political battle in the Republic of Belarus? What have been the characteristics of the historical policy pursued by the Lukashenko administration? Which version of history is more readily accepted by the contemporary Belarusian society: the one created by the official administration or the opposition? (p. 16).

The work is multi-faceted. The author addresses multiple research problems important for historians, political scientists and even sociologists, exhibiting thorough knowledge of issues pertaining to Belarus. It includes numerous references to a vast literature and other research sources. As to the structure, the monograph comprises an *Introduction*, ten chapters, *Conclusion*, abstracts in Russian, Belarusian and English, *References and bibliography*, and an index of names. In the first chapter, the author establishes the theoretical framework and explains the notions he uses. The next two chapters present the formation of the Belarusian historical narrative at the turn of the 20th century, particularly the modern national identity of Belarusians which was forming at that time. Subsequently, the book portrays Belarus in the years 1919–1939, i.e. both during the period of Belarusianisation and severe sovietisation afterwards. It also depicts the functioning of the Dzierzhynsky Polish national district. The fourth chapter is devoted to the Belarusian community in the Second Polish Republic. It points to the formation of its historical narrative taking into account the assimilation policy enforced by the Polish state in the North-Eastern territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The two subsequent chapters describe the years of the Second World War (1939–1944) in ethnically Belarusian territories, i.e. in the area occupied by the Soviets in 1939, which were later under German occupation and ultimately saw the return of the communist authorities. The seventh chapter illustrates the development of the Soviet system in the BSSR until 1991, when Belarus regained independence. The analysis encompasses *inter alia* the building of historical policy based on the myth of the 'Great Patriotic War'. The last three chapters detail the particular stages of building the historical narrative in the independent Republic of Belarus. 'The chronological scope of the study was limited by the beginning of 2016, when the dominant pro-Russian historical narrative slowed down as a result of the events in Ukraine' (p. 20).

In the Introduction to the dissertation, the author states:

> By means of this publication, the author aspires (...) to familiarise the reader not only with the political changes of the 20th and 21st century but most importantly to acquaint them with the impact of those changes on the interpretation of the written history. Another goal is to show the correlations between politics and history. The work is to help understand why the Belarusian communities made particular civilization choices and assess the influence of the particular account of history on current political decisions in Belarus (pp. 31–32).

The study is interdisciplinary albeit dominated by historical research methods. The author analysed various sources, including materials obtained from Polish, Belarusian

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and Lithuanian archives (listed on pp. 411–413). Apart from extensive literature in Polish, Belarusian, Russian and English (pp. 424–451), the work was based on numerous scientific journals in Polish and Belarusian (pp. 413–416), as well as speeches, interviews, press articles, school textbooks, guidebooks (pp. 417–424), and several online sources. In certain instances, he saw the transformations of independent Belarus first-hand and even participated in several events. He used radio broadcasts, films and television programmes. He studied the educational process in schools as well as the policy of erecting museums and monuments.

Both in the period of BSSR and independent Belarus (except for the years 1991–1994), the historical narrative was controlled by the state authorities to an extent unheard-of in Western Europe (not including the period of fascism and Nazism). It was strongly politicised or plain communist, and after 1994 it included evident remnants of communist views. Nationalist elements were visible in the account of history promoted by Belarusian national activists throughout the first two decades of the 20th century, in the Second Polish Republic, under Nazi occupation and the at the beginnings of the Republic of Belarus. Wojciech Śleszyński is correct to note that Alexander Lukashenka understands and senses the public mood of the post-Soviet Belarusian society much better than the local nationalist milieus. For many years, he has been building Belarusian identity not by referring to Western notions of a nation or aversion towards Russianness, but on the role of the state in ensuring relative prosperity and economic stability (see: pp. 382–385).

> It would be a mistake to examine the formation stages of the Belarusian national identity over the 20th and 21st centuries in contrast to the processes ensuing in Poland or other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is impossible to compare Belarusian national life, e.g. with Poland, Lithuania or even Latvia. Belarusians are not a community easily described through concepts and categories specific to the nations of Western Europe. (...) Since the beginning of the 19th century to date, Belarusian society has been subject to experiences which have reinforced its connection with Eastern culture. The contemporary sense of national identity among Belarusians is a conglomerate of Orthodox heritage, nostalgia for the supremacy and power of the Soviet Union, and modern patriotism model introduced and put into practice by the Lukashenka administration. In contrast to the opposition, he eagerly emphasises the elements which portray modern Belarus as a part of the Great Russian and Russian legacy. According to this narrative, Russia is not simply a neighbouring country, but part of the Belarusian heritage. It seems that this version of history is much better received by citizens than the confrontational concept proposed by the opposition, with a clearly anti-Russian view of the past (p. 395).

The monograph by Wojciech Śleszyński is required reading for those who wish to understand today's Belarus (not necessarily scholars) better and deeper than it is possible through basic facts, simplifications, and stereotypes.

*Translated into English by Marek Robak-Sobolewski*