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Liberating the Past and Transgressing the National

Simon Lewis, *Belarus – Alternative Visions: Nation, Memory and Cosmopolitanism*, Routledge, New York/London, 2019 (BASEES / Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies). XI, 230 pp.

In Slavic studies abroad, research on Belarusian literature is rare, and a monograph an event. This slender book evolved from Simon Lewis's doctoral dissertation, submitted at Cambridge University in 2014. It is a thorough study on the negotiations of *nation* and *memory*, with *cosmopolitanism* as a key word for the 'alternative visions' of the Belarus(ian) past, in which the author is interested most. The book concentrates on the second half of the 20th century and the post-Soviet period. As the first chapter offers an overview from ca. 1800, it doubles as an excellent introduction into modern Belarusian literature in general. The book must be praised particularly in this respect for its brevity and conciseness that completely differs from the multi-volume cumulative histories of Belarusian literature published in Miensk, and from Arnold McMillin's encyclopaedic publications over the last decades. The six chapters, as well as the endnotes that follow each of them, prove the author's broad and thorough knowledge not only of the Belarusian classics, but also of Russian and Polish literature. Reading Belarusian, Russian, Polish, English, and German, Lewis bridges the gap between both research communities and disciplines (a good deal of his secondary literature stems from history). Experts will also appreciate his interpretation of Belarusian culture against the theoretic background of postcolonial studies.

The Introduction (pp. 1–24) informs the reader about the necessary historical facts: the country's multicultural past, the subjection to Polish and Russian dominance, and the violence and repression during the first half of the 20th century, which traumatized the society. Lewis discusses the 'delayed' nationalism: the Belarusian national idea emerged only at the beginning of the 20th century and was brutally repressed during Stalinism. The Second World War (WWII) gave birth to the partisan myth, which became a major instrument of the Sovietization of memory and is still central for the Lukashenka regime. Since the 1990s, however, the official narrative highlighting the

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brotherhood in arms with Russia, is countered by an oppositional one propagating pro-European and national(ist) visions. The two opposing concepts of Belarusian history share an essentialist understanding of nation and identity: Belarus and Belarusians have always existed. Following the common opinion in (Western) research, Lewis supports an understanding of 'nation' as a construct that has been invented and is constantly being negotiated. This interest explains his choice of fictional sources, which supply subversive ideas questioning the 'monolithic vision of national history' (9). They advance, in his words, 'a civic Belarusian identity that is based on an open-ended and self-reflective memory' (ibid).

Lewis also discusses the framework of postcolonial theory, which introduces stimulating concepts. In his opinion, Belarus is an interesting case, as its mode of colonialization is different both from the classical British, French etc. rule on other continents (external colonialization), as well as the Russian case with its unfree peasantry and Europeanized masters (Aleksandr Etkind's 'internal colonization'). For the Polish and Russian ruling elite, the subaltern Belarusians were neither foreign, nor completely own. As a result of Soviet cultural politics, which actually implemented Russification, only a minority actually speaks and writes Belarusian today. The 'colonial centre' also manipulated Belarusian collective memory by the unification of representations of 'the Great Patriotic War' and the suppression and distortion of pre-Soviet history. Historical discourse in Belarus is even nowadays still characterized by gaps and distortions, hindering the understanding of the past and making it difficult to come to terms with historical traumas.

The first part: *Contexts (1800–1991)* provides an overview of the two main strands of Belarusian (literary) history discussed in the book: the negotiation of Belarusianness and the representation of the experience of WWII, which became the key narrative in Belarusian memory politics after 1945. Chapter 1: *An abundant harvest: the emergence of Belarusian memory* (pp. 27–52) begins with the 'gaze of the colonizer[s]' (27), i.e. Polish and Russian interpretations of Belarusian culture. After the final partitions of Poland-Lithuania, the romanticist age gave birth to a heightened interest in the culture of the people. The first collectors of Belarusian folklore were of Polish or Russian origin and inscribed their material into the context of these dominant cultures. Polish folklorists sought access to a primordial Slavic culture and to their own past. They understood the Belarusians as part of a bigger Polish nation and their language as a regional dialect. In contrast to the Polish 'between orientalism and panslavism' (28), Lewis characterizes the Russian discourse as 'the denial of alterity' (33). The representatives of the Russian Empire classified Belarusians and Ukrainians as '„branches" of the Great Russian family who had been subject to the pernicious influence of Polonization' (33). Lewis points out the contradiction in the politics of (Re-)Russification of a group that was defined as genuinely Russian. In his opinion, both the Polish and the Russian discourse are 'an internalizing form of colonialism' (36). The third subchapter analyses Jan Barszczewski's *Szlachcic Zawalnia, czyli Bialoruś w fantastycznych opowiadaniach…* (1844–1846). This multi-layered narrative in Polish combines

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sketches from the countryside with retold fantastic stories, subsumed by a made-up author persona, Zawalnia's nephew. The novel is void of concrete knowledge about the past; all that remains is a blurred echo in the alarming stories. Characteristic for later texts in Polish, e.g. Eliza Orzeszkowa's *Nad Niemnem*, or the bilingual Vikienci Dunin-Marcinkievič, is the 'othering' of Belarusian peasants in respect to Polish gentry. The overview ends with a section on the intellectuals who refuted the internalizing ambitions of the dominant neighbours and articulated a demand for cultural and political sovereignty. This postcolonial triangulation of Belarusian between Polish and Russian cultures in Lewis's narrative is fascinating.

Chapter 2: *By force of myth: the making of the partisan republic* (pp. 53–80) is dedicated to WWII. Characteristic for the Soviet memory politics was the limitation to heroic topics, in the case of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic on partisan warfare against the Germans. The State invested in war memorials and in historiography, perpetuating 'essentially similar material' (57). As a typical example, Lewis discusses the movie *Deti partizana* (1954), filmed in Russian, 'the language of choice of official memory' (60). The core of the chapter is the Khatyn myth. In the 1960s, this village, where a massacre of the civilian population had taken place, was chosen as the site for a huge memorial complex. Lewis supplies what is left out in the official versions of the events (like the 'documentary short story by Mikalaj Andruščanka). Any discussion about the price of partisan activity or about the traumata of those who failed in being heroic, had to be suppressed. Part I ends with further theoretical input from Postcolonial Studies: the colonizers distort the history of the subaltern people, up to the destruction of the *memory* that they had of their own history.

Part II, *Texts of resistance (1956–1991)*, discusses the writing of two authors who proposed alternative narratives, subverting the official, Sovietized memory. Chapter 3: *Memory at war: un-writing the partisan republic* (pp. 83–111) deals with Vasiĺ Bykaŭ. Due to (often censored) translations of his war prose into Russian, Bykaŭ became an all-Soviet classic and as Lewis remarks critically, many researchers have simply discussed him as representative of *Russian* war literature. Lewis emphasizes Bykaŭ's importance in his refuting of the Belarusian partisan myth and 'for his cosmopolitan outlook on the violence of the mid-twentieth century' (83). Bykaŭ's short novel *Treciaja rakieta* (1962) is populated with partisans who lack patriotism and group solidarity. *Miortvym ne balić* (1965) contrasts the war experience with the jubilee ceremonies of 1965: a veteran meets a double of the former SMERSH officer who in the war had betrayed his comrades. *Sotnikaŭ* (1970) contains a controversial psychological portrait of Belarusians who became collaborators. *Znak biady* (1982) links WWII with the collectivization of the 1930s. In particular, the latter examples show in which ways Bykaŭ touched upon the deep-rooted traumata, mostly or completely supressed by the official memory.

Chapter 4: *Retrofitting rebellion: defiance and laughter as hybrid memory* is dedicated to Uladzimir Karatkievič, a pioneer of the historical novel in Belarusian who spread knowledge about the pre-Soviet Belarusian past among quite a large readership.

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Lewis proposes a new reading of his 'complex, playful and rebellious' oeuvre (113), exemplifying the coexistence of national *and* transnational (cosmopolitan) narratives. The first example is the play *Kastuś Kalinoŭski: Smerć i neumiručaść (1963/1978)*, which deals with one of the heroes of the January Uprising in 1863–1864. Providing the (Polish) noble and other characters a Belarusian identity, Karatkievič creates a Belarusian nation that encompasses different social classes. However, there is no proof that the historical Kalinoŭski defined himself as Belarusian. From this critical viewpoint, Lewis detects details that contradict the Belarusifying narrative. The ambivalence between national and cosmopolitan visions of the past are more visible in the novel *Chrystos przyziamliŭsia u Harodni* (1966–1972), which prolongs the construction of a Belarusian past into the 16th century. Comments by the text's narrator as well as a (fake) quote from a (fake) documentary source serve as an introduction to the discussion of political manipulations of the past. Almost parodistic is the book's motto, attributed to a *Kronika Belaj Rusi* by Maciej Stryjkoŭski, which is an obviously Belarusified version of the true title of the famous chronicle, *Kronika polska, litewska, żmudzka i wszystkiej Rusi*. In Lewis's opinion, Karatkievič writes about Belarusian national identity 'as a mode of becoming rather than a state of being', i.e. rather than something stable (127). He characterises such a perspective with the term 'minor nationalism' (pp. 127–129), by which he means the striving for the ideal of 'major nationalism' that cannot be realized due to the heterogeneous nature of the nation-to-be. He also proposes the term 'patriotic cosmopolitanism' (a term by Deleuze and Guattari, adapted by Aleksandr Pershai for Belarus) for writing that shows, like a negative, the 'mirror imprint of the absence of the national' (132).

Part III: *Texts of renewal (1991–2016)* scans contemporary culture for contributions to the thematic lines from Parts I and II. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a national(ist) revival; however, Lukashenka's presidency brought a return to the old ideologies. Chapter 5: *Still fighting: the afterlife of the partisan republic* shows that the Soviet myth lives on in state-supported culture, but that there is a multitude of counter-narratives. VasiĺBykaŭ continued his uncovering of the unheroic war and, more importantly, the independent post-Soviet culture has reinterpreted the partisan myth as symbol for its underground existence. Lewis explains this appropriation, e.g. in the rock song *Partyzanskaja* by N.R.M. (1996) or Artur Klinaŭ's art journal 'pARTisan', as a post-colonial 'writing back' in the language of the colonizing culture. He critically analyses a series of highly suspicious nationalist 'documentary' films by the studio PartyzanFilm about the 'real' history of the anti-Soviet (!) partisan war. More positive is the evaluation of the movie *Okkupatsiia. Misterii* (2003). Andrei Chadanovič's postmodern poems parody war stereotypes; the poet wrote them in Russian, not in his usual Belarusian, which characterizes the speaker(s) as Russified Belarusians (157). These different representations of 'post-memory' show a critical stance towards Soviet myth-making, which suppressed the real memories of the WWII generation.

The last chapter *Divided legacies: towards cosmopolitan mourning* explores representations of the country's multicultural past. *Adam Klakocki i jahonyia cieni* (2001)

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is a multi-layered, multi-vocal novel by Ihar Babkoŭ. It is a combination of dreams of a fictional 19th-century noble, which look forward into the future, and a kind of 'madman's diary' in the style of Gogol'. Some of the dreams are counterfactual sketches, e.g. of an anti-Soviet Belarusian state in 1934, with statues of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania populating the public sphere (172). Natalka Babina's novel *Rybin horad* (2007) is a detective-mystery novel with a 'failed historian' (181) as hero and narrator. She solves the murder of her grandmother and discovers a 17th century treasure due to the supernatural gift of being able to see the past. Her visions show historical Brest for example, which has been completely erased and replaced by a WWII memorial. Present on a more subdued level is another trauma, the redrawing of borders and forced migration that took place. The treasure is found in the camp in which Poles had been imprisoned during the Soviet occupation in 1939–1941. Thus, the historical traumata and the problems of contemporary society 'are all magicked away as the promise of a prosperous, complex-free and unbordered society becomes visible' (180). Whereas these two examples are convincing, AÍhierd Bacharevič's novel *Saroka na šybienicy* (2009) concentrates not on memory, but on political repressions under the Lukashenka regime and could have been omitted.

The afterword comments on recent developments. For example, the Lukashenka regime has started to exploit the idea of a multicultural and multilingual heritage: 'a sanitized and easily digestible cosmopolitan memory' (194). The paragraph on Svetlana Alexievich makes the reader aware of a certain gap. That no subchapter is dedicated to her, whom Lewis calls 'a quintessentially cosmopolitan writer with universalist concerns' (195) because 'her work is much less rooted in Belarus itself' and her 'place in the local Belarusian literary canon is precarious' (195) seem to be arguments *post factum*, as Alexievich received the Nobel Prize *after* the submission of the doctoral thesis. It may have been her choice of Russian, though Lewis does not limit his material explicitly to texts/films in Belarusian.

The afterword provides, finally, an explanation of 'cosmopolitanism' (197). The concept of 'cosmopolitan memory' not linked to the unit 'nation' developed in research on representations of the Holocaust, which has become a global phenomenon. Lewis proposes a different understanding: 'Cosmopolitan remembering is not the act of conforming to a dominant transnational norm, but an active practice of transcending boundaries in one's gazing towards the past.' (197). But does the re-defined term show heuristic advantages? The negotiating of the Belarusian past is linked, above all, to the neighbouring societies/cultures/nations. Thus the (still trendy) pair 'transnational-transcultural', perhaps combined with 'regional', would be more suitable, though Lewis consciously did not choose them. Actually, in setting, main characters or conflicts, none of the fictional texts or films discussed leaves the Belarusian context. If we take the basic meaning of 'cosmopolitan', i.e. 'open towards or from all or many parts of the world', a quite different book should be expected. It could be about the opening up towards 'the West', about the discovery of non-European societies, and/or comparisons with memory discourses in other parts of the world.

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A second point of criticism is a certain imbalance in the choice of material. Part II concentrates on two authors, whereas the others present a broad panorama. Most of the chapters are about literature, but some also about film. This leads to the impression that sometimes coincidences or pragmatic reasons influenced the choice. For chapters 4 and 6, more information about the general context is in fact available. The idea of a multilingual and multicultural past has advanced in the field of literary studies (in respect to 'Old Belarusian literature') and a similar development should be visible in historical research.

Even when criticizing the scope, one must not forget that the monograph is an (updated, enlarged, revised) version of a dissertation. As a first book, it is an exceptional achievement. It sums up the history of modern Belarusian literature and supplies new theoretical perspectives, new observations about classical texts, and examples from contemporary culture. It is a milestone for everybody involved in teaching Belarusian literature and culture abroad. Inspiring and thrilling, this book deserves to be read well beyond the UK and US, despite its quite substantial price[1].

[1] I thank Elsbeth van der Wilt for proof-reading.