

The Road to the First Belarusian State:
Nation-Building in the Context of the First World War and Revolution

by

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Abstract

This dissertation contributes to the study of the First World War in East Central Europe, providing an insight into the profound political, demographic, social, and cultural changes introduced by the Great War and deepened by the Revolution. Focusing on the Belarusian nation-building process in the early 20th century, this study treats the First World War as an important divide in the national politics of the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borderlands. Rather than emphasizing the framework of the “rise of nationalism,” Belarusian nation-building is analyzed with regard to the recent methodological trends of approaching the First World War as a mobilizational moment for stateless nations, demonstrating the ways in which the Great War catalyzed the growth of ethnic particularism in the region. With a broad comparative perspective on the entangled histories of the nation-building activities of Belarusian, Lithuanian, and Polish national movements, this dissertation addresses the problem of supporting and promoting national identity formation in a borderland region, where powers were changing frequently and people were maneuvering in their survival tactics. This study thus deals with the processes of overcoming indifference and creating allegiance to the new project of the Belarusian nation, uncovering the problematic roots of the Belarusian national identity and persisting patterns of national indifference and passivity, which still remain defining characteristics for contemporary Belarusian society.

Preface

This dissertation is an original work of Lizaveta Kasmach. Parts of Chapter 5 are accepted for publication entitled “Forgotten Occupation: Germans and Belarusians in the Lands of Ober Ost (1915 – 1917),” forthcoming in *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* in 2016.

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Table of Contents

Introduction / 1

Chapter 1

The First World War on Belarusian Territories / 29

Chapter 2

The Political Organization of the Belarusian Movement in Non-Occupied Territories in 1917 / 56

Chapter 3

Between Local and National: the Case of Eastern Belarus in 1917 / 101

Chapter 4

The First All-Belarusian Congress / 154

Chapter 5

Teile und Herrsche: Belarusians, Lithuanians, and Poles in the Lands of Ober Ost (1915 – 1917) / 220

Chapter 6

“Common” Homeland of the Grand Duchy: National Politics in Ober Ost / 278

Chapter 7

Belarusian Statehood in the Making: BNR and Soviet Belarus / 333

Concluding Remarks / 392

Bibliography / 397

Appendix / 417

List of Figures

Figure 1: Belarusian Territories during the First World War

Figure 2: Nationalities of Ober Ost

Figure 3: Belarusian Ethnographic Borders

Figure 4: Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR) in 1918

Figure 5: German Occupation of Eastern Europe in 1918

Abbreviations

Bielnackam	Bielaruski Nacyjanal'ny Kamisaryjat (Belarusian National Commissariat)
BNK	Bielaruski Nacyjanal'ny Kamitet (Belarusian National Committee)
BNPS	Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Partyja Sacyjalistaŭ (Belarusian People's Party of Socialists)
BNR	Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika (Belarusian Democratic Republic)
BOK	Belorusskii Oblastnoi Komitet (Belarusian Oblast' Committee)
BPSF	Bielaruskaja Partyja Sacyjalistaŭ-Federalistaŭ (Belarusian Party of the Socialists-Federalists)
BPSR	Bielaruskaja Partyja Sacyjalistaŭ-Revalucyjneraŭ (Belarusian Party of the Socialist-Revolutionaries)
BRH	Bielaruskaja Revaliucyjnaja Hramada (Belarusian Revolutionary Hramada)
BRP	Bielaruskaja Revaliucyjnaja Partyja (Belarusian Revolutionary Party)
BSDP	Bielaruskaja Sacyjal-Demakratyčnaja Partyja (Belarusian Social-Democratic Party)
BSDRP	Bielaruskaja Sacyjal-Demakratyčnaja Rabočaja Partyja (Belarusian Social-Democratic Workers' Party)
BSH	Bielaruskaja Sacyjalistyčnaja Hramada (Belarusian Socialist Hramada)
BSSR	Bielaruskaja Saveckaja Sacyjalistyčnaja Respublika (Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic)
CBVR	Central'naja Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Rada (Central Belarusian Military Rada)
GDL	Grand Duchy of Lithuania
Narkomnats	Narodnyi Komissariat po Delam Natsionalnostei (People's Commissariat for Nationality Affairs)
Ober Ost	Oberbefehlshaber Ost (German Supreme Command in the East)
Obliskomzap	Oblastnoi Iсполnitel'nyi Komitet Sovetov Rabochikh, Soldatskikh i Krest'ianskikh Deputatov Zapadnoj Oblasti i Fronta (Oblast' Executive Committee of the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies of the Western Oblast' and Front)
Oblastiskomzap	Oblastnoi Iсполnitel'nyi Komitet Zapadnoi oblasti (Oblast' Executive Committee of the Western oblast')
P.O.W.	Polska Organizacja Wojskowa (Polish Military Organization)
PPS	Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (Polish Socialist Party)
RKP(b)	Rossiiskaia Kommunističeskaia Partii (bolshevikov) (Russian

	Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
RSDRP	Rossiiskaya Sotsial-Demokraticheskaia Rabochaia Partiiia (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party)
RSFSR	Rossiiskaya Sovetskaia Federativnaia Sotsialisticheskaja Respublika (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic)
SDKPiL	Socjaldemokracja Królestwa Polskiego i Litwy (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania)
SSRB	Savieckaja Sacyjalistyčnaja Respublika Bielarus' (Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus)
Sovnarkom	Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov (Council of the People's Commissars)
SVU	Soiuz Vyzvolennia Ukraïny (Union for the Liberation of Ukraine)
TsB KP(b)B	Tsentral'noe Biuro Kommunisticheskoi Partii Belorussii (Central Bureau of the Communist Party of Belarus)
TsK RKP(b)	Tsentralnyi Komitet Rossiiskoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii (bolshevikov) (Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks))
VBR	Vialikaja Bielaruskaja Rada (Great Belarusian Rada)

Introduction

“Narod tol'ki tady isnue, kali mae svaih herojaŭ”

Barys Kit¹

This dissertation deals with imperial decline and the rise of the nation-state concept in the early 20th century, when the First World War, revolutions, and subsequent violence disrupted traditional peasant societies throughout Eastern Europe, opening up new opportunities for the national self-determination of so-called “small” nations. More specifically, it is a case-study of the Belarusian nation- and state-building efforts during the period between 1914 and 1918, following the path towards the establishment of the first modern Belarusian state and analyzing the roots of its duality. The proclamation of Belarusian independence on 25 March 1918, and the rival establishment of the Soviet Belarusian state on 1 January 1919 resulted in two distinct and mutually exclusive national myths, which continue to define contemporary Belarusian society. Both projects, national and Soviet, transformed into two separate concepts of alternative and official Belarusianness respectively, which had been developing parallel to each other during the 20th century.² By looking at their formative period, this dissertation contributes to an analysis of the origins of modern Belarusian statehood and the problematic character of national identity. The main questions that I ask here address the impact of the First World War on Belarusian nation-building and the reasons for the uneven development of Belarusian national mobilization in the early 20th century as well as its consequences for

¹ “The nation exists only when it has its own heroes.” Barys Kit, *Ciarnovy šliach. Uspaminy* (Frankfurt na Majne, n. p., 2001), 56.

² Nelly Bekus, *Struggle over Identity. The Official and the Alternative “Belarusianness”* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2010), 163 – 164.

the future state-building process, which are still felt in contemporary Belarusian society.

This dissertation focuses on Belarusian national politics and nation-building activities during the First World War in various settings: primarily in the eastern Belarusian territories that remained under Russian rule in 1915, and in the German-occupied parts of western Belarus. Further, it also deals with the political organization of the Belarusian diaspora in Russia and Ukraine. With attention to these major centers of national activities, my aim is to analyze the achievements and failures of the Belarusian national movement, based on the example of the national elites as the chief agents of modernization, and their interaction with the largely non-national masses, still clinging to their pre-modern identities. With regard to the Belarusian national activists, I look at their nation-building efforts against the background of the changing dynamics of competition with the Polish and Lithuanian national movements on the one hand, and the lasting influences of the Russification policies on the other. Within this context, this dissertation contributes to the analysis of the evolution of Belarusian political thought from different federalist-based concepts, rooted in the demands of cultural autonomy within democratic Russia and plans for a federation with neighbouring nations, towards thinking in terms of an independent statehood. In short, this dissertation examines the evolution of the young Belarusian national movement during the First World War and the degree to which it was able to extract benefits from the new political circumstances in the region.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In this study, I treat the concept of a nation in the broad sense, defined by Ernest Renan as “a large-scale solidarity,” held together by two basic principles: that of the common legacy of historical memories and the present desire to live together, being in

essence a “daily plebiscite.”³ Methodologically, this dissertation is based on the modernist approach in the study of nationalism, assuming the artificial nature of every national project and treating it as a product of certain conditions, which enabled nationalism to emerge in the capacity of a political principle, advocating the congruence of political and national boundaries.⁴ Ernest Gellner, who formulated this definition of nationalism, maintained that its analysis necessitated a departure from the assumption of the “awakening” of an ancient nation, towards understanding it as a modern phenomenon of transformation or the invention of a new form of a shared high culture.⁵

Similarly to Gellner, who connected the emergence of nationalism to the rise of industrial society, Eric Hobsbawm also accepted the modernization paradigm, postulating that the state and nationalisms create nations, which then thrive in advanced stages of economic and technological development and transform pre-existing cultures.⁶ While these interpretations of nationalism are strongly linked to the processes of industrialization, Benedict Anderson's theory points out the importance of modern means of communication, contributing to the emergence of literate and mobilized parts of the population, the so-called “reading classes,” who become the leaders of national movements.⁷ This perspective mirrors Karl Deutsch's approach, which elucidates that economic and social developments in society intensify social communication, thus causing the emergence of a “mobilized population,”⁸ or in other words, national elites.

These national elites emerge as the major actors in Miroslav Hroch's three-

³ Ernest Renan, “What Is a Nation?,” in *Becoming National. A Reader*, eds. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 52 – 53.

⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 10.

⁷ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 76.

⁸ Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication. An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1962), 100.

level typology of the national movements of small nations. Treating a nation as a large social group held together by a number of territorial, economic, political, religious, cultural, and linguistic factors, this definition of a small nation rests on the assumption of its “subjection to a ruling nation.”⁹ In other words, small nations are understood in a qualitative, rather than a quantitative, sense.¹⁰ Further, this relation of subordination impacts the social structure of the small nation, causing its incomplete character or atypical composition. While certain social groups dominate,¹¹ national elites usually remain outnumbered by the elites of the ruling nation.¹²

Hroch's model postulates that national movements are sparked by the start of scholarly interest in the nation, initiating the so-called *Phase A*. As soon as scientific explorations move into the practical realm and form the basis of the activities of patriotic agitation, it transforms into *Phase B*. This starts when a group within the educated strata of society decides to offer a new national identity to the masses. The premise for successful national agitation implies the creation of a certain system of coordinates, including the delimitation of territorial boundaries, the dissemination of historical knowledge, and the establishment and regulation of national traditions. In the aftermath of *Phase B*, the national movement transforms into a “material force,”¹³ initializing *Phase C*,

⁹ Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups Among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4 – 5, 9.

¹⁰ Andreas Kappeler, *Der schwierige Weg zur Nation. Beiträge zur neueren Geschichte der Ukraine* (Wien: Böhlau, 2003), 25.

¹¹ Thus, in the late 19th century more than 90% of ethnic Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians inhabited the countryside, enjoying only limited chances of upward social mobility. See Steven L. Guthrie, *The Belorussians: National Identification and Assimilation, 1897 – 1970* (Ann Arbor, Mich: Center for Russian and East European Studies, University of Michigan, 1977), 43; Pavel Tereshkovich, “The Belarusian Road to Modernity,” *International Journal of Sociology* (Fall 2001), vol. 31, Nr. 3: 82; Henning Bauer, Andreas Kappeler, and Brigitte Roth, eds., *Die Nationalitäten des Russischen Reiches in der Volkszählung von 1897. B: Ausgewählte Daten zur sozio-ethnischen Struktur des russischen Reiches: erste Auswertungen der Kölner NFR-Datenbank* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1991), 69.

¹² Hroch, *Social Preconditions*, 9.

¹³ Miroslav Hroch, *Das Europa der Nationen: die moderne Nationsbildung im europäischen Vergleich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005) 45 – 46.

which denotes the stage of broad mass support of the national movement.¹⁴ Within this model, patriotic agitation by the elites, defining for *Phase B*, has to be studied against the background of the social transformations specific to each society.¹⁵

Yet the analysis of European societies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveals that this process was never as smooth and linear as the theory suggests. In particular, national activists had to deal with a number of obstacles, in order to be able to assert themselves against the passive majority and create their own mass following. Competition of the new elites for the “souls” of potential supporters had to overcome the major obstacle of indifference to their cause. Shifting the focus onto the behaviour of the masses during *Phase B* and asking how non-national attitudes had to give way to fixed identities in politics and everyday life allows one to gain a deeper understanding of the origins of national identity formation and its importance for the process of nation-state building in the 20th century.¹⁶ Following this approach, I look at the elites as the chief agents of modernization and analyze the dynamics of their interaction with the objects of their activities – the largely non-national masses, still possessing their pre-modern identities, thus moving beyond the single perspective on the national agitation.

Another problematic aspect of Hroch's paradigm lies in its limited applicability to separate cases. For instance, in the Belarusian case, the *Phase C* of popular mass support had barely begun when the Soviet state appropriated and directed the national

¹⁴ Hroch, *Social Preconditions*, 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 178 – 179.

¹⁶ For instance, Jeremy King and Tara Zahra discuss the issue of national indifference and nationalizing efforts in Bohemia, see Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848 – 1948* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900 – 1948* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). Caitlin Murdock's work provides an additional perspective with attention to the reasons for the persisting character of national ambiguities in the Saxon-Bohemian borderlands, see Caitlin E. Murdock, *Changing Places: Society, Culture, and Territory in the Saxon-Bohemian Borderlands, 1870 – 1946* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010). James Bjork raises the issues of practical implementation of modernist theories of nationalism in the problematic case of Upper Silesia, where non-national and national identities coexisted for a long time, see James E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole. Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

movements of the small nations, imposing on them *Phase D*, that of controlled national development, promoting non-Russian nationalisms from above.¹⁷ Thus, while Hroch's theory can be applied to the analysis of the Belarusian national movement at the turn of the 20th century, it exhausts its potential when seeking to explain the dynamics of national movements within the multiethnic socialist state, as was the case of Belarusian nation-building in the Soviet Union.¹⁸

Similar reservations apply to the conditions of imperial collapse and rise of nationalism. Presenting an algorithm for the crystallization of a nation-state within an imperial context, Ernest Gellner offers a schematic view of ideal-type developments which befall empires upon entering the modern age. In the abstract case of the Ruritanian nation, which separates itself from the Megalomanian Empire, Gellner shows how communities of the imperial peripheries form separate identities from their own local cultures. Ruritanians appear as a group of people, culturally and linguistically different from the centre, who start to become aware of this difference in the context of early industrialization. Gellner notes that as a periphery, they also suffer more disadvantages, which separate them from other Megalomanians. Eventually, this results in their distancing from the center and the declaration of their own national distinctiveness, later leading to the establishment of a new high culture and eventually a separate state.¹⁹ At the first sight, this model bears striking similarities to the Belarusian case, yet at the same time, it demonstrates how theories of nationalism fail to take into account extraordinary external conditions, which break up empires and lead to the emergence of nation-states.

In this regard, this dissertation draws on the recent methodological frameworks

¹⁷ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923 – 1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 15.

¹⁸ Nelly Bekus, "Nationalism and Socialism: "Phase D" in the Belarusian Nation-Building," *Nationalities Papers* (November 2010), Vol. 38, Nr. 6: 829.

¹⁹ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 58 – 62.

and concepts which emerged in the context of the growing interest of historians to the complexities and peculiarities of the Great War in Eastern Europe as a whole, rather than as a prelude to revolutionary upheaval. Thus, Joshua Sanborn offers to treat the First World War in Eastern Europe as the war of European decolonization, a complex “multiactor and multistage process,” not limited to the war's outcome at Versailles.²⁰ In this manner, he challenges the “rise of nationalism” paradigm, noting that it fails to explain all political and military aspects of the war, leading to independence by placing the wrong emphasis on the struggle between nation and empire, where supposedly the sides aim for liberation and control, respectively.²¹ Sanborn suggests distinguishing between four stages of decolonization, commencing with the imperial challenge, or the formation of anti-imperial political movements with the potential to challenge existing authority. The road of national movements towards independence starts with the failure of the imperial state, which, in the case of the Russian empire was marked by the introduction of martial law in the western borderlands in July 1914 and the retreat of the Russian armies, culminating with the February Revolution in 1917. Within Sanborn's decolonization scheme, state failure leads to the termination of the state's monopoly on violence, destabilizing authority and power relations. Finally, the fourth stage, that of social disaster, is interconnected with the state-building process, which according to Sanborn, is a continuous work in progress.²²

Modernization alone does not explain the emergence of nation-states in the imperial context, as the persisting military and economic stability of the imperial power during peacetime disadvantages national movements. In a similar vein as Sanborn,

²⁰ Joshua Sanborn, “War of Decolonization,” in *The Empire and Nationalism at War*, eds. Eric Lohr, Vera Tolz, Alexander Semyonov, Mark von Hagen (Bloomington, Ind.: Slavica Publishers, 2014), 52.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

²² *Ibid.*, 59, 62; Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5 – 7.

Andreas Wimmer maintains that the latter have a viable chance only when power shifts occur, weakening the imperial regime by wars or military conflicts. Only in this scenario are the national movements able to accumulate considerable strength for challenging the authority of the empire and able to mobilize their critical mass of followers.²³ Noting that major theories of nationalism fail to account for wars as important factors in the successes of national movements, Eric Lohr suggests the concept of war nationalism, thus dismissing the view on nationalism as a linear progression, and seeing it rather as “contingent upon a sudden rupture.”²⁴ Commenting on the development of nationalism in the imperial context, Aviel Roshwald also concurs with the significance of the First World War, stating that it provided the impetus to “catapult the idea of national self-determination toward sudden realization across wide range of societies.”²⁵

For Belarusians, the new conditions created by the First World War indeed catalyzed the process of national mobilization, concentrating it within a limited period of time. Having barely completed the *Phase B* of national agitation and attempting a transition to mass national politics during 1917 – 1918, the national movement was under pressure from varying combinations of external factors, including population displacement, the wartime rule of Russian generals, the German occupation regime, and the growing competition from Polish and Lithuanian nationalisms. Internally, Belarusian national elites also faced a number of challenges, which otherwise would have required several decades to solve. Their experiences during the First World War and the revolution indicate that they had to complete all of the tasks of constructing a common modern national project simultaneously, while at the same time still working on their own self-

²³ Andreas Wimmer, *Waves of War: Nationalism, State Formation and Ethnic Exclusion in the Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22.

²⁴ Eric Lohr, “War Nationalism,” in Lohr et al., *The Empire and Nationalism at War*, 93.

²⁵ Aviel Roshwald, *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires. Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914 – 1923* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

identification (e. g. learning and using the Belarusian language), recruiting more nationally-conscious activists to their ranks, and promoting this identification among the population yet to be nationalized. Within a few years, the new extreme circumstances that had been imposed by the First World War forced the evolution of Belarusian national thinking away from demanding cultural autonomy within democratic Russia on one hand, and planning federative state solutions with the neighbouring nations on the other, towards the development of the concept of independent statehood and pursuing practical state-building activities.

Last but not least, this dissertation benefits from the use of the “entangled history” concept, which opens up a new perspective on the nation and empire, by integrating transnational and regional history.²⁶ Even though it is more common for an analysis of peacetime, Mark von Hagen suggests that this concept might widen our understanding of the First World War in Eastern Europe, pointing to the inter-imperial entanglements as well as the connections of empires with ethnic and religious minorities in other empires.²⁷ During the war, this trend was particularly evident from the forced entanglement of civilian and military spheres, illustrated by Ludendorff's aspirations towards a military utopian state in Ober Ost on one hand, and the arbitrary military rule of Russian generals in the western borderlands under martial law on the other hand.²⁸ The Great War transformed, reformatted, and intensified contacts, conflicts, and competitions in the western borderlands, benefiting local national movements by challenging the imperial authority and its legitimacy.

²⁶ For examples of these approaches for the analysis of Belarusian history, see Thomas M. Bohn, Victor Shadurski, and Albert Weber, eds., *Ein weißer Fleck in Europa. Die Imagination der Belarus als einer Kontaktzone zwischen Ost und West* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011).

²⁷ Mark von Hagen, “The Entangled Eastern Front in the First World War,” in Lohr et al., *The Empire and Nationalism at War*, 9 – 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23, 26.

Historical Background of the Belarusian National Movement

Throughout the course of the 20th century, Belarus transformed from several provinces of the Russian Empire into a sovereign state. More than seven decades of communist rule over the country coincided with the active process of nation-building, which in the Belarusian case was directed from above. Its origins are traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the modern national movement emerged and developed, following common trends for the whole region of Eastern Europe. The distinctive feature in the Belarusian case was the relative lateness in the formation of the modern national project, overshadowed by the neighboring Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian national movements. Yet this apparent drawback does not make it less worthy of study or attention, because along with successes and progress, struggles and challenges to an equal degree help to reveal the internal mechanisms of national mobilization, serving as a key to understanding the nature of nationalism as an inherently modern phenomenon.²⁹

After the final partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, the Russian Empire incorporated most of the ethnically Belarusian territories. In the first half of the 19th century, it was still cautious with the newly acquired territories, attempting to coopt the local elites into the administrative structures and to cooperate with them, prioritizing the integrity of the empire.³⁰ However, this situation changed significantly in the 1860s, when the aftermath of the January Uprising of 1863 marked a definitive turn in the Russian nationalities policies, aiming to deprive the Poles of their influence in the

²⁹ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 43; Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569 – 1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 41.

³⁰ On the integration and Russian administration of the former territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the first half of the 19th century see Jörg Ganzenmüller, *Russische Staatsgewalt und Polnischer Adel. Elitenintegration und Staatsaufbau im Westen des Zarenreiches (1772 – 1850)* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2013).

western borderlands, which became the site of assimilatory nationalities policies.³¹ More confrontational and uncompromising than elite cooptation, these policies nevertheless affected various national groups in different ways, as imperial authorities were careful to recognize the areas where they could proceed with greater confidence. For instance, there was a consensus that Poles could not be assimilated, yet on the other hand, Belarusians were targeted as the primary objects of Russification measures. In the case of Lithuanians, there was a less clearly expressed intention toward full assimilation, which allowed for more leeway in the activities of the national movement, as compared to the Belarusian case.³²

The turn towards assimilation in the second half of the 19th century was exemplified by the Russian approach to religious issues: the Uniate church was already liquidated by 1839 and former Uniates were forced to convert to Orthodoxy, while in the 1860s Russian imperial authorities aimed to Russify the Roman Catholic church in the western borderlands, in this way recognizing the existence of Belarusian Catholics.³³ Thus, in the second half of the 19th century, the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian region became the arena of struggle between the Russian Empire and the Polish national movement. While the latter aimed to create a modern nation with vertical ties uniting the elites and the masses, the Russian imperial government focused on the idea of Slavic unity, in particular the notion of the tri-partite Russian nation, where the Great Russian, Little Russian, and White Russian nationalities were conceived as branches of the same

³¹ Alexei Miller refers to these territories as “laboratory of nationalisms” in the 19th and 20th centuries. See Alexei Miller, “The Role of the First World War in the Competition Between Ukrainian and All-Russian Nationalism,” in Lohr et al., *The Empire and Nationalism at War*, 73. On Russification see also Darius Staliūnas, *Making Russians. Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus After 1863* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 297; Andrew Savchenko, *Belarus. A Perpetual Borderland* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 53.

³² Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 302 – 305.

³³ For a detailed analysis of Russian imperial confessional policies see Theodore Weeks, “Religion and Russification: Russian Language in the Catholic Churches of the 'Northwest Provinces' after 1863,” *Kritika. Explorations In Russian And Eurasian History* (2001), Nr. 1: 87 – 110; M. D. Dolbilov, *Russkii kraj, chuzhaia vera. Etnokonfessional'naiia politika imperii v Litve i Belorussii pri Aleksandre II* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010).

tree. Therefore, depolonization was treated as an essential tool for depriving the Polish nobility of their influence in the region, and asserting Russian dominance over the Eastern Slavs.

Imperial authorities started to interpret the Belarusian past in terms of Russian dominance in opposition to the Poles.³⁴ The turn in imperial policies towards full assimilation appeared to be an impediment to the Belarusian nation-building process, as it suppressed the development of a national movement. In particular, it resulted in the lack of sufficient numbers of dedicated national activists supporting and promoting the national project, defined exclusively in Belarusian terms. Combined with the predominantly peasant character of society and the weakly defined boundaries with the Russians, arising from the linguistic closeness of Slavic languages, these factors collectively accounted for the belated Belarusian nation-building. At the same time, comparisons with the Ukrainian situation reveal that despite similar social structures, Ukraine was under far more favourable conditions due to presence of universities in its cultural life and its different history of partition.³⁵ Moreover, since Belarusian territories were administered by the Russian Empire, the chance that a significant emigre community would emerge to initiate and uphold alternate projects was rather limited,³⁶ unlike in the Ukrainian and Lithuanian cases.

The Russian ethnographic discovery of Belarus in the second half of the 19th century manifested the official acknowledgement of Belarusians as a separate ethnic group. Conceptualized by the imperial authorities to prove the close connections and common historical roots of all East Slavic peoples in the newly constructed imperial region, this approach eventually culminated in the emergence of the ideology of West

³⁴ Rainer Lindner, *Historiker und Herrschaft. Nationsbildung und Geschichtspolitik in Weissrussland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1999), 71.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57, 69.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

Russism.³⁷ Belarusian identification within this framework was subordinated to the large All-Russian project and had to remain within its regional boundaries.³⁸ However, from another angle, the Russian imperial nationalities policies also had an important side-effect of the unintended recognition of local Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian³⁹ nationalisms, contributing to the process of cultural accumulation⁴⁰ and the subsequent strengthening of corresponding national movements. More importantly, from a long term perspective, even a controlled interim construction of new regions and identities from above within a colonial context created a space and premise for an “imaginable” project of modern Belarus,⁴¹ facilitating the task of the emerging national elites. Belarusian national discourse developed parallel to the imperially promoted West Russism, thus already demonstrating the inherent duality of the modern Belarusian project in its early formative period. Rainer Lindner terms these two competing positions as integrative and national conceptions, noting that both found expression in a political dimension.⁴² The latter gradually gained strength in the second half of the 19th century, separating the history of Belarusians from their neighbours and creating myths of the “golden age,” as for instance Adam Kirkor did by idealizing the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.⁴³

During the 1863 Uprising, the insurgents started to use the Belarusian language as a means of political struggle in an attempt to mobilize the support of the peasantry. Kanstancin (Kastus') Kalinoŭski, who commanded the uprising in Belarus and Lithuania, tried to reach out to the broad masses with the irregular newspaper *Myžyckaja Praŭda*

³⁷ Valer Bulgakov, *Istoriia belorusskogo natsionalizma* (Vil'nius: Institut belorusistiki, 2006), 151.

³⁸ Dolbilov, *Russkii krai, chuzhaia vera*, 195.

³⁹ Alexei Miller, “The Romanov Empire and the Russian Nation,” in *Nationalizing Empires*, eds. A. I. Miller and Stefan Berger (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015), 330 – 331.

⁴⁰ Ales' Smaliančuk, “Licvinstva, zachodnerusizm i bielaruskaja ideja XIX – pačatak XX st.,” in *Białoruś w XX stuleciu: w kregu kultury i polityki*, ed. Dorota Michaluk (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2007), 60.

⁴¹ P. V. Tereshkovich, *Etnicheskaia istoriia Belarusi XIX – nachala XX v. v kontekste Tsentralno-Vostochnoi Evropy* (Minsk: BGU, 2004), 187.

⁴² Lindner, *Historiker und Herrschaft*, 72.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 76 – 77.

(Peasant Truth). Shortly after the defeat of the uprising, his “Listy z-pad šybenicy” (Letters from beneath the Gallows) addressed the issue of the Belarusian language and its suppression by the educational system.⁴⁴ Kalinoŭski became an important symbolic figure within the Belarusian national discourse, but his own identification remains disputed.⁴⁵ Most likely, the uprising caused the evolution of his views from support for the regional patriotic allegiance to the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania towards the national concept.⁴⁶

The last decades of the 19th century represented the key turning point for modern Belarusian nationalism. Between 1880 and 1900, the clear anticolonial counter-narrative espoused by the lawyer and poet Francišak Bahuševič marked this transition.⁴⁷ Bahuševič became the key figure of Belarusian ethnic nationalism by formulating the Belarusian national idea in the introduction to his poetry volume *Dudka Belaruskja*.⁴⁸ Mediating between the past and the present, Bahuševič developed a Belarusian national mythology by establishing a tradition of the Belarusian Revival/Renaissance, based on the interpretation of Belarus as the core of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, glorifying its history and emphasizing the value of the Belarusian language.⁴⁹ These steps were instrumental in creating a common legacy of memories for Belarusians. According to the French theorist of nationalism, Ernest Renan, such images of heroic history, great men,

⁴⁴ Kastus' Kalinoŭski and Henadz' Kisialoŭ, *Za našuju vol'nasc': tvory, dokumenty* (Minsk: “Bielaruskii knihazbor,” 1999), 40 – 46.

⁴⁵ For the debates in the historiography see Aliaksandr Smaliančuk, “Kastus' Kalinoŭski and the Belarusian National Idea: Research Problems,” *Journal of Belarusian Studies* (2015), vol. 7, Nr. 3: 70 – 78. Smaliančuk supports the view that Kalinoŭski represented a certain stage in the evolution of modern Belarusian nationalism. A similar interpretation is suggested by Per Anders Rudling, describing Kalinoŭski as the “first Belarusian narodnik and national activist,” who did not yet “think of Belarus as a separate nation.” See Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906 – 1931* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 36. On the contrary, Bulgakov perceives Kalinoŭski only as a regional patriot and “Russophobe.” See Bulgakov, *Istoriia*, 135 – 138.

⁴⁶ Aleksandr Kravtsevich, Aleksandr Smolenchuk, and Sergei Tokt', *Belorusy: natsiia Pogranič'ia* (Vil'nius: EGU, 2011), 123 – 124.

⁴⁷ Bulgakov, *Istoriia*, 233.

⁴⁸ Maciej Buraczok, *Dudka Białaruskaja* (Kraków: Wł. L. Anczyc i Ska, 1891), http://knihi.com/Francisak_Bahusevic/Dudka_bielaruskaja.html#chapter1 (Accessed 28 March 2016).

⁴⁹ Bulgakov, *Istoriia*, 226 – 227, 229.

and past glory constitute a foundation of the national idea.⁵⁰

In an attempt to convey the national message to the broad masses, Bahuševič constructed the ideal-type of the recipient of the national message, the image of a Belarusian peasant, with a distinctly differing identification from Russians and Poles.⁵¹ However, the major drawback in this approach, adopted later by the emergent Belarusian national elites, was that the orientation focused on peasant culture. In fact, it was unattractive not only for the nobles, who were unlikely to identify with peasant culture, but for the broad masses as well, since the latter were more inclined to strive for inclusion into the cultural world of nobles and intellectuals (Polish or Russian) in hopes of future social mobility.⁵² The lack of social groups dedicated primarily to the modern Belarusian project, especially in a situation where religion was a divisive factor rather than a unifying one, slowed down the process of nation-building. The ban on the Uniate church back in 1839 deprived the future Belarusian movement of its potentially active social base,⁵³ especially as in the subsequent decades, religious identifications tended to be equated to national ones, where being Roman Catholic or Orthodox often meant being identified as Polish or Russian, respectively.

Who Were the National Activists?

The final project of the modern Belarusian nation was heavily influenced by the colonial discourses of West Russism and modern Polish nationalism,⁵⁴ which presented Belarus as a marginalized region with a predominantly peasant culture. The political context of the second half of the 19th century, along with the assimilatory

⁵⁰ Renan, "What Is a Nation?," 52.

⁵¹ Bulgakov, *Istoriia*, 267; Tereshkovich, *Etnicheskaia istoriia*, 133.

⁵² Ryšard Radzik, *Vytoki sučasnaj bielaruskasci. Bielarusy na fone nacyiatvorčykh pracesaŭ u Centralna-Uščodniaj Eŭrope 19 st.* (Minsk: Medysont, 2012), 319.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 312 – 313. For instance, the Lithuanian national movement capitalized on the religious element; on the role of the Roman Catholic clergy see Tomas Balkelis, *The Making of Modern Lithuania* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 87 – 88.

⁵⁴ Bulgakov, *Istoriia*, 115 – 128.

pressures directed towards Belarusians and Ukrainians, slowed down the development and evolution of their respective national movements.⁵⁵ National movements of largely peasant nations were highly dependent on the coincidence of confessional, social, and political antagonisms,⁵⁶ most of which were not pronounced in the Belarusian case, as demonstrated by the religious divide between the masses and national activists, who belonged to different confessions and social strata.

Similarly to the Ukrainians, the Belarusians were more receptive to socialist rather than nationalist agitation, due to their peasant-dominated society. In this respect, the convergence of social and national demands could be used as an effective means of mobilizing the masses, which explains the popularity of the socialist parties within the Belarusian national milieu.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the socialist character of the leading Belarusian political parties and their emphasis on social liberation rather than clear national self-determination precluded the inclusion of all social strata in the process of modern nation construction. Socialists were focused on their own narrow vision of a nation, rooted in the perceptions of Belarusians as predominantly peasant masses, Orthodox by religion, and populating the countryside. Within this socialist framework, the nation was interpreted in exclusivist terms, leaving no place for the nobles or even, often, the Roman Catholics.⁵⁸

By contrast, the long-lasting identification of elites with the pre-modern Grand Duchy of Lithuania and their orientation towards regional patriotism resulted in the reluctance to embrace the new nationalist thinking, which was especially characteristic for Belarusians, or Polonized Belarusians to be exact. In contrast to the Lithuanians,

⁵⁵ Kappeler, *Der schwierige Weg*, 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 96 – 97.

⁵⁷ Rudling, *The Rise and Fall*, 22; Kappeler, *Der schwierige Weg*, 31.

⁵⁸ Dorota Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa, 1918 – 1920: u podstaw białoruskiej państwowości* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2010), 320; Bekus, “*Nationalism and Socialism: “Phase D,”*” 834.

whose elites had strong connections to the peasantry,⁵⁹ Belarusian activists had different backgrounds: most of them belonged to the smallholding gentry with strong ties to Polish culture, magnified through common religion and language affinity. Thus, the broad masses of the ethnically Belarusian peasant population, Orthodox or converted to Orthodoxy, had little in common with its largely Roman Catholic elites with noble backgrounds. Moreover, the linguistic closeness of Slavic languages did not bring out the need for the exclusive use of Belarusian for communication with the peasant masses, who could understand other languages too. Under the conditions of the increased emphasis that national movements placed on language and religious distinctions in the late 19th century, this was a certain drawback.⁶⁰

The Revolution of 1905 marked a turn towards a more flexible nationalities policy in the western borderlands and changed the Russian imperial hierarchy of internal threats, where the revolutionary peasantry replaced the Poles as the primary danger. At the same time, the revolution contributed to the revival of national activities and their inclusion into the political realm. Duma election campaigns led to the nationalization of the peasantry, causing a growing interest in politics.⁶¹ However, in the case of Belarusian nation-building, the period of liberalization proved to be ambiguous and challenging. Despite the concessions to nationalities in the sphere of education, schools with Belarusian as the principal language of instruction were not tolerated, unlike the Polish or Lithuanian schools.⁶² The demands for education in the mother tongue for Belarusians remained one of the principal aims of the short-lived Belarusian Teachers' Union,

⁵⁹ Wiktor Sukiennicki and Maciej Siekierski, *East Central Europe During World War I: From Foreign Domination to National Independence*. V. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 53 – 54.

⁶⁰ Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations*, 40, 45 – 47.

⁶¹ M. D. Dolbilov and A. I. Miller, *Zapadnye okrainy Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006), 343 – 353.

⁶² On the effects of the Revolution of 1905 on Polish culture in the Belarusian territories see Andrzej Romanowski, “The Year 1905 and the Revival of Polish Culture between the Neman and the Dnepr,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* (1999) 41, Nr. 1: 45 – 67.

established in 1907 in Vil'nia.⁶³

Nevertheless, following the Revolution of 1905, the role of the urban-based intellectuals in articulating national interests became more pronounced. In the Belarusian case, this meant growing influence and increased nation-building activities within the intellectual circles in Vil'nia. One of the positive outcomes was the growth of their publishing activities in the subsequent decade.⁶⁴ In 1906, the BSH initiated the publication of the first legal Belarusian newspaper, conceptualized primarily by Ivan Luckievič.⁶⁵ The first issue of *Naša Dolia* appeared on 14 September 1906 in a run of 10,000 copies. Five other issues followed, yet the newspaper closed down after the confiscations by the tsarist authorities, the political persecutions of its authors, and also due to the outwardly radical tone of the last two issues.

Envisioning a more stable long-term project, the BSH established *Naša Niva*, which appeared on 10 November 1906. Due to the reactionary tsarist policies, its circulation was notably lower, around 3,000 copies, yet it existed until 7 August 1915, and acted as “the main forge of the Belarusian revival ideology,”⁶⁶ giving a name to a whole period in the early history of modern Belarusian nationalism. Brothers Ivan and Anton Luckievič along with the editor Aliaksandr Ulasau formed the core of the *Naša*

⁶³ Sviatlana Snapkoŭskaja, *Adukacyjnaja palityka i škola na Bielarusi ŭ kancy XIX - pačatku XX stst.* (Minsk: Ministerstva Adukacyi Respubliki Bielarus', Nacyjanal'ny Instytut Adukacyi, 1998), 70.

⁶⁴ Lindner, *Historiker und Herrschaft*, 56 – 57. Similar situation was also characteristic for the Lithuanian national movement, which expanded its cultural activities after 1905 in an attempt to forge the links between the national elites and the population. See Balkelis, *The Making of Modern Lithuania*, 102.

⁶⁵ Ivan Luckievič (1881 – 1919) and his brother Anton (1884 – 1942) were born in Shavli (Kovno province) in a family of the railway official. In 1895, the family moved to Minsk, where Ivan could further develop his interests in history, antiques, and archeology. In 1902, Ivan Luckievič was admitted to the St. Petersburg university to study law, while simultaneously enrolling at the Institute for Archeology. Ivan Luckievič's collections became the basis of the Belarusian Museum in Vil'nia, which officially opened in 1921 and was named after Ivan Luckievič. It became one of the major educational and cultural Belarusian institutions, with rich library and archival holdings. Ivan and his brother Anton kept close contacts with all future major figures in the Belarusian national movement, among them Alaiza Paškevič (literary pseudonym – Ciotka), Ales' Burbis, Aliaksandr Ulasau, Branislaŭ Epimach-Šypila, and Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski. See Anatol' Sidarevič, ed., “Pamiaci Ivana Luckieviča ŭ pieršyja uhodki s'mierci Jaho (20.VIII. 1919 – 20.VIII.1920),” in *Pra Ivana Luckieviča: Uspaminy, sviedčanni* (Minsk: “Knihazbor,” 2007), 13 – 15.

⁶⁶ Anton Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu: vybranyja tvory*, ed. Anatol' Sidarevič (Minsk: “Bielaruski knihazbor,” 2003), 134

Niva milieu, grouping together the Belarusian poets Maksim Bahdanovič, Jakub Kolas, Janka Kupala, Ales' Harun, the writers Zmitrok Biadulia, Ciška Hartny, Maksim Harecki, Jadzvihin Š., Siarhej Palujan, and others.⁶⁷ While *Naša Dolia* focused on the social liberation of the poor Belarusian peasantry, *Naša Niva* assumed a more moderate tone and essentially served as a tool of ethnic nationalism. Belarusian activists also used regional patriotism as a means of expanding the national agitation to a broader strata of society. Finally, the so-called “clerical-patriotic” version emphasized the national unity of Orthodox and Roman Catholic Belarusians. It gave rise to the Belarusian Christian Democrats, who were represented by the milieu around the newspaper *Bielarus*, which started to appear in 1913 and was edited by Baliaslau Pačobka.⁶⁸

In 1910, Vaclau Lastoŭski⁶⁹ published his “Short History of Belarus,” pioneering the construction of the Belarusian historical narrative in exclusively national terms. In the vein of Bahuševič’s nation-foundation mythology, he provided the modern Belarusian narrative with historical continuity. Remarkably, it was defined by its defensive character, emphasizing victimization and suffering rather than progress and development. Moreover, this aspect was magnified by the accusation that Russia and Poland had detrimentally influenced the Belarusian cultural, linguistic, and social development.⁷⁰ Remarkably, these tropes proved to be rather persistent almost one hundred years later, when Belarus gained independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The inception of the organized Belarusian political movement dates back to the

⁶⁷ Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 135 – 136.

⁶⁸ Ales' Smaliančuk, “Licvinstva, zachodnerusizm i bielaruskaja ideja XIX – pačatak XX st.,” in *Białorus w XX stuleciu: w kregu kultury i polityki*, ed. Dorota Michaluk (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2007), 62 – 66.

⁶⁹ Writer, politician, and historian, he is also referred to as a “herald of the Belarusian national reawakening.” See Victor Sienkevich, “Lastoŭski the Historian and his Historical Views,” *Journal of Belarusian Studies* (1984), Nr. 2: 4.

⁷⁰ Lindner, *Historiker und Herrschaft*, 115 – 117.

establishment of the first illegal Belarusian party BRP (Belarusian Revolutionary Party), which originated in the Belarusian student circles in St. Petersburg around Vaclaŭ Ivanoŭski in 1902. Ivanoŭski soon switched his interests to the cultural and educational sphere, popularizing Belarusian publishing, while the brothers Ivan and Anton Luckievič assumed the leading roles in the political establishment of the Belarusian national movement in the early 20th century.⁷¹ They initialized the transformation of the BRP into the Belarusian Revolutionary Hramada (BRH) in 1904.⁷² In the late 1905, the BRH held a congress in Minsk where it decided on a socialist direction and was renamed into the Belarusian Socialist Hramada (BSH), which maintained major centers in Minsk, Vil'nia, and St. Petersburg.⁷³ In the reactionary period, the BSH did not operate and resurfaced in the political arena after the February Revolution in 1917, immediately claiming the leadership of the Belarusian national movement.⁷⁴

Structure and Organization

Chronologically, this dissertation covers the period between 1914 and 1918, following the dynamics of the national movement throughout the years of population displacement from the western borderlands, German occupation in the western Belarusian areas, as well as in the Russian- controlled territories, and finally in Russia proper. Notably, the First World War did not end on 11 November 1918 for Eastern Europe, as the defeat of the German Empire was overshadowed here by a series of local conflicts,⁷⁵

⁷¹ Jury Turonak, *Madernaja historyja Bielarusi* (Vil'nia: Instytut bielarusistyki, 2008), 166 – 167.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 174.

⁷³ Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 152 – 153.

⁷⁴ Z. Žylunovič, “Liuty – Kastryčnik u bielaruskim nacyjanalnym ruchu,” in *Bielarus'. Narysy historyi, ekanomiki, kul'turnaha i revoliucyjnaha ruchu*, eds. A. Stašeŭski, Z. Žylunovič, U. Ihnatoŭski (Miensk: Vydannie Centralnaha Komitetu Bielaruskae Savieckae Socyjalistyčnae Respubliki, 1924), 184 – 185.

⁷⁵ In the Belarusian case, the Polish-Soviet war replaced the First World War until the signing of the Treaty of Riga on 18 March 1921. By its terms, Poland and Soviet Russia divided the Belarusian territories for the interwar period.

stretching over the following years.⁷⁶ However, I limit the scope of this study to 1918, because this year marks the emergence of a Belarusian statehood: in March 1918 the national elites in Minsk proclaimed the BNR (Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika, Belarusian Democratic Republic), while at the same time, the Soviet state developed its own version of the Belarusian Soviet republic. According to Anton Luckievič, in essence, it was the victory of “the idea of a Belarusian republic.”⁷⁷ He made this enthusiastic entry in his diary in January 1919, when the days of the first SSRB (Savieckaja Sacyjalistyčnaja Respublika, Belarus', Socialist Soviet Republic of Belarus) were already numbered, yet he was correct in noting that the idea of Belarusian statehood took roots, even if in the future this project was implemented under Soviet control. Eventually, it became the basis of Belarusian nation-building and survived throughout the 20th century.

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. Starting with the political, social, and demographic effects of the First World War in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire, Chapter 1 analyzes the implications of the war for the situation of the ethnically Belarusian population and the nation-building process. In this regard, two major aspects are of importance. Firstly, the military conflict between Germany and the Russian Empire resulted in new territorial divisions, drawing new borders across the Belarusian territories. Since 1915, the Belarusian lands had been ruled by different powers: the western areas (Vil'nia, Hrodna, parts of Minsk provinces) were incorporated into Ober Ost under German administration, while the eastern areas (parts of Minsk, Viciebsk and Mahilioŭ provinces) remained within the Russian Empire. Both of these regions experienced different policies, which in turn led to diverse conditions for the national activists and

⁷⁶ On the need to incorporate the revolution and the subsequent civil war experiences into the larger framework of the total war, see Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution. Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914 – 1921* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2 – 6.

⁷⁷ Lietuvos Mokslų Akademijos Vrublevskių Biblioteka, Rankraščių Skyrius (hereafter LMAVB, RS), f. 21, b. 319, l. 38 r.

their work. While the Russian Empire mobilized all resources for the war and tightened controls over the activities of the population, especially on the territories adjacent to the front line, the areas under German occupation, although similarly tormented by a number of problems, experienced more liberal approaches in the sphere of culture and education. Secondly, the areas of the Russian Empire where military actions were expected to take place, were subjected to forced migration. A substantial part of the population turned into refugees who were resettled to other parts of the empire.

Moving to the revolutionary times, Chapter 2 examines the re-organization of the Belarusian national milieu in the Russian-controlled territories of eastern Belarus between the two revolutions in 1917, when liberalization and democratization enabled the national elites across the former Russian Empire to consolidate and strengthen their national movements. Similarly to other nationalities, the chief demands of Belarusians throughout 1917 remained limited to different forms of autonomy within the hypothetical future Russian federative democratic state. Reflecting on the political organization of the Belarusian movement after the February Revolution, this chapter analyzes its internal dynamics and provides an insight into the intense political competition in Minsk during 1917, while paying attention to the changing fortunes of the Belarusian national parties.

The process of national mobilization and the practical challenges encountered by the national activists in eastern Belarus during 1917 are the subject of Chapter 3. Moving away from events in Minsk, it takes a closer look at the provinces to see how the majority of the population perceived Belarusian national agitation and whether it was ready to accept new forms of national identification. In particular, here I analyze the efforts at political education and the attempts to establish a system of Belarusian national schooling. Furthermore, this chapter explores the connections between Belarusian national agitation and religion by addressing the degree of involvement of both the

Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches in the process of Belarusian nation-building during 1917.

The consolidation attempts of the Belarusian national forces in the second half of 1917 are discussed in Chapter 4, using the example of the preparation and convocation of the First All-Belarusian Congress which took place from 5 to 17 (N. S. 18 – 31) December 1917 in Minsk. Often described as the Belarusian version of the constituent assembly,⁷⁸ the Congress was one of the key events of Belarusian national life in 1917. In many respects, this is the core part of my study, as the Congress marked an important transition in the political positions of Belarusian national activists. In the wake of its violent dissolution by the Minsk Bolshevik authorities, national elites started to re-evaluate their political views, and moved towards abandoning their aspirations to the status of an autonomy within a federative Russian republic, the prevalent attitude throughout 1917.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the positions and evolution of the Belarusian national movement in Ober Ost under German occupation. Chapter 5 examines the early phase of occupation between 1915 and 1917, when the German military administration organized the governance of Ober Ost in accordance with the proclaimed principle of the equal treatment of all local nationalities. Belarusian national activists were able to act within the parameters defined by the Germans, advancing the cause of nation-building. Despite the lack of resources, both human and financial, they managed to achieve relative progress, especially in contrast to eastern Belarus during the same period. Vil'nia was a focal point of Belarusian national activism at this time, where the first schools with Belarusian as the principal language of instruction appeared as early as 1915. However, by early 1917, German *Ostpolitik* had already assumed a more pronounced anti-Polish

⁷⁸ Ja. Varonko, *Bielaruski ruch ad 1917 da 1920 hodu. Karotki ahliad* (Koŭna: n. p., 1920), 7; A. Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk vozniknoveniia Belarusskoi narodnoi respubliki* (Kiev: n. p., 1918), 8.

and Lithuanian-oriented character, placing the Belarusian national movement on the margins. Outside of Vil'nia, the movement was instrumentalized by the occupation authorities as a tool to undermine Polish national politics.

Chapter 6 addresses the evolution of Belarusian political thinking in the context of the modified German national politics in East Central Europe between 1916 and 1918. By looking at the interplay of regional and national interests in the Belarusian-Lithuanian-Polish borderlands, it explores why federalism, rather than a nation-state concept, enjoyed popularity among the Belarusian activists, both in western and eastern Belarus, while the Lithuanian and Polish national movements reoriented towards the nation-state concept. It concludes with an account of the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers, with particular attention to the question of how the concept of national self-determination was misused by the great powers to ensure dominance in East-Central Europe.

Finally, Chapter 7 provides a comparative perspective of the early state- and nation-building efforts of the Belarusian national activists from the national and Bolshevik-friendly camps during the crucial period in the history of Belarusian statehood in 1918. It addresses the conditions under which the idea of a separate Belarusian nation-state emerged, examining the meaning that this had for the Belarusian national movement. Dating back to resolutions of the First All-Belarusian Congress in late December 1917 and the aftermath of its dissolution, its implementation was prompted by the unfavourable international situation and, in particular, the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty signed by Soviet Russia and the Central Powers. The departure from Russia-oriented state-building concepts was evident from the proclamation of the Belarusian National Republic (BNR) on 9 March 1918, which was followed by the declaration of its independence on 25 March. Immediately thereafter, the Bolsheviks hurried to appropriate

the Belarusian national movement and make use of it to secure the borders of the Soviet state.

Sources

This dissertation is based on an analysis of primary sources and archival holdings, complemented by the collections of published archival materials. Furthermore, I use a selection of writings and memoirs authored by Belarusian national activists, including Anton Luckievič, Ivan Luckievič, Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, Jazep Varonka, Adam Stankievič, Aliaksandr Cvikevič, and others.⁷⁹ For the analysis of policies in place during the First World War, I utilize Belarusian, Russian, and German sources, including official and personal documentation and correspondence, protocols of the meetings, analytical reports, and administrative regulations and reports. They provide different perspectives: that of the occupied populations and the imperial powers. Another type of source is the periodical press, its correspondence with officials, journalists, and ordinary readers, as well as censored materials which did not appear in print.

Unfortunately, documentation pertaining to Belarusian national activism during the First World War is not preserved in full, leaving voids which cannot be filled in. For instance, the BNR-related source materials suffered a difficult fate throughout the 20th century. Location of some key documents is unknown and they are inaccessible for researchers. These include, but are not limited to, the documentation concerning the All-Belarusian Congress in 1917, the protocols of its Executive Committee, which continued operating after the dissolution of the Congress, and the documents reflecting the early

⁷⁹ For instance, see Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*; Anatol' Sidarevič, ed., *Pra Ivana Luckieviča: Uspaminy, sviedčanni* (Minsk: "Knihazbor," 2007); Juliana Vitan-Dubejkaŭskaja, *Mae ūspaminy* (Vil'nia: Niezaležnae vydavectva Technalohija, 1994); Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk*; F. Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie. Ocherk istorii natsionalnogo i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia belorussov* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1921); Adam Stankievič, *Z Boham da Bielarusi. Zbor tvoraŭ* (Vil'nia: Instytut bielarusistyki, 2008); Jazep Varonka, *Bielaruski ruch ad 1917 da 1920 hodu: Karotki ahliad* (Koŭna: n. p., 1920).

activities of the BNR government. Since late 1918, the archives of the BNR had been in the custody of different people and some of them were either lost or destroyed after the BNR institutions were forced to leave Minsk in December 1918.⁸⁰ Currently, the majority of the surviving documentation is scattered between the National Archive of the Republic of Belarus (NARB) and the Lithuanian Central State Archive (LCVA). The latter's BNR files were published in a two-volume document collection in 1998.⁸¹

Other important sources on Belarusian national activism during the First World War and the revolution are also divided between Belarusian and Lithuanian archives, among them the NARB, the LCVA, the Belarusian State Archive-Museum of Literature and Arts (BDAMLIM), the National Historical Archive of Belarus (NHAB), the Lithuanian State Historical Archive (LVIA), the National Library of Belarus, and the Manuscript Department of the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences (LMAVB, RS). Archival signatures throughout the text are used in the original language, hence for Belarusian archives following abbreviations are used: f. (fond), vop. (vopis), spr. (sprava), ark. (arkuš); for Lithuanian archives: f. (fondas), ap. (aprašas), b. (byla), l. (lapas).

Notes on Terms, Transliterations, and Calendars

There are different variants of translation of the BNR (Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika). In research literature, it is most often referred to as the Belarusian People's Republic, the Belarusian National Republic or the Belarusian Democratic Republic. In terms of translation, I opted to choose the last variant, as it is the most precise. However,

⁸⁰ For a more detailed summary of the BNR archives' fate see Hanna Surmač, "Bielaruski zahraničny archiū," *Bielaruskaja Miniūščyna* (1993), Nr. 1: 18 – 23; Siarhej Šupa, "Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika i jaje archivy," in Siarhej Šupa, ed., *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki* (Vil'nia: Bielaruski instytut navuki i mastactva, 1998), v – xviii; Janka Zaprudnik, "Da zahadki dziaržaŭnaha archivu BNR u Mikoly Abramčyka," *Zapisy* (2009), Nr. 32: 450 – 476.

⁸¹ Siarhej Šupa, ed., *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki* (Vil'nia: Bielaruski instytut navuki i mastactva, 1998).

throughout the text I use the abbreviation of the BNR and not the BDR, based on the use of abbreviations from the original language, in this case, Belarusian. All abbreviations, along with full forms and English translations, are listed separately. For reasons of consistency, Belarusian geographical and personal names are transliterated from the Belarusian language, using the Roman alphabet transliteration system, based on the historical Belarusian Latin alphabet (known as *Lacinka*), used in the 19th and early 20th centuries.⁸² The case of Vil'nia/Wilno/Vilnius is the only exception. Without questioning its current status as a Lithuanian city, I nevertheless decided to transliterate it from Belarusian, paying tribute to the historical context, in which I focus primarily on Belarusian life in the city and its importance as one of the chief centers of the Belarusian national movement in the early 20th century.⁸³ For the transliteration of other Cyrillic-based languages (Russian and Ukrainian) I use the Library of Congress (LOC) system. Polish and Lithuanian geographical and personal names appear in their original form, unless there is a more common English form. For instance, Warsaw is used instead of Warszawa; the same applies to Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The difference between the old-style (Julian) and new-style (Gregorian) calendars in Soviet Russia was eliminated on 14 February 1918. The switch to the Gregorian calendar resulted in missing the first thirteen days of the month of February. Those chapters dealing with the eastern Belarusian territories administered by the Russian Empire and later under Bolshevik control, will use the Julian calendar (old-style, O.S.) for dates up until the calendar change in 1918. Gregorian calendar (new-style, N. S.) dates will be indicated in brackets in cases where it is appropriate, especially, at the turn of

⁸² See United Nations guidelines for transliteration of Belarusian, http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/10th-uncsgn-docs/crp/E_CONF101_CRP2_The%20Roman%20alphabet%20transliteration.pdf (Accessed 28 March 2016).

⁸³ It still remains an underresearched topic and even the latest study of Theodore Weeks about Vilnius and its declining fortunes as a multicultural city throughout the 20th century fails to address the role of Belarusians in shaping its diversity. See Theodore Weeks, *Vilnius Between Nations, 1795 – 2000* (DeKalb: NIU Press, 2015).

1918. After 14 February 1918, the Gregorian calendar style will be used. The chapters dealing with the German occupation of the Belarusian territories will use the new-style dates of the Gregorian calendar, since the German authorities had already introduced it for the occupied territories in Eastern Europe on 25 May 1915.

Chapter 1

The First World War on Belarusian Territories

Until recently, the First World War in Eastern Europe remained in the shadows of the colossal battles and trench warfare of the Western front on the one hand, and the revolutionary period of 1917 in Russia on the other. For a long time, Norman Stone's account of the military operations on the Eastern front, dating back to the 1970s, was one of the few studies which addressed the Eastern front of the Great War.¹ Yet with the advent of the centennial of the war, the historiography of the First World War in Eastern Europe experienced rapid growth. Along with the traditional topics of military,² diplomatic,³ economic, and social history,⁴ recent historiography also turns to the cultural aspects of the Great War and experiences of the civilian populations and soldiers on the Eastern front⁵. Finally, new methodological approaches of transnational and entangled histories concentrate on the implications of the First World War on the process of imperial collapse, decolonization, and the radicalization of violence in the region.⁶ In this regard, a

¹ Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914 – 1917* (New York: Scribner, 1975).

² David R. Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War. The Eastern Front, 1914 – 1917* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015); Gerhard P. Groß, ed., *Die Zeitalter der Weltkriege. Die vergessene Front – der Osten 1914/15. Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006).

³ Dominic Lieven, *The End of Tsarist Russia. The March to World War I and Revolution* (New York: Viking, 2015).

⁴ See Peter Gatrell, *Russia's First World War. A Social and Economic History* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2005); Jennifer Siegel, *For Peace and Money. French and British Money in the Service of Tsars and Commissars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ See for instance Murray Frame, Boris Kolonitskii, Steven G. Marks, and Melissa K. Stockdale, eds., *Russian Culture in War and Revolution, 1914 – 22* (Bloomington, Ind.: Slavica Publishers, 2014); Alfred Eisfeld, Guido Hausmann, Dietmar Neutatz, eds., *Besetzt, interniert, deportiert. Der Erste Weltkrieg und die deutsche, jüdische, polnische und ukrainische Zivilbevölkerung im östlichen Europa* (Essen: Klartext, 2013); Bernhard Bachinger, Wolfram Dornik, eds., *Jenseits des Schützengrabes. Der Erste Weltkrieg im Osten: Erfahrung – Wahrnehmung – Kontext* (Innsbruck, Wien, Bozen: Studien Verlag 2013); Oksana S. Nagornaia, *Drugoi voennyi opyt. Rossiiskie voennoplennye Pervoi mirovoi voiny v Germanii (1914 – 1922)* (Moskva: Novyi Khronograf, 2010).

⁶ Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Eric Lohr, Vera Tolz, Alexander Semyonov, Mark von Hagen, eds., *The Empire and Nationalism at War* (Bloomington, Ind.: Slavica Publishers, 2014).

focus on the Belarusian dimension within these larger paradigms allows one to contextualize the impact of this major military conflict on the conditions for nation-building.

In 1915, the Eastern front of the First World War had stabilized, which lasted for three years and divided contemporary Belarusian territories into two parts: the German-occupied Ober Ost and the areas controlled by the Russian Empire. Belarusians who found themselves under German administration had to deal with a foreign occupational regime. To some degree, they could use German concessions to the local nationalities in the spheres of culture and education in order to advance their nation-building efforts. Yet national politics suffered from the limitations imposed by the German military administration.⁷ On the other side of the front, martial law in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire, a ban on political activities, forced migration, mass displacement of the civilian population, and evacuations of educational and cultural institutions negatively affected the nation-building efforts of Belarusian national activists up until 1917, when the February Revolution liberalized political life for all nationalities of the former Russian Empire. The aim of this chapter is to outline the major implications of the First World War on Belarusians and their national movement in the Russian Empire in the period between the start of the war and the February Revolution in 1917.

Russian Military Administration in the Western Borderlands

After the declaration of general mobilization in Russia on 30 July 1914 (N. S.), about 3.4 million reservists were called to service. Russian imperial authorities hurried with mobilization and had already started military operations against Germany in East

⁷ See Chapters 5 and 6 for a detailed discussion of the German occupation regime in Ober Ost.

Prussia by mid-August 1914, as they were obliged to keep their treaty promises to France.⁸ Imperial Russia received the news of the war with patriotic-inspired enthusiasm, mobilizing all available resources for the war effort.⁹ On 16 July 1914, tsar Nicholas II signed the “Regulations on the Field Administration of the Troops in Wartime,” which structured the army command and introduced martial law in the Russian borderlands west of the Dnepr River. Over time, this area gradually expanded eastward, exceeding in size the combined territories of Germany and Austria-Hungary.¹⁰

New regulations prioritized the needs of the Russian army and allowed the military to take extraordinary measures to ensure successful military operations, fight espionage, and guarantee state security.¹¹ Yet in reality, martial law introduced the supremacy of the military over civilian authorities, fundamentally transforming governance in the western provinces. It resulted in a hybrid dual power system, where the military regime in the borderlands existed almost independently of the central civilian powers in Petrograd.¹² For instance, the entire hierarchy of the Russian army command in 1914 became independent of the Ministry of War and civilian government. Daniel Graf argued that in the long run, this circumstance combined with the lack of coordinated actions endangered the Russian war effort, contributing to the demise of tsarism.¹³

According to the “Regulations,” tsar Nicholas II personally picked the commanders of the armies, who were subordinated only to the Commander-in-Chief,

⁸ Bruce W. Menning, “War Planning and Initial Operations in the Russian Context,” in *War Planning 1914*, eds. Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 126, 128.

⁹ On the popular moods in 1914 see the eyewitness account of Mikhail Lemke, who served in the Russian Stavka, M. K. Lemke, *250 dnei v tsarskoi stavke 1914 – 1915* (Minsk: Kharvest, 2003), 14 – 25.

¹⁰ Daniel Graf, “Military Rule Behind the Russian Front, 1914 – 1917: The Political Ramifications,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* (1974), Bd. 22, H. 3: 390 – 392.

¹¹ Joshua Sanborn, “War of Decolonization,” in Lohr et al., *The Empire and Nationalism at War*, 63 – 64.

¹² Jochen Böehler, “Generals and Warlords, Revolutionaries and Nation State Builders,” in *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe's First World War*, eds. Jochen Böehler, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Joachim von Puttkamer (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014), 55 – 56.

¹³ Graf, “Military Rule,” 390.

Grand Duke Nicholas. The imperial bureaucracy and civil institutions had no authority to supervise or request any reports from the military. Along with the war-related missions, army commanders received powers to interfere in civilian matters. They could limit freedom of movement by ordering the compulsory removal of individuals deemed undesirable from the army operation areas. On the other hand, they also could prohibit certain categories of professionals from leaving, if their jobs were important for the war effort at the front. Further, army commanders had the upper hand in management of resources and provisions, and were responsible for carrying out requisitions. They overtook responsibility for civil order and state security, controlling transportation, communications, trade, industries, and censoring the press.¹⁴ The introduction of martial law allowed Russian generals to move whole regions under their direct command, expanding zones of violence and catalyzing the overall radicalization of society.¹⁵

On 16 August 1914, the Russian Headquarters of the Supreme Commander, known as Stavka, started operating in the town of Baranavičy, located south-west of Minsk. Threatened by the German advance in the summer of 1915, Stavka moved further east to Mahilioŭ in August 1915.¹⁶ Concerned with strengthening the rear of the army in 1915, Stavka conducted its own policies, severely interfering with the authority of the central government. On 16 June 1915, the Russian Chief of Staff, General Yanushkevich, sent a secret telegram from Stavka to General Danilov at the North-Western front, ordering him to evacuate all means of transportation, cattle, and provisions, to destroy the crops, and to blow up bridges and dams.¹⁷ Following the removal of strategically important industries, the military started to evacuate administrative and cultural

¹⁴ Lemke, *250 dnei*, 61 – 63.

¹⁵ Eric Lohr argues that the system of military rule and increased role of the army marked the era of so-called war nationalism, which defined the transformation of nationalism during the First World War. See Eric Lohr, “War Nationalism,” in Lohr et al. *The Empire and Nationalism at War*, 95 – 97.

¹⁶ Irina Dubeiko, *Zabytaia voina* (Minsk: “Medisont,” 2014), 9.

¹⁷ M. M. Smol'ianinov, *Belarus' v pervoi mirovoi voine 1914 – 1918* (Minsk: “Bielaruskaja navuka,” 2014), 95 – 96.

institutions, banks, businesses, and even church bells. Schools, public libraries, museums, and archives from the western borderlands were thus scattered across the Russian Empire. Some of the schools were permanently dismantled and closed down. Only the larger ones managed to continue working during the evacuation. Among the latter was the Minsk Pedagogical Institute in Yaroslavl and Maladzečna Pedagogical Seminary in Smolensk.¹⁸

The process of evacuations was accompanied by the forced uprooting and resettlement of reservists, soon extending to the entire populations of the front rear, conducted both by military and civil authorities. The army commanders did not differentiate between which categories of the population could be useful for the enemy, and which could stay.¹⁹ Relying on the Russian experiences during the war of 1812, when civilians fled from the Grande Armée, destroying provisions and complicating the procurement of resources for the French, Russian Commander-in-Chief Grand Duke Nicholas hoped that depopulated areas would slow the German armies in the same manner. Yet while this tactic made sense in 1812, when the French armies moved east through a narrow corridor, in 1915, it was already obsolete, as the German armies quickly advanced in a broad continuous front, using all available roads and railways.²⁰ Failure to account for modernization turned the “scorched earth” tactic into another factor that discredited the Russian military in the eyes of the local populations, who suffered to a greater degree than the enemy armies. Unpredictable behaviour of the Russian generals, whose actions were often not coordinated with the central government, contributed to further chaos and disorganization during the retreat.²¹

Fearing the negative reactions of the local population, Commander-in-Chief

¹⁸ “Rasciarušanje bahacce,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 68, 16 June 1918, 1.

¹⁹ Smol'ianinov, *Belarus' v pervoi mirovoi voine*, 95 – 96.

²⁰ E. A. Nikol'skii, *Zapiski o proshlom* (Moskva: Russkii put', 2007), 212 – 213.

²¹ Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking. Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 16, 33.

Grand Duke Nicholas tried to prevent the escalation of violent expropriations and involve civilian authorities in securing order and providing for the army's needs. However, his intervention was not successful. The front commanders and the lower rank army officers together with the subordinated local authorities, often interpreted Stavka's orders in a broader sense, accompanying them with threats and terrorizing the civilian population. In this manner, the military authorities sidelined the civilian government and expanded their own sphere of power.²² Generals Danilov and Zabelin, acting as supreme chiefs of supplies at the Northwestern and Southwestern fronts respectively, were in charge of the front rears. In addition to the expanded authorities of the civilian governors-general, these military "virtual dictators" also received the power to control almost any aspect of life in the western borderlands, including the bureaucracy, censorship, requisitions, and prices.²³ In certain ways, the Russian military regime resembled Ludendorff's methods of military administration in the neighboring occupied Ober Ost lands at around the same time.²⁴

Military operations in Eastern Prussia, Galicia, and Poland during the first year of the war uncovered a number of problems within the Russian imperial army. Ineffective command, a lack of munitions, unreliable intelligence, and insufficient communication between different army headquarters had already resulted in the retreat and significant human losses by the fall of 1914.²⁵ The Russian military soon discovered that prewar investment into the construction of fortresses was useless, as it only translated into wasted resources and increased numbers of POWs. Moreover, soldiers were not sufficiently prepared for trench warfare and were forced to learn new field fortification technologies

²² Smol'ianinov, *Belarus' v pervoi mirovoi voine*, 98 – 99.

²³ Graf, "Military Rule," 392 – 393. On the organization of requisitions and mobilization of industries for the needs of the Russian army in 1914 – 1915 see Valerii N. Cherepitsa, *Gorod-krepost' Grodno v gody Pervoj mirovoj vojny. Meropriiatiia grazhdanskikh i voennykh vlastei po obespecheniiu oboronosposobnosti i zhiznedeiatel'nosti* (Minsk: Bielaruskaja Encyklapedyja imia Petrusia Broŭki, 2009), 261 – 277.

²⁴ See the detailed discussion of Ober Ost in Chapter 5.

²⁵ Menning, "War Planning," 131 – 132; Smol'ianinov, *Belarus' v pervoi mirovoi voine*, 69.

by method of trial and error.²⁶ The fighting spirit of the Russian army deteriorated, as soldiers and officers lost faith in the successful outcome of the war. These moods created a fertile ground for Bolshevik anti-war agitation. The number of deserters and instances of mass surrender grew, with the first case of fraternization between Russian and German soldiers documented during Easter of 1915.²⁷

The Great Retreat of the Russian army in the summer of 1915 brought military action to the western provinces of the Russian Empire. After conquering the Polish provinces, German armies celebrated a successful offensive with the Sventsiany Breakthrough on 27 August 1915, destroying the lines of the Russian Northern and Western fronts. Large territories of the present-day Lithuania, Latvia, and Belarus came under German power, yet strategic gains were not comparable to the scope of territorial conquest, as the Russian armies were able to fortify defences and stabilize the front along the Riga-Baranavičy-Pinsk-Dubno line. Mobile warfare, characteristic for the Eastern front in the initial phase of the war, turned into a positional war in the Belarusian territories for almost three years, up until 1918.²⁸

Eastern front trenches stretched over the vast territories from Riga at the Baltic Sea in the north to the Romanian border in the south. The military conflict between Germany and the Russian Empire thus led to the first major redrawing of borders in Eastern Europe since the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late 18th century. The German offensive on the Eastern front in the fall of 1915 cut through the Belarusian territories. Eastern non-occupied areas (parts of Minsk, Viciebsk, Mahilioŭ provinces) remained within the Russian Empire, while the areas in the west around the

²⁶ Lemke, *250 dnei*, 120.

²⁷ V. M. Chadanionak, *Sacyjalna-ekanamičnae stanovišča nasiel'nictva neakupiravanaj terytoryi Bielarusi ŭ hady Pieršaj susvietnaj vajny (kastryčnik 1915 – kastryčnik 1917 hh.)* (Viciebsk: UA “VDTU,” 2015), 35 – 36.

²⁸ Boris Khavkin, “Russland gegen Deutschland. Die Ostfront des Ersten Weltkrieges in den Jahren 1914 bis 1915,” in *Die vergessene Front – der Osten 1914/15: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, ed. Gerhard Paul Gross (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), 82; Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse*, 106 – 107.

major cities of Vil'nia, Hrodna, and Białystok were incorporated into the German zone of occupation, known as Ober Ost. The rest of the territories in the vicinity of the front line turned into a depopulated wasteland and massive battlefields. For instance, the town of Smarhon', located about 120 km to the west of Minsk, was completely destroyed during the 810 days long siege by the German armies.²⁹

Demographic Crisis of 1915

In the first year of the war, the Russian military authorities decided to secure the western borderlands by deporting so-called “enemy subjects,” including ethnic Germans and Austrians, who were deemed unreliable.³⁰ In early 1915, the policy of forced deportations was expanded towards the Jewish populations.³¹ These practices, along with the resettlement of reservists, foreshadowed the large-scale displacement of civilians later on in 1915, which complemented the “scorched earth” tactics. The Russian military regime soon became infamous for its arbitrary actions towards the civilian population in the rear of the front, contributing to the overall chaos and disorganization in the western provinces. Enforced migration from the areas where military actions were expected to take place resulted in a massive and unprecedented uprooting of the local population. Violence and threats, along with overzealous interpretations of the orders, were common occurrences. For instance, Cossack units were notorious in their ruthlessness: often they forced people to move east with minimal or no possessions and provisions.³²

Surveys conducted by the Union of Zemstvos among the refugees in 1915

²⁹ Vladimir Liguta, *U Smorgoni, pod znakom Sviatogo Georgiia* (Minsk: Izdatel'stvo Viktora Khursika, 2010), 102.

³⁰ Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens During World War I* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 122 – 123.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 137 – 140.

³² A. Iu. Bakhturina, *Okrainy Rossijskoj imperii: gosudarstvennoe upravlenie i natsionalnaia politika v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny (1914 – 1917 gg.)* (Moskva: Rosspen, 2004), 339 – 340; Nikol'skii, *Zapiski o proshlom*, 212.

confirm the forced nature of resettlement, noting that “despite the outwardly voluntary character of evacuations, available data indicate significant role of threats and pressures exercised by the local administrations.”³³ The eyewitness account of Siamion Aniščuk from the village of Husaki (Białystok province) is more explicit, describing how Cossacks rode through the village, chased people away from their houses and set all buildings on fire. Prior to that, Orthodox priests intimidated the villagers, demonizing the Germans as barbarians, who were allegedly blinding people and mutilating women.³⁴ In some cases, people resisted the orders to evacuate in 1915, refusing to leave their homes and properties. Employees of the Union of Zemstvos recorded the statements of refugees, which indicated their negative opinions of the evacuation.³⁵ Others remained, as the Russian army was busy retreating and ran out of time to deal with civilians due to the quickly approaching front.³⁶

Conducted in an *ad hoc* manner, the evacuations of the civilian population destroyed traditional peasant societies and produced millions of refugees. British historian Peter Gatrell estimated the overall number of refugees in the Russian Empire to have been around 7 million people by 1917. The exact percentage of Belarusian refugees is unknown, since they, together with Ukrainians, were represented in the official statistics under the category of “Great Russians,” which comprised 67.2% of the overall number of refugees.³⁷ According to the statistics collected by the Union of Zemstvos, out of all registered refugees in the Russian Empire in 1916, 30.6% refugees were from the Hrodna province, 4.82% from the Minsk province, 4.12% from the Vil'nia province, and 1.47%

³³ Nacyjanal'ny Historyčny Archiū Bielarusi (hereafter NHAB), f. 700, vop. 4, spr. 9, ark. 29.

³⁴ Vital' Luba, ed., *Bežanstva 1915 hoda* (Belastok: Prahramnaja rada tydniovika “Niva,” 2000), 24.

³⁵ “We will not move anywhere, unless we are chased away and forced to leave. Where should women go? It is cold and children have no clothes. We will not go anywhere, unless there is shooting.” See NHAB, f. 700, vop. 4, spr. 9, ark. 2.

³⁶ Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 213 – 214.

from the Viciebsk province.³⁸ Overall, as the western borderlands of the Russian empire were the ones primarily affected by the military actions, researchers concur that the total number of evacuated people from the Vil'nia, Hrodna, Minsk, Viciebsk, and Mahilioŭ provinces, where the majority of the ethnically Belarusian population resided, lies at around 1.4 million.³⁹ The Hrodna province was among the most severely affected: according to the official data gathered by the Tatiana Committee, the number of refugees from the Hrodna province alone exceeded 700,000 people.⁴⁰

The distribution of refugees within the Russian Empire did not have clear patterns. Some ended up in the Far East and Turkestan, while others were scattered all over the inner Russian provinces.⁴¹ Some refugees often deliberately chose to stay closer to home, in the non-occupied Belarusian provinces, especially when it became clear that the front had stabilized. In early 1917, their overall number in the unoccupied parts of the Minsk, Vil'nia, Viciebsk and Mahilioŭ provinces comprised about 285,442 persons. The majority stayed in the Minsk and Mahilioŭ provinces: 126,496 and 91,639 persons, respectively. How many Belarusians were among them remains unknown, as the Russian imperial statistics did not differentiate the Orthodox Belarusians from Russians and the Catholic Belarusians from Poles.⁴²

The first category was most likely to be evacuated, as generally the Orthodox church actively supported resettlement along with the official war propaganda and

³⁸ S. F. Lapanovič, *Dzejnasc' dzjaržaŭnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj pa akazanni dapamohi bežancam u Bielarusi ŭ hady Pieršaj susvietnaj vajny (1914 – kastryčnik 1917 h.)* (Minsk: Akademija MUS, 2010), 23 – 24.

³⁹ Eugeniusz Mironowicz, Siarhiej Tokć, and Ryszard Radzik, *Zmiana struktury narodowościowej na pograniczu polsko-białoruskim w XX wieku* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2005), 26; Dorota Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa, 1918 – 1920: u podstaw białoruskiej państwowości* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2010), 132.

⁴⁰ Nacyjanal'ny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielarus' (hereafter NARB), f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 4.

⁴¹ Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 54 – 55.

⁴² Lapanovič, *Dzejnasc' dzjaržaŭnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj*, 98 – 99.

fearmongering. Entire Orthodox parishes often evacuated east.⁴³ Known cases from the Białystok region testify to the eagerness of the Orthodox clergy to lead the process. Often, these priests even left their congregations behind, as later, during the occupation, the German administration documented high numbers of Orthodox Belarusians in the region, noting problems in the organization of church services for them. As of spring 1916, there were no Orthodox priests available to serve in the Białystok region.⁴⁴ According to correspondence received by the Belarusian newspaper *Homan*, the remaining Orthodox population of Białystok had to ask a German Lutheran priest for assistance. Pastor Zirknitz created an officially recognized organization for the Belarusian Orthodox population of the city and was even known to baptize children according to the Orthodox rite. Throughout 1916, the local Lutheran parish also helped provide about 50,000 free meals and financial assistance to the Orthodox population.⁴⁵

By contrast, almost all of the Roman Catholic priests remained with their parishes.⁴⁶ Orthodox believers who chose to stay often found themselves under pressure to convert to Catholicism, as was the case in the town of Rudomina (Vil'nia district). A letter, addressed to the German Military Administration of Lithuania, pointed out that the town had lost a significant part of its Orthodox population due to the 1915 evacuations. Using the departure of the Orthodox clergy as a pretext, local Catholics were undertaking steps towards appropriating the abandoned church and turning it into a Catholic one.⁴⁷ In this manner, through the church, Polish nationalism often successfully claimed Catholic

⁴³ "Relihiijnye sprawy," *Homan*, Nr. 5, 29 February 1916, 3. See also Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 212 – 214; Mironowicz, *Zmiana struktury narodowościowej*, 24 – 26; Valentina Utgof, "In Search of National Support: Belarusian Refugees in World War One and the People's Republic of Belarus," in *Homelands. War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918 – 1924*, eds. Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 53.

⁴⁴ Lietuvos Mokslų Akademijos Vrublevskių Biblioteka, Rankraščių Skyrius (hereafter LMAVB, RS), f. 23, b. 11a, l. 25.

⁴⁵ "Z usiaho kraju," *Homan*, Nr. 73, 11 September 1917, 2. Orthodox church services in the Białystok area resumed only in April 1918, when three priests started to travel through Białystok, Hrodna, and Svislač districts. See LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 15, l. 34.

⁴⁶ *Homan*, Nr. 74, 14 September 1917, 1.

⁴⁷ Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas (hereafter LCVA), f. 361, ap. 5, b. 14, l. 54, 55.

Belarusians, as during the war the numbers of Belarusian national activists in the countryside were low and they did not have stable support within any church structures.

With millions of civilians from the western provinces and the Kingdom of Poland blocking the roads of the army rear in the summer of 1915, Russian imperial authorities faced another unexpected problem. As the scope of the humanitarian crisis became alarming, General Danilov criticized Minsk zemstvo authorities for their lack of attention to the refugees, requesting that actions be taken immediately along the major roads leading to Minsk, Ihumen, Berazina, and Mahilioŭ. Danilov also offered financial assistance in this matter,⁴⁸ as the military finally realized that the depopulation tactic had backfired and that thousands of refugees had become a major inconvenience for the Russian military operations.

Major routes of evacuation led east from the Hrodna, Vil'nia, and Minsk provinces. Those people who could afford to travel on the railways, packed passenger and cargo trains,⁴⁹ while refugee traffic on eastward roads peaked in the late summer of 1915. Peasants were travelling with everything that they could take, bringing along horses, cattle, and all their possessions.⁵⁰ According to the report of the Minsk governor Aleksei Girs, addressed to the Special Commission dealing with the regulation of refugee movement in Minsk, by September 1915, the refugee crisis heavily affected the city and its surroundings. Tens of thousands of displaced people came to Minsk with the hope of getting on trains and evacuating to safer provinces. Many were forced to sell their horses due to a lack of food for the animals. Deprived of their own means of transportation, the refugees received free tickets to move further east by railway. However, the number of available trains did not suffice, forcing about 6,000 people to camp around the railway

⁴⁸ NHAB, f. 700, vop. 1, spr. 29, ark. 80.

⁴⁹ See the memoirs of Zos'ka Vieras, who evacuated from the Hrodna province to Minsk: Zos'ka Vieras, *Ja pomniu ŭsio: uspaminy, listy* (Harodnia – Wrocław: Haradzienskaja biblijateka, 2013), 29 – 32.

⁵⁰ NHAB, f. 511, vop. 1, spr. 7, ark. 209 adv.

station. Trying to make their way out, refugees besieged every train that they could see, disrupting the operation of the railway station. Refugees still in possession of horses and carts crowded the streets of Minsk, creating serious obstacles for traffic and the transportation of soldiers and military cargo. The governor's report ended on a desperate note, complaining that police forces could not handle the large number of displaced people and requesting reinforcement from the army to guard the railway station and major streets in the city.⁵¹

Thousands of people in need of accommodation stayed under the open sky in Minsk, camping in the city suburbs and antagonizing the local population by damaging property and the harvest. Some “entrepreneurs” in the city even made money by turning telephone booths into temporary accommodations and renting them to the desperate people in need.⁵² Refugees who stayed near the front often found themselves in limbo, not eager to look for stable jobs out of fear of being parted from their families, who could be moved further east.⁵³ Those who were stuck on the roads were often forced to move at a slow pace, suffering from German bombardments, as happened with the refugees in the marches of Palesse region, in the vicinity of Pinsk.⁵⁴ Unsanitary conditions, exhaustion, malnutrition and a lack of clean drinking water led to the spread of cholera, dysentery, and typhus among the refugees, further endangering this new vulnerable social group.⁵⁵

Many people had left in a panic at the last moment before the invasion of the enemy, or fled their homes within sight of military action. According to the surveys of the refugees and their moods, conducted by the Union of Zemstvos among the refugees in Valožyn (Vil'nia province) in November 1915, the majority came to the city from the

⁵¹ NHAB, f. 511, vop. 1, spr. 7, ark. 258, 259.

⁵² NHAB, f. 511, vop. 1, spr. 7, ark. 259. See also Aliaksandr Mikalaevič, “Bežancy Pieršaj susvietnaj vajny,” *Spadčyna* (1994) Nr. 3: 20.

⁵³ NHAB, f. 700, vop. 4, spr. 9, ark. 40.

⁵⁴ Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 51.

⁵⁵ *Kratkii otchet o deiatel'nosti Minskago Gubernskago Komiteta V. Z. S. za 1916 god* (Minsk: Tipografiia B. L. Kaplana, 1917), 2 – 5.

neighboring localities of Kreva, Višneva, Bakšty, which had been immediately affected by the front movement. Disoriented and traumatized by the war, large families had to share accommodations, often with three or four families living in one tiny house. Deprived of their properties, cattle, and regular income, refugees made a living from the bread that they received from charitable canteens. The lack of food, clothes, and necessities was exacerbated by the unavailability of information about resettlement. Moreover, a majority of the refugees were not interested in moving away, as all of them hoped to return to their homes as soon as possible.⁵⁶ Sometimes the authorities forced the refugees to move further east, as occurred in the Rečyca district, where refugee groups tried to avoid using emergency canteens, as the local authorities detained them and drove them out of the Minsk province, regardless of whether these people were from the Minsk province or other provinces.⁵⁷

Overall, evacuations, both voluntary and forced, along with the army mobilization at the onset of the First World War fundamentally changed the demographic situation in the Belarusian provinces. Moreover, they severely impacted the potential of the Belarusian national movement, since people who would have potentially been able to respond positively to nationalist slogans had been physically absent for several years. As correctly noted by Eugeniusz Mironowicz, this fact is often overlooked in the discussions of the weaknesses of Belarusian nationalism.⁵⁸ Anton Luckievič, who remained in the German-occupied territories, observed how “the Russian government drove out masses of people from the Hrodna and Vil'nia provinces, including nearly all Belarusian intelligentsia.”⁵⁹ The First World War thus interfered in the process of national agitation by creating more obstacles for the national activists, since they, as well, were all suddenly

⁵⁶ NHAB, f. 700, vop. 4, spr. 9, ark. 27 – 29.

⁵⁷ NHAB, f. 700, vop. 1, spr. 29, ark. 84.

⁵⁸ Mironowicz, *Zmiana struktury narodowościowej*, 27.

⁵⁹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 131.

scattered across Russia, Ukraine, and the unoccupied Belarusian provinces of Minsk, Viciebsk, and Mahilioŭ, where political activities were severely restricted.

Belarusian Charities within the System of Organized Refugee Relief

Refugee relief in the Russian Empire was administered by both government-sponsored and public organizations. One of the first official charitable institutions was the Tatiana Committee. Named after the tsar's second daughter, it was established on 14 September 1914 to supervise the provision of assistance to the wounded soldiers, yet it soon expanded its activities to provide support to the displaced civilians.⁶⁰ Committee chair, the member of the State Council Aleksei Neidgardt, visited Minsk on 5 October 1914 in order to clarify the situation with the war victims in the province. After his meeting with the local authorities and representatives of the local civil society, the Minsk section of the Tatiana Committee was founded on 29 October 1914, chaired by the Minsk governor Aleksei Girs.⁶¹ In the first year of the war, the Tatiana Committee acted as the central refugee relief institution, administering resettlement, running shelters, distributing food and medicine, and paying allowances. By 1915, its Minsk section managed twenty free shelters in the city, providing accommodation for over 1,000 people. Anticipating even greater numbers of displaced people in the summer of 1915, it initiated the construction of special barracks.⁶²

As the refugee crisis deepened, the Russian Ministry of the Interior drafted a law “On Meeting the Needs of Refugees” on 30 August 1915. It determined the legal refugee status for all individuals who were resettled or displaced due to the wartime conditions.⁶³ Along with the Tatiana Committee, the local governors' offices and the

⁶⁰ Anastasia S. Tumanova, “The Public and the Organization of Aid to Refugees During World War I,” *Russian Studies In History* 51 (Winter 2012), Nr. 3: 85.

⁶¹ NHAB, f. 511, vop. 1, spr. 8, ark. 60, 60 adv., 65.

⁶² NHAB, f. 511, vop. 1, spr 7, ark. 213 adv., 215.

⁶³ Lapanovič, *Dzejnasc' dzjaržaŭnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj*, 70.

network of *Severopomoshch*, administered by the Chief Plenipotentiary for Refugee Matters at the North-Western front S. I. Zubchaninov, shared the responsibility for refugee relief in the affected areas in the western borderlands and in the vicinity of the front. Their efforts to regulate streams of refugees and coordinate assistance were complemented by the public organizations of zemstvos and municipalities, represented by the All-Russian Union of Towns and the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos, which also contributed to the solution of the refugee problem. Yet activities of the government and public refugee relief organizations were often uncoordinated, and sometimes they even competed with each other. Finally, the arbitrary behaviour of the army command further complicated the conditions of their work.⁶⁴

Last but not least, national charitable organizations grew along with the mass exodus of refugees from the western borderlands of the Russian Empire in the summer of 1915. Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Jewish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian charities were the only kind of permitted associations for nationalities in the Russian Empire prior to the February Revolution. In most cases, these organizations not only took care of people's welfare, but they also expanded their work into other spheres, providing a range of cultural and educational activities. Along with their humanitarian mission, these charities thus served as the main centers for bringing national activists together and legalizing their activities during the war. Belarusian refugee relief organizations were not an exception, despite being underfunded and understaffed.⁶⁵ Subjected to suspicious attitudes from both the Russian imperial authorities and public organizations, they nevertheless attempted to provide necessary assistance to the uprooted Belarusian peasants, while at the same time making their first attempts to advance the cause of national solidarity in the wartime period.

⁶⁴ NHAB, f. 700, vop. 1, spr. 29, ark. 88; Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 34 – 40.

⁶⁵ Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 156, 165.

The Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims (henceforth the Belarusian Committee) was established in April 1915 in Vil'nia by a group consisting of Vaclaŭ Ivanoŭski, Paval Radkievič, Paval Aliaksiuk, Ihnat Bindziuk, Mikalaj Mochaŭ, and Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski. The goal was to provide assistance to all inhabitants of the Vil'nia, Hrodna, Minsk, Viciebsk, and Mahilioŭ provinces who suffered from the war.⁶⁶ In the first three months before the arrival of the Germans, the Vil'nia section of the Committee helped Belarusian refugees to settle in safer eastern Belarusian provinces and established its own small regional network with three sections in the Vil'nia province, two sections in the Hrodna province, as well as branches in Minsk and Polack.⁶⁷ The arrival of the Germans in Vil'nia in September 1915 cut off all contacts with the eastern Belarusian areas, thus severing communication to the Vil'nia and Minsk sections of the Committee, which continued to operate as two separate centers of charitable activities.

It appears that the Belarusian Committee was smaller than the Jewish, Polish, and Lithuanian organizations. For instance, by 1915, the Lithuanian Committee for the Aid of War Victims supervised about ninety-eight local branches in the western provinces, which was considerably more than the Belarusian Committee.⁶⁸ By mid-summer 1915, Belarusian activists in Vil'nia had already complained that the Russian authorities, which supported the national charitable organizations financially, “declared a full boycott” of the Belarusian Committee, whereas private donations and membership fees did not suffice and assistance from the Union of Towns was irregular or marginal at best. The Belarusian Committee struggled to find stable funding schemes in order to

⁶⁶ LCVA, f. 361, ap. 5, b. 4, l. 2, l. 8.

⁶⁷ *Homan*, Nr. 74, 14 September 1917, 2. See also Lapanovič, *Dzejnasc' dzjaržaŭnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj*, 105.

⁶⁸ By February 1915, 32 branches of the Lithuanian Society for the Aid of War Victims operated in the Suwalki province, 37 – in the Kovno province, 26 – in the Vil'nia province, and 3 – in the Hrodna province. See *Otchet o deiatelnosti Litovskogo Obshchestva po okazaniiu pomoshchi postradavshim ot voiny za vremia s 22 noiabria 1914 po 1 iulia 1915 g.* (Petrograd: Nauchnoe delo, 1916), 16.

construct a larger network in the provinces.⁶⁹

By the time the Russians retreated, the Belarusian Committee was left without any substantial funds, unable to maintain contact with its sections in the provinces.⁷⁰ It is likely that the Russian authorities perceived a danger of separatism and nationalism in the Belarusian charity and tried to appropriate its target populations. For instance, the All-Russian Society for the Aid of Refugees, established in September 1915 and designed to assist the Russian population, declared that the Orthodox Belarusians and Ukrainians were also in the sphere of its responsibility. This society actively supported its local branches and enjoyed privileges from the local Russian civilian authorities. It had a strong inclination towards promoting the Orthodox faith and stressed its own uniqueness as opposed to other national organizations.⁷¹

The Minsk section of the Belarusian Committee started operating in the summer of 1915, in the midst of the refugee crisis. Headed by the Minsk lawyer Viktor Čavusaŭ, it attracted about fifty members, including Zos'ka Vieras (Ludvika Sivickaja), Uladzislaŭ Halubok, Usevalad Falski, Anton Liavicki, Aliksandr Astramovič, Albert Paŭlovič, Fabian Šantyr, as well as Belarusian writer Maksim Bahdanovič. In the fall of 1915, the Belarusian Committee opened six free shelters and three canteens in Minsk.⁷² However, by 1916, due to its sporadic and insufficient funding, it was forced to limit its activities to the operation of a single dining hall.⁷³

Instead of paying allowances to the refugees, the Belarusian Committee reoriented towards the more practical tasks of finding work for them. In January 1916, it organized the distribution of flax for weaving, initially employing about 150 women for

⁶⁹ Lapanovič, *Dzejnasc' dzjaržaŭnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj*, 105.

⁷⁰ *Homan*, Nr. 74, 14 September 1917, 2.

⁷¹ Lapanovič, *Dzejnasc' dzjaržaŭnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj*, 101.

⁷² Maksim Bahdanovič, *Vybranyja tvory* (Minsk: Bielaruski knihazbor, 1996), 381.

⁷³ Lapanovič, *Dzejnasc' dzjaržaŭnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj*, 105.

this job. Another 700 women did sewing jobs for the army. In the spring and summer of 1916, the Belarusian Committee organized six-week long agricultural courses for the refugees, with instruction in the Belarusian language.⁷⁴ Yet the majority of the refugees in the non-occupied Belarusian provinces continued to receive assistance through the Tatiana Committee, as well as through the Union of Zemstvos and *Severopomoshch*, which boasted a better developed institutional network, stable funding, and governmental support.⁷⁵

Displaced Belarusians in Russia and Ukraine: 1915 – 1917

Over 100,000 Belarusian refugees stayed in Petrograd,⁷⁶ where the section of the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims was founded on 22 December 1915, when Branislaŭ Epimach-Šypila, Časlaŭ Rodzevič, Aliaksandr Jaremič, and Uladzimir Mitkievič signed its statute. The official founding conference followed on 31 January 1916, gathering seventy-one active members, including a number of known supporters of the Belarusian national cause, among them Branislaŭ Taraškievič, Edvard Budz'ka, and Zmicier Žylunovič.⁷⁷ Chaired by Leanid Siaŭruk, the Belarusian Committee in Petrograd was the only national charitable organization of Belarusian refugees in Russia, until the creation of the Belarusian National Commissariat in 1918, which concentrated on the refugee issue as one of the major areas of its work.⁷⁸

In order to reach out to Belarusians beyond the capital, the Petrograd section of the Belarusian Committee initialized the publication of two newspapers, addressing the needs of the Belarusian refugees. With the reluctant approval of the Ministry of the

⁷⁴ Bahdanovič, *Vybranyja tvory*, 382.

⁷⁵ *Kratkii otchet o deiiatel'nosti Minskago Gubernskago komiteta V. Z. S. za 1916 god* (Minsk: Tipografia B. L. Kaplana, 1917), 1.

⁷⁶ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 211, ark. 157.

⁷⁷ NHAB, f. 511, vop. 1, spr. 8, ark. 1 – 2.

⁷⁸ On the Belarusian National Commissariat in 1918 see Chapter 7.

Interior, starting in November 1916, *Dziannica* and *Svietač* appeared in Petrograd. The editors, Zmicier Źylunovič and Edvard Budz'ka, used their own funds and connections to publish these periodicals. Heavily censored, the newspapers nevertheless found their readership among the Belarusians in Russia and in the unoccupied Belarusian provinces, as confirmed by pre-orders and excited messages to the editors. However, on 31 December 1916, *Dziannica* was discontinued due to the strict censorship which prohibited all materials with a trace of links to the Belarusian national movement. The even more moderate *Svietač* shared this fate, as only five issues were ever allowed to be published.⁷⁹

Petrograd Belarusians continued keeping track of the refugees, assisting them in everyday matters, supporting Belarusian students, overseeing medical services, and organizing social gatherings. The bulk of financial support to the Petrograd section was provided by the Tatiana Committee, although membership fees, donations, and proceeds from cultural events and concerts also contributed to its funding. However, similarly to the Minsk section of the Belarusian Committee, this funding did not suffice either, as the Russian government often deliberately denied financial assistance to the Belarusian relief organizations. The latter were perceived as competitors of the already established separate departments, designed to help the “refugees of Russian nationality.” This broad categorization included Belarusians and Ukrainians.⁸⁰

Thus, the Belarusian Committee in Petrograd was often not able to secure the needs of all Belarusian refugees, especially those who were resettled to the remote Russian provinces.⁸¹ According to the eyewitness account of refugee V. Hrynievič, despite

⁷⁹ Nikolai Shchavlinkii, “Deiitel'nost' Belorusskogo obshchestva v Petrograde po okazaniiu pomoshchi poterpevshim ot voiny v 1916 – 1918 godakh,” *Bielaruskaja Dumka* (2013), Nr. 6: 63 – 65; Utgof, “In Search of National Support,” 58.

⁸⁰ Mikalaievič, “Biežancy Pieršaj susvietnaj vajny,” 21.

⁸¹ N. E. Kalesnik, *Belorusskoe obshchestvo v Petrograde po okazaniiu pomoshchi postradavshim ot voiny, 1916 – 1918: mezkharkhivnyi spravochnik* (Minsk: NARB, 2008), 6.

the significant numbers of Belarusian refugees in Kazan province, they did not have their own national charity, in contrast to the extant Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian refugee committees. People applied for assistance either to the Russian or Polish committees, where along with bread, they also received a dose of corresponding “patriotism.” Russian committees were in particular singled out as the most successful in their Russification attempts, as they had the advantage of operating in their own country.⁸²

Refugees found themselves adjusting to new life circumstances, uprooted and displaced, away from their homes. Although their perceptions of national belonging were starting to change, it appeared to be a slow and inconsistent process, often accompanied by the pressures of assimilation to the local cultures of their new surroundings.⁸³ Due to the lack of strong Belarusian charitable organizations outside of Petrograd, refugees in Russia were left without a stable connection to their homeland, often in an information vacuum, and hence susceptible to assimilation by the dominant Russian culture. A representative of the Belarusian National Commissariat reported that even in 1918, Belarusian refugees in the Saratov province were completely apolitical and did not have any information on the political developments in Belarus.⁸⁴ Generally, they viewed Belarusian national activists with suspicion, seeing in them either “Polish servants” or “intriguers.”⁸⁵

Some of the population of the Belarusian provinces was also resettled in Ukraine, where Belarusian committees existed in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Yekaterinoslav. The highest number of Belarusian refugees was recorded in Odessa. According to a detailed report by Anton Balicki, who was an authorized representative of

⁸² V. Hrynievič, “Na rekach Vavilonu,” *Spadčyna* (1997), Nr. 4: 167 – 168.

⁸³ Uladzimir Liachoŭski, *Ad homanaŭcaŭ da hajsakoŭ. Čynnasc' bielaruskich maladzevych arhanizacyj u 2-oj palove 19 st. – 1-aj palove 20 st. (da 1939)* (Vił'nia: Instytut bielarusistyki, 2012), 101 – 102.

⁸⁴ NARB, f. 4, vop. 1, spr. 67, ark. 4.

⁸⁵ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 27, 30 October 1917, 3.

Belarusians in the Odessa district in 1918, the number of Belarusians in Odessa alone was around 20,000 in the city and about 100,000 in the whole district.⁸⁶ Their mood was described as patriotic: after having lived in a different country, they realized that they were a separate people, with their own language and customs. The refugees tended to settle in the vicinity of each other, forming their own communities, with clear ideas that they differed from the local population. They did not lose their connection to their homeland and showed interest in all news from Belarus.⁸⁷ Despite good living conditions and availability of jobs, a lot of refugees dreamed about returning home.⁸⁸

Odessa Belarusians established a range of cultural initiatives, including an artistic circle, a Belarusian orchestra, theatre groups, and a cultural-educational organization “Bielaruski Haj” (Belarusian Grove).⁸⁹ By 1917, these organizations started transforming, receiving a political dimension: in particular, “Bielaruski Haj” became a base for the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims in Odessa. The Statute of the Committee pointed out that its main goals were to provide financial assistance and moral support to all Belarusians evacuated during the war, to collect information on the locations of their families, and to inform people about current events in Belarus. The Committee also emphasized the task of strengthening national consciousness among the Belarusian refugees.⁹⁰

Despite the financial difficulties, it managed to attract people to its side by offering them effective assistance in repatriation. It also disseminated Belarusian newspapers and literature, popular among the refugees. Remarkably, the Odessa section of the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims clashed with the local Russian

⁸⁶ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 139.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 139 adv.

⁸⁹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 140 adv.

⁹⁰ LCVA, f. 361, ap. 5, b. 21, l. 1.

Refugee Committee. The latter claimed that there was no need to single out Belarusians, since it saw no difference between them and Russians.⁹¹

Refugees in Russia generally perceived the modern Belarusian national movement through the “Russian lens” of Polish intrigues. The experiences of Belarusian refugees in Ukraine represent a contrasting example to the assimilation trends among the refugees in Russia. The Odessa section of the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims successfully engaged in nation-building efforts among the displaced people, promoting a distinct Belarusian identity along with their effective refugee relief. However, as the efforts to create a national army out of the Belarusian soldiers on the Romanian front failed,⁹² the Odessa Belarusians did not manage to influence the outcome of the power struggle over Belarus in 1917 – 1918.

Belarusian Dilemmas in Minsk

In contrast to the Belarusian areas under German occupation, abandoned by the refugees, the eastern Belarusian provinces were overpopulated.⁹³ The influx of armies, refugees, workers, and administrative personnel to the cities disrupted the ethnic composition of the population, creating more challenges for the Belarusian nation-building processes. The armies of the Western Front (its headquarters were stationed in Minsk) numbered over 1,500,000 soldiers and officers of non-Belarusian origin. At the same time, about 636,000 Belarusian peasants from the Minsk, Viciebsk, and Mahilioŭ provinces were mobilized into the Russian army and sent away from their homes to distant fronts. The First World War thus resulted in serious demographic changes in the Belarusian areas, where refugeedom and military mobilization set in motion processes of

⁹¹ *Niezależnaja Bielarus*, Nr. 7, 24 October 1919, 4.

⁹² See Chapter 2.

⁹³ Helena Głogowska, *Białoruś 1914 – 1929: kultura pod presją polityki* (Białystok: Białoruskie Towarzystwo Historyczne, 1996), 24.

mass migration. Similarly to Ober Ost, economic life in the Russian-held provinces prioritized military needs: this is especially evident in the creation of new enterprises for the army and the employment of workers mobilized from the interior of Russia.⁹⁴

In the early 20th century, Minsk did not offer a lot of space for Belarusian national politics. According to the 1897 Russian Imperial Census data, the population of Minsk made up 90,912 people, 9% of the total city population were Belarusian, 25.5% were Russian, 11.4% were Polish, and 51.2% were Jewish.⁹⁵ On the eve of the First World War, this provincial capital was dominated by Russian cultural influence. While there was some connection to local traditions and culture, as the growing interest in Belarusianness after the Revolution of 1905 indicated, overall Minsk was the result of Russification policies, which influenced even its Jewish population.⁹⁶ The ideology of West Russism, which only allowed for regional forms of identification for Belarusians within a larger All-Russian framework, took firm roots in the city. According to the correspondence of the teacher Selenskii from Haradzišča (Minsk province) to the liberal *Vecherniia gazeta* in 1913, “Russian nationalists from Minsk” were very vocal in protesting against the hypothetical opening of a university in Vil'nia, claiming that it would “destroy their century-long work to strengthen and restore the Russian origins in the North-Western region.”⁹⁷

While many cities of the western borderlands were depopulated due to the forced uprooting of the population and military actions, Minsk was full of newcomers: mostly soldiers and refugees. Many locals became refugees and moved east, or were

⁹⁴ Aleh Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR* (Bielastok: Bielaruskae Historyčnaje Tavarystva, 2009), 33; Stanislau Rudovič, “Bielarus' u čas Pieršaj susvietnaj vajny. Aspekty etnalityčnaj historyi,” in *Białoruś w XX stuleciu: w kregu kultury i polityki*, ed. Dorota Michaluk (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2007) 100 – 101.

⁹⁵ Steven L. Guthrie, *The Belorussians: National Identification and Assimilation, 1897 – 1970* (Ann Arbor, Mich: Center for Russian and East European Studies, University of Michigan, 1977), 45.

⁹⁶ Zachar Šybeka, *Minsk sto hadoŭ tamu* (Minsk: Bielarus', 2007), 293.

⁹⁷ LCVA, f. 368, ap. 1, b. 10, l. 110.

mobilized to serve in the army on the distant fronts. By 1918, Minsk was colourfully described as “Harbin of the rear, where all the natives have disappeared.”⁹⁸ The already strong positions of Polish culture became even more prominent after 1915, when significant numbers of Polish refugees settled in the eastern Belarusian provinces. Actively participating in public life, Poles had already started publishing their own newspaper in Minsk, *Nowy Kurier Litewski* by August 1915. It was succeeded by *Dziennik Miński* in 1917, established by the Executive Committee of the Polish Council of the Minsk Province (Rada Polska Ziemi Mińskiej). The Polish press in Minsk prioritized national consolidation among the refugees and the local Poles, without clearly siding with any of the Polish political parties.⁹⁹

The Belarusian national milieu in Minsk during the First World War survived mainly through the efforts of the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims. Its Minsk section oversaw a number of Belarusian-themed cultural events in the city, thus spearheading socializing among the intelligentsia and popularizing the Belarusian language. Members of the Committee organized Christmas performances for children and successfully revived the traditions of *batlejka*, the ancient Belarusian puppet theatre. Usevalad Falski directed a choir, soon followed by weekly dancing parties and performances of Flaryjan Ždanovič's theatrical company.¹⁰⁰ Yet Belarusian public space in the city remained limited, especially in contrast to Vil'nia, where the Germans allowed the publication of a Belarusian newspaper and conducted rather liberal politics in the cultural sphere for all non-Russian nationalities. At the same time, the Russian press, banned from German-occupied Vil'nia, moved to Minsk, where it prospered, in contrast to the

⁹⁸ *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 12, 6 April 1918, 1.

⁹⁹ Dariusz Tarasiuk, *Między nadzieją a niepokojem: działalność społeczno-kulturalna i polityczna Polaków na wschodniej Białorusi w latach 1905 – 1918* (Lublin: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2007), 56 – 58. In 1915, the number of Polish refugees in Minsk province alone was estimated at more than 90,000. See Tadeusz Zienkiewicz, *Polskie życie literackie w Mińsku: w XIX i na początku XX wieku, do roku 1921* (Olsztyn: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna, 1997), 111.

¹⁰⁰ Vieras, *Ja pomniu ūsio*, 36 – 38; Bahdanovič, *Vybranyja tvory*, 383.

marginalized Belarusian press, which appeared in the city only in 1917.¹⁰¹

Conclusions

With the start of the First World War, the western borderlands of the Russian Empire experienced destruction through military actions, an unprecedented demographic crisis, and a major redrawing of borders. In 1915, German military successes in Eastern Europe forced imperial Russia to relinquish to the enemy the territories of present-day Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and parts of Belarus. The war also resulted in the elimination of the boundaries between civil and military authorities, with the establishment of military rule. This trend was characteristic both for the German-occupied Ober Ost and the Russian-controlled Belarusian provinces in the front rear under martial law, where the military assumed the upper hand in governance.

The Great War represented an unforeseen disruptive external factor for the Belarusian nation-building, as its violence interfered in the process of the gradual evolution of Belarusian national movement. Forced evacuations affected all social groups, resulting in displacement of the national intelligentsia, along with the masses of ethnic Belarusians from the western provinces. Moreover, the effects of the wartime restrictions, combined with the strong positions of Russian culture in Minsk and the eastern Belarusian provinces, negatively impacted the potential of the young Belarusian national movement, weakening it structurally. By 1917, it barely survived under the guise of national charities, which had been established to solve the humanitarian catastrophe of the refugees.

Until the February Revolution in 1917, Belarusian national activists were deprived of their own distinct center, as the German powers prohibited political activities in Vil'nia, while Minsk did not have enough potential to establish itself in this role. The

¹⁰¹ Šybeka, *Minsk sto hadoŭ tamu*, 152 – 154.

introduction of martial law in the Russian-administered provinces, along with the massive population displacement and arrival of Polish refugees, further restricted opportunities for the development of the Belarusian national milieu in Minsk. Yet on the other hand, the war resulted in the failure of the imperial state, which eventually paved the way for the revolution and enabled national movements to challenge central authority.

Chapter 2

The Political Organization of the Belarusian Movement in Non-Occupied Territories in 1917

The liberalization of political life in the wake of the February Revolution resulted in the acceleration of the national development of the peoples of the former Russian Empire. Their chief demands throughout 1917 up until the October Revolution remained limited to different forms of autonomy within the future Russian federative democratic state. This was often connected to calls for the use of local languages and the encouragement of local cultures. Small nations felt the need to be under the protection of a larger state, whereas full independence was still interpreted as a dangerous undertaking, detrimental to their survival in the international arena.¹ The Provisional Government did not respond directly to the ideas of federative governance. The center neglected the issue of nationalism on the peripheries in favour of rallying the population around the war cause and maintaining order. Autonomy was recognized only for Finland and Poland, while the modest demands of other nations were ignored or postponed until the convocation of the Constituent Assembly. The Provisional Government underestimated the growing power of nationalism and failed to maintain a clearly defined position on the national issue, which led to the radicalization of national movements, especially in a situation of wartime deprivations and the diminishing authority of the central power in the peripheries.²

National elites representing small nations were confronted with a variety of tasks in the attempts to consolidate and strengthen their national movements. Since all

¹ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 148 – 149.

² Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire. A Multiethnic History* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 355 – 356.

repressive restrictions imposed by the tsarist authorities with the start of the First World War were lifted after the February Revolution, territories to the east of the front line experienced an unusual surge of political activities. Appropriate for this case is the metaphor of “explosion,”³ highlighting the exponential growth of various parties and organizations.

The majority of Belarusian activists were not ready to use this unexpected liberalization to its full possible extent immediately after the February Revolution. During the war they were scattered across Russia and the unoccupied Belarusian provinces of Minsk, Viciebsk, and Mahilioŭ, where political activities were severely restricted. As a result, Belarusian national elites were left with no choice other than to organize themselves within the structures of refugee committees or societies for the aid of war victims, which, as philanthropic organizations, were allowed to function. The February Revolution acted as a catalyst for the revival of political activities, which was also true for Belarusian society. However, here the activists faced the obstacle of lacking previous organization, which left them unprepared for decisive and well-planned actions as necessary during the revolution. A high degree of idealism also prevented them from an adequate evaluation of their influence in society and their position in relation to other competing political forces, in particular the socialists. The latter were able to gain the sympathies of the peasants, as they were primarily concerned with social rather than national issues.

This chapter will explore how Belarusian national activists reorganized their forces in the first months following the February Revolution and the problems that they encountered throughout 1917 on territories not occupied by Germany (Minsk, Mahilioŭ, Viciebsk, and parts of Vil'nia provinces), as well as in Russia and Ukraine. In particular, I

³ Piotr Wróbel, *Kształtowanie się białoruskiej świadomości narodowej a Polska* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1990), 36.

will look at the organizations that came into existence during this period in order to determine what difficulties and obstacles the national activists faced in their interaction with other political forces on Belarusian territories. Furthermore, questions regarding the chief political demands of the Belarusian national parties during 1917, the evolution of thinking in national terms and reactions of the population to the revolutionary changes and national mobilization will be analyzed.

Revival of Political Life

The February Revolution in the Belarusian provinces followed the general pattern that was typical in most of the Russian provinces. It can be summarized in three main stages, which in essence followed the course of the revolution in Petrograd, with the only exception that mass street demonstrations usually took place after the establishment of new governing authorities. First, the liberal forces of society, most often members of zemstvos or public organizations belonging to the Kadet party, formed a public committee, which later served as a basis for the new administration. This was followed by the establishment of local Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' or Peasants' Deputies by the Socialist-Revolutionary and Social-Democratic forces. These two institutions usually worked in contact with each other. The final stage included public demonstrations in support of the revolutionary gains.⁴ Patriotism, equality, fairness, justice, and dedication to the revolution became common slogans in Russian society in early 1917.⁵ The news about the revolution in Petrograd reached the Belarusian provinces quickly. This was followed by the early establishment of dual power: along with the Minsk Committee of Public Safety, the Minsk Soviet was created in early March 1917. Its support of the Provisional Government depended on the implementation of promised democratic

⁴ Wade, *The Russian Revolution*, 49 – 50.

⁵ Peter Gatrell, *Russia's First World War: A Social and Economic History* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2005), 200 – 201.

reforms. The executive committee of the Minsk Soviet was chaired by the social democrat Boris Pozern.⁶ One of the distinctive features of all Belarusian soviets was that they were predominantly created by the soldiers.⁷

Revolutionary changes and the liberalization of society affected party activities as well. The overall number of political parties active on Belarusian territories between March and November 1917 reached twenty-six. Their political programs ranged from conservative to revolutionary-democratic. Fourteen parties were of Belarusian origin, while the rest represented Jewish and All-Russian parties. Most notable among the All-Russian parties active in eastern Belarus were Constitutional-Democrats (Kadets), also known as the Party of People's Freedom, Socialist Revolutionaries, and Social Democrats (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks).⁸ Despite their ideological differences, their positions in regard to the national issues and the right to self-determination of nations were similar. As Stanislau Rudovič demonstrated, both the governing circles and an overwhelming majority of the All-Russian political parties, including conservatives, liberals, and all varieties of socialists were generally united by their disregard of the national demands of the peripheries and firm intentions to maintain the territorial integrity of Russia.⁹ The majority could not abandon the idea of a great Russian state, despite this contradicting the common revolutionary democratic slogans. Often this was concealed under the notion of postponing the solution of the national question until the convocation of the Constituent Assembly.

The Party of People's Freedom (Kadets), which dominated the Provisional Government in early 1917, clearly prioritized the preservation of the Russian state,

⁶ Stanislau Rudovič, *Čas vybaru. Prablema samavyznačennia Bielarusi ũ 1917 hodzie* (Minsk: "Technalohija," 2001), 36.

⁷ Zachar Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi, 1795 – 2002* (Minsk: "Encyklopedyks," 2003), 179.

⁸ U. F. Ladyseŭ and P. I. Bryhadzin, *Pamiž Uschodam i Zachadam. Stanaŭlienne dziaŭžaŭnasci i terytaryjalnaj celasnasci Bielarusi (1917 – 1939)* (Minsk: BDU 2003), 10.

⁹ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 84.

strongly opposing secession and the creation of any sovereign and independent units.¹⁰ In practice, this thinking in terms of “one and indivisible” meant that gradually they were losing the confidence of national minorities, as the latter's demands for autonomy rights grew. Throughout 1917 the Kadets displayed some flexibility as the new coalition government in July 1917 declared its readiness to accept solutions entailing autonomy. According to the statement of the Kadet party representative Samoilo during the Congress of Belarusian organizations in July 1917, the project of Belarusian autonomy could potentially be discussed by the Constituent Assembly. The news was met with such enthusiasm, that Samoilo specifically had to warn the Congress to be more cautious and to consider the interests of Russia first and foremost.¹¹ Obviously, the government's reluctant approach to the autonomy issue did not match its priority for the nations of the former Russian Empire.

Other political parties, however, were more flexible and were able to make use of the national question to their own advantage, thus increasing their own popularity. For instance, the Bolsheviks recognized the right of nations to self-determination, distinguishing between regressive and progressive nationalism. In Lenin's view, the nationalism of repressed minorities had to be separated from the nationalism of oppressor nations. Therefore, granting the former the right to self-determination was intended to eliminate the mistrust of the working classes and ensure that small nations would not in fact seek secession, as oppression would vanish.¹² Thus, class interests remained a dogmatic priority, while the right to secession was open to wide interpretations, suitable for the Bolsheviks. They were able to recognize the practical use of nationalist

¹⁰ Robert Paul Browder and Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents*. Vol. 1 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1961), 317.

¹¹ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 12, 8 August 1917, 4.

¹² Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917 – 23* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 16. Terry Martin terms it Greatest-Danger Principle, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923 – 1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 7.

movements in the short-term, which allowed them to increase the numbers of their supporters. In reality, the Bolsheviks still were convinced that nationalism would be soon rendered obsolete by the advance of socialism.¹³ Generally, all Social Democrats were leaning towards the centralist concept of a state. The Mensheviks supported the Austro-Marxist concept of extra-territorial national autonomy, developed by Otto Bauer and Karl Renner. It recognized the existence of national differences and suggested accommodating them within a strong centralized state, which was obliged to guarantee cultural and linguistic rights to the national minorities.¹⁴

Austro-Marxism in essence advocated that administrative division of the state should not necessarily coincide with national division, however, nationalities were allowed to determine cultural policies through special elected bodies, comprised of the members of a respective national group. Since 1901, this approach was also incorporated in the political program of the Bund (General Jewish Workers' Union in Lithuania, Poland and Russia),¹⁵ which was active on Belarusian territories. Since the Belarusian provinces were located within the borders of the Pale of Settlement, a significant segment of its urban population was Jewish.¹⁶ In the early 20th century, Minsk became one of the main centers of Jewish socialism. The Bund and the Jewish Social-Democratic Labour Party Poalei Zion enjoyed significant influence in the Minsk region and in the city, respectively.¹⁷

While Poalei Zion combined Zionism and Marxism, supporting national and

¹³ Wade, *The Russian Revolution*, 151.

¹⁴ Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 10 – 11.

¹⁵ Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 32.

¹⁶ According to the data from the 1897 Russian census, about 14% of the population in Belarusian provinces was Jewish. There were no conflicts in their relations with the Belarusians, and some Jews even participated in the Belarusian national movement. See P. V. Tereshkovich, *Etnicheskaia istoriia Belarusi XIX – nachala XX v. v kontekste Tsentralno-Vostochnoi Evropy* (Minsk: BGU, 2004), 146 – 147.

¹⁷ Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews. The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 22 – 23.

political autonomy for the Jewish minority with the ideal of their own territory in Palestine, the Bund had a different position in 1917, supporting a cultural autonomy program for the Jewish minority. With regard to the Belarusian situation, the Bund was also supporting Belarusian cultural autonomy within Russia.¹⁸ Jewish national awakening followed the same trends as the national movements of their neighbours in Eastern Europe. For instance, the attempts to elevate the role of Yiddish as the language of high culture in the Jewish community¹⁹ faced similar obstacles as analogous efforts of Belarusian activists to promote the use of Belarusian. During the revolution Jews showed understanding for the Belarusian demands, while Jewish and Belarusian socialists even formed a bloc during the municipal elections in summer 1917.²⁰ However, there were also opponents, and the majority of them supported the internationalist idea that nations were destined to become superfluous. Some Jews without party affiliations were also against the national self-determination of Belarus or Ukraine, because they saw in it further danger for the dispersion of the Jewish nation, as it was already divided between different nations.²¹

Belarusian National Parties and Organizations

Changes in the political situation in 1917 influenced the status of Vil'nia and Minsk as centers of Belarusian national activities. By early 1917, the Belarusian national movement had developed in parallel form, but not with equal intensity, in both cities. The First World War and German occupation gradually changed the status of Vil'nia as the leading center of Belarusian activism. Although it became more prominent in cultural and

¹⁸ Ladyseŭ and Bryhadzin, *Pamiž Uschodam i Zachadam*, 33 – 34.

¹⁹ Delphine Bechtel, “The Russian Jewish Intelligentsia and Modern Yiddish Culture,” in *Nationalism, Zionism and Ethnic Mobilization of the Jews in 1900 and Beyond*, ed. Michael Berkowitz (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 214.

²⁰ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 13, 11 August 1917, 2.

²¹ Z. Biadulia, *Žydy na Bielarusi. Bytavyja štrychi* (Miensk: Drukarnia Ja. A. Hrynbliata, 1918), 28 – 29.

educational matters due to the nature of the occupation regime, which allowed more freedoms in these spheres, political activities remained restricted by the German powers. In these circumstances, Minsk was gradually assuming the role of a political center during 1917.²²

As soon as the political regime changed, Belarusian philanthropic organizations entered the political scene in a new capacity. After the February Revolution, the Minsk section of the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims declared itself a National Committee and became involved in political activities. It should be noted that initially, there was a possibility for its potential cooperation with the Minsk Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies; however, it failed almost immediately.²³ At that moment, most socialists considered the national question to be an anachronistic remnant of the past and therefore showed no sympathy for Belarusian national ambitions, which were represented by the National Committee.

The revival of political life also meant a restoration of the old parties along with the establishment of new parties and organizations. One of the most influential among the former – the Belarusian Socialist Hramada (BSH) – was revived in March 1917 after nearly a decade of non-existence. In an official declaration announcing the resumption of its legal activities on 25 March 1917, its representatives expressed their support of the Provisional Government and an intention to continue the war, which was interpreted as a just war of revolutionary Russia against German militarism, aiming to protect freedom and fighting for peace without annexations and indemnities. Preparations for the convocation of the Constituent Assembly were prioritized, with an emphasis on federal republican forms of governance and Belarusian autonomy. The BSH called for social justice, minimum salaries, an eight-hour working day, the equality of all citizens,

²² A. Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk vozniknoveniia Belarusskoi narodnoi respubliki* (Kiev, 1918), 7.

²³ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 78 – 79.

equal political, economic and civic rights for all nationalities, the nationalization of the school system, and the development of national culture and self-government. The land question was to be solved by turning over all land to those who were working on it without the use of hired labour. At the same time the BSH warned the peasantry against unorganized actions, condemning voluntary land seizures.²⁴

The BSH stressed the right of the Belarusian people to develop their national consciousness and to form a separate unit in the Russian democratic state. The latter was understood as a voluntary union of separate nations. This structure was interpreted as an essential feature for the strength and stability of the state, while the development of national consciousness was seen as the correct path towards future internationalism. The BSH activists noted that danger came from two directions. First, the counteractions of local Polish nationalists, landowners, and clergy had to be taken into account. Second, the identified group of political adversaries included Russian “Black-Hundreders” and their local collaborators, who were ready to treat the Belarusian national project as a threat to Russian unity through German intrigues.²⁵

Within a short time BSH organizations were established in Petrograd, Moscow, Minsk, Saratov, Viciebsk, Babrujsk, and in various cities across Siberia and Ukraine. According to the party activist Zmicier Žylunovič, in Petrograd alone by the end of April, the party had about 1,000 supporters.²⁶ In spring 1917, the BSH numbered up to 5,000

²⁴ Nacyjanal'ny Archiū Respubliki Bielarus' (hereafter NARB), f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 5, 6.

²⁵ “Rezalucyja rabočych-bielarusau Narvskaha rajena ŭ Pietragradzi,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 4, 24 June 1917, 4.

²⁶ Z. Žylunovič, “Liuty – Kastyčnik u bielaruskim nacyjanalnym ruchu,” in *Bielarus'. Narysy historyi, ekanomiki, kul'turnaha i revoliucyjnaha ruchu*, eds. A. Stašeŭski, Z. Žylunovič, U. Ihnatoŭski (Miensk: Vydannie Centralnaha Komitetu Bielaruskae Savieckae Socyjalistyčnae Respubliki, 1924), 184 – 185. By comparison, the representation of Ukrainian parties and organizations in Petrograd was more impressive. The Ukrainian National Rada was organized there after the February Revolution, in an attempt to consolidate and engage politically almost 100,000 Ukrainians of Petrograd. By March 1917, they had organized a manifestation on Nevskii prospekt (central street of Petrograd), attended by some 20,000 people. The Ukrainian National Rada in Petrograd also played a key role in making itself heard by the Provisional Government, thus serving as a link between the Provisional Government and the Central Rada in Kyiv, actively promoting the issue of Ukrainian autonomy. See Volodymyr Serhiichuk, “Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi i ukrainstvo Petrohradu,” *Ukrains'kyi Istoryk* 34 (April 1997), Nr. 1/4: 187 –

members and published the party newspaper *Hramada* between April and June 1917. The second party congress of the BSH in summer 1917 showed more tendencies towards radicalization, which is attributed to the place where the congress took place (Petrograd) and the social composition of its participants, many of whom had refugee, military, or worker backgrounds.²⁷ The shift of the party to more leftist positions helped it to recruit more supporters, but at the same time it lost the sympathies of the political center and the right.²⁸ At this time, the BSH was also reluctant to support the idea of creating a national army and did not approve of Belarusians joining Polish or Lithuanian regiments.²⁹

The Belarusian People's Party of Socialists (Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Partyja Sacyjalistaŭ, BNPS) was more moderate in comparison to the BSH. It was organized in May 1917, and among its members were Viktor Čavusaŭ, Pavel Aliaksiuk, General Kandratovič, and Raman Skirmunt. The People's Socialists declared that their main goal was to support the renaissance of national culture and to develop the national question, based on the interests of working people.³⁰ The party supported Belarusian territorial and national autonomy within the Russian federative democratic republic with its own legislative organ – *Bielaruskaja Krajevaja Rada*. The land question received a lot of attention in the BNPS program, according to which all land had to become public property. A national land fund was to be formed from church, state, and partly from landowners' possessions, while uncontrolled land seizures were not encouraged. A more comprehensive solution of the agrarian question was postponed until the convocation of the Constituent Assembly.³¹

Not all parties with Belarusian roots can be automatically regarded as

189.

²⁷ Aleh Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR* (Bielastok: Bielaruskaj Histaryčnaj Tavarystva, 2009), 38.

²⁸ Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 183.

²⁹ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 41.

³⁰ Lietuvos Mokslų Akademijos Vrublevskių Biblioteka, Rankraščių Skyrius (hereafter LMAVB, RS), f. 21, b. 2213, l. 1.

³¹ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2213, l. 2, 3.

supporters of Belarusian national development. Often their only connection to the latter were the words “Belarusian” and “national” in the organization name, which created an inadequate image of the Belarusian movement and often discredited it, as in the case of the notorious Belarusian National Union from Viciebsk, which was established in early May 1917 by conservative bureaucrats, Orthodox clergy, and government officials, who were on the far right even in the time of the Russian Empire. They covertly opposed democratization and were known for expressing chauvinist and anti-Semitic views in public, despite their reluctant recognition of the Provisional Government.³² The political program of the National Union did not differ much from programs of other organizations: it declared the goal to unite all Belarusians of Viciebsk province, aiming to support democratic reforms and to create a separate economic administrative unit on Belarusian territories.³³ In reality, the actions of the National Union revealed other allegiances. During the gathering of public organizations in Viciebsk on 25 and 26 June 1917, it declared its unanimous support of resolutions from teachers' and peasants'³⁴ congresses, condemning “separatist and chauvinistic desires of a small group of the Belarusian population.”³⁵ It should be noted that all “separatist desires” at that point in time were limited to the modest wishes of autonomy. According to the National Union, Belarusian territories were inseparable from the Russian state, and Russian was considered to be the native language of the population. While the existence of Belarusian culture was not denied completely, the Union from Viciebsk suggested that schools had to prioritize the study of the history of West Russian principalities,³⁶ implying the inherent connections of all East Slavic tribes in the tradition of West Russian ideology. During the Congress of the

³² Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 95.

³³ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2225, l. 1 – 2.

³⁴ See section *The Belarusian National Committee (March – July 1917)* below for the discussion of the peasant organizations dominated by the Bolshevik forces. For a detailed discussion of teachers' organizations and their conservatism see the next chapter.

³⁵ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2225, l. 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Belarusian Party and Public Organizations in July 1917, the delegates of the Viciebsk Belarusian National Union Zbitkoŭski and Piatuchoŭ were the only ones who were against the decision to send a telegram of support to the Ukrainian Central Rada and even left the Congress in protest.³⁷

While the pro-Russian Belarusian National Union established its structures, Belarusian national life in the city of Viciebsk suffered from a lack of activists, as is clear from the report of the representative of the Viciebsk section of the BSH Mialeška. Most of them were students, who could not form a serious opposition to the National Union, which was led by old “Black-Hundreders” and had vast financial resources.³⁸ The position of the Belarusian movement in Viciebsk province remained precarious throughout 1917. According to a report in the newspaper *Vitebskoe Slovo*, when local socialists decided to contribute to the interaction of various nationalities in Viciebsk and organized an evening of national songs, Belarusians were not represented there. The program featured performances of Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Jewish groups and was very popular with the public. The author of the report regretted that planned performances of Belarusian and Latvian groups did not take place,³⁹ implying that these nationalities did not have enough human resources. Viciebsk province remained heavily Russified, and the fact that in this situation the Belarusian National Union posed as a genuine Belarusian organization, while at the same time followed the radical right program, was especially dangerous for and detrimental to the national mobilization of Belarusians.⁴⁰

Another example of a “blackhundred-spirited” organization was the Union of Belarusian Democracy from Homiel', which was established by “Russifiers,”⁴¹ mostly

³⁷ “Zjezd delehataŭ ad bielaruskich partyjnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj 8 – 10 lipnia ŭ Minsku,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 8, 21 July 1917, 2 – 3.

³⁸ “Zjezd delehataŭ ad bielaruskich partyjnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj 8 – 10 lipnia ŭ Minsku,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 9, 26 July 1917, 2 – 3.

³⁹ “Večer natsionalnykh pesen,” *Vitebskoe Slovo*, Nr. 1, 6 October 1917, 4.

⁴⁰ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 96.

⁴¹ Žylunovič, “Liuty – Kastyčnik,” 188.

state officials, teachers, and bureaucrats, who were evacuated from Vil'nia at the start of the First World War. The Homiel' Union of Belarusian Democracy was active between April and November 1917 and was chaired by P. Karankievič. The main direction of its activities in this period was a counteraction to the appeals for the autonomy and nationalization of schooling in cooperation with reactionary organizations of peasants and teachers who were hostile to the Belarusian national movement. It is also noteworthy that in the elections to the Homiel' City Duma, the Union ran separately from the democratic bloc.⁴² Although the Union of Belarusian Democracy too recognized the notion of Belarusian territory as a separate unit, it nevertheless demanded full integration of Belarus with the rest of Russia. Like the Belarusian National Union from Viciebsk, it also advocated for schooling in the Russian language, as it was considered that all Belarusians would understand it.⁴³

These circumstances indicate that the enormous task of creating a modern Belarusian nation within a very limited time frame faced serious competition from other political forces, which actively promoted their own positions in eastern Belarus, especially in Viciebsk and Homiel', often creating confusion among the population. Another obstacle was the territorial dispersion of activists: Belarusian parties and organizations were often operating from Russia, where a lot of refugees remained. This led to lack of coordination between them on one level, and insufficient communication between them and the wider population on the other. In addition, All-Russian parties were ready to step in and to implement their own agenda on Belarusian territories.

In particular, they developed their own vision of the future state structure, reflected in the idea of the creation of the Western oblast' as a separate administrative

⁴² Mikalaj Siamenčyk, "Sajuz Bielaruskaj Demakratyi," in *Encykłapedyja Historyi Bielarusi*, T. 6 (Minsk: Bielaruskaja Encykłapedyja imia Pietrusia Broŭki, 1994), 248.

⁴³ Žylunovič, "Liuty – Kastrýčnik," 188; Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 102.

unit, in contrast to the demands of Belarusian autonomy. This was supported by municipalities and zemstvos as well as by Socialist Revolutionaries, Bolsheviks, Kadets, and the Bund – as all these parties established their oblast'-level organizations, encompassing Belarus and the Western front. This concept had its supporters among Belarusians too, especially among the delegates from the Belarusian provinces attending the peasants' congresses in Russia and active in the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Soviet of the Peasants' Deputies.⁴⁴ After the October Revolution, these delegates formed the Belarusian Oblast' Committee, uniting Belarusians with pro-Russian sentiments on positions of West-Russian ideology.⁴⁵

Finally, it should be noted that revolutionary events radicalized the entire society.⁴⁶ This led to repercussions for politics on a local level, often not only complicating national work, but also having a negative impact on the basic functions of political institutions. According to an eyewitness account from an unoccupied part of Vil'nia province in 1917, the district zemstvo in that particular district was elected in a revolutionary mood, under the slogan “daloŭ i davaj,”⁴⁷ which left no room for compromises. Even the impoverished village teachers were labelled as bourgeois counterrevolutionaries and had no chance to be elected. All attempts to establish order were “washed away by the waves of Soviets.”⁴⁸ Inefficiency and radicalism were

⁴⁴ In the Belarusian milieu they were also known as *ablasniki* (*oblastniki* if transliterated from Russian).

⁴⁵ Stanislau Rudovič, “Zachodnerusizm va ŭmovach revalucyi 1917 hoda: pamiž imperskasciu i bielaruskaj idejaj,” *Bialoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (2001) Nr. 16: 66.

⁴⁶ For instance, mob law was a common occurrence in 1917. According to a report from Viciebsk, a youth was attacked there by a crowd after it found out that he was wearing a false military uniform. He was beaten and dragged away by the militia, while the crowd was still raging and trying to kill him. In Smolensk a thief was discovered at the train station. People tried to kill him right on the platform. See *Vitebskoe Slovo*, Nr. 1, 6 October 1917, 2. Although crime rates soared in Belarus starting from summer 1917, violence was characteristic for the Russian society on the whole in 1917. For instance, in Siberia crowds were lynching suspected thieves, while in the Baltics, the population was constantly terrorized by the armed bands. Joshua Sanborn termed this phenomenon as “decentralization of legitimate violence.” See Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse. The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 224.

⁴⁷ In English: “Down with and we want.”

⁴⁸ *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 30, 27 April 1918, 1.

gradually eliminated only by 1918, when some of the local landowners, rural teachers, former bureaucrats native to the area, and some of the elders were re-elected to a new zemstvo.⁴⁹

Belarusians in Ukraine

As is evident from the example of the BSH, Belarusian organizations were active in places where a lot of people held refugee status, primarily in Russia and Ukraine. Belarusian refugees and soldiers of the Southwestern and Romanian fronts were among those who stayed on Ukrainian territories in 1917. Belarusian organization “Zorka”⁵⁰ from Kyiv numbered up to 150 members in summer 1917.⁵¹ It was divided into five sections, which were collecting funds for book publishing, organizing lectures and talks, supporting soldiers, and providing financial assistance to students. Paŭlina Miadziolka, one of the well-known Belarusian actresses at that time, who had also been a refugee during the First World War, was one of its main activists in the Belarusian milieu in Kyiv.⁵² Belarusian soldiers in Ukraine showed more intentions towards organizing later in 1917: soldiers of the South-Western front held their congress on 10 – 20 December 1917, and soldiers from the Romanian front gathered on 1 – 7 December 1917 in Odessa. Both congresses agreed on the priority of promoting national consolidation and established Belarusian Councils. In March 1918, the Kyiv Belarusian Military Council was transformed into the Belarusian National Organization in Ukraine.⁵³

The first national political organization among Belarusians in Odessa district

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ In English: “Star.”

⁵¹ “Zjezd delehataŭ ad bielaruskich partyjnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj 8 – 10 lipnia ŭ Minsku,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 9, 26 July 1917, 2 – 3.

⁵² Document Nr. 0030 “Pratakoly pieršaj sesii Central'naj Rady Bielaruskich Arhanizacyjaŭ u Miensku, 5-6.08.1917,” in Siarhej Šupa ed., *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki* (Vil'nia: Bielaruski instytut navuki i mastactva, 1998), 9.

⁵³ Nikolai Shchavlinskii, “Deiatel'nost' belorusskikh natsionalnykh organizatsii v Kieve i Odesse v 1917 – 1918 godakh,” *Ukrains'kii istorichnii zbirnik* (2009), Nr. 12: 176 – 177.

appeared relatively late, only in December 1917, after the congress of Belarusian soldiers of the Romanian front. The latter established the Belarusian Military Rada.⁵⁴ Its work showed some optimistic signs initially, attempting to facilitate creation of the national army by keeping Belarusian soldiers together, in order to be able to transfer those units to Belarus if needed. However, Ukrainization of the Romanian front was also in full swing, as it started earlier and was more efficient due to proximity to Ukraine. Bolshevik propaganda of internationalism further disrupted efforts of the Belarusian Military Rada.⁵⁵ Odessa was also home to other organizations, among them “Bielaruski Haj,”⁵⁶ an artistic circle, and a Belarusian orchestra. Similar groups were established throughout Odessa district too.⁵⁷ As the Belarusian Military Rada of the Romanian front faced further misfortunes due to lack of financial aid from Ukraine, it was merged with “Bielaruski Haj” in March 1918. The new organization was known as the Belarusian National Commissariat in Odessa.⁵⁸ During 1918, it acted both as a local Belarusian organization and as a representative of the new Belarusian state, registering people, issuing permits for re-evacuation, and interceding on behalf of Belarusians with the Ukrainian authorities.⁵⁹

Belarusians in Russia

The situation among the refugees in Russia was different due to a lack of national refugee organizations and the territorial dispersion of Belarusians. Most notable among Russian-based Belarusian political actors in early 1917 were the Belarusian Christian Democrats and the Belarusian People's Hramada. Further, a section of the Belarusian Socialist Hramada and the Belarusian publishing association were also

⁵⁴ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 139 adv.

⁵⁵ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 140.

⁵⁶ In English: “Belarusian Grove.”

⁵⁷ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 140 adv.

⁵⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 142.

⁵⁹ NARB, f. 325, vop.1, spr. 10, ark. 16.

active.⁶⁰ The Christian Democrats and the People's Hramada shared several general traits in common. First, they consisted of Belarusian refugees, who had escaped the war by fleeing to Russia in 1915. Second, both organizations were united by the general demands of autonomy and by their declarations of support for Belarusian schooling, characteristic for the majority of Belarusian oriented political forces at that time. Yet they differed in the degree of their dedication to the national cause and in their levels of cooperation with organizations based in Belarus.

The Belarusian People's Hramada represented a broad and loose association of Belarusians in Russia. It was established on 9 May 1917, at a rally at Moscow University, on the initiative of Ja. Vasilievič, A. Cvikievič, and F. Turuk. It was known primarily as a refugee dominated organization uniting over one thousand persons. According to one of its members, Jazep Dyla, at first a broad democratic program without reference to socialism was agreed upon in order to attract more people.⁶¹ The peak of the People's Hramada activities was during 1917, as already by the spring of 1918 it was losing influence. One of the most plausible explanations of the decline in support for the People's Hramada suggested that even though it united people of various political views, they would not agree to cooperate with the Soviet power.⁶²

Throughout 1917, the People's Hramada actively engaged in work with refugees in Moscow and attempted to compete with the BSH-dominated Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations, which had become the leading organ of the Belarusian movement in Minsk by July 1917. This trend manifested itself clearly at the first congress of Belarusian refugees, held in Moscow from on 24 – 27 September 1917. It was called by the People's Hramada in order to discuss the refugee situation, the process of re-

⁶⁰ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 9, 26 July 1917, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2 – 3.

⁶² *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 50, 25 May 1918, 1.

evacuation, the elections to the Constituent Assembly, and the political organization of Belarusian territories. The congress was attended by seventy-three delegates with voting rights and numerous guests, representing Belarusians from Tver', Saratov, Nizhnii Novgorod, Kaluga, Orel, Tula, Kazan', Moscow, and Minsk provinces.⁶³ Discussions of autonomy and forms of governance showed that Belarusian refugees in Russia were not yet thinking in national terms. Another problem was a lack of Belarusian refugee organizations, which left the Belarusians in Russia without a stable connection to their homeland, often in an information vacuum, and hence susceptible to assimilation by Russian culture. According to a report in *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, some of the delegates of the September congress in Moscow started to oppose the use of the Belarusian language, leading to allegations of Polish intrigue and financing behind the Belarusian national project. The newspaper further admitted that a number of conscious democratic Belarusians were active in the People's Hramada in Moscow, significantly contributing to the refugee relief efforts, yet the Moscow organization as a whole was portrayed as a competing center, attempting to discredit the Minsk-based organizations.⁶⁴

The People's Hramada enjoyed popularity with refugees, as they were looking for a connection to their homeland and used Hramada's platform to voice their concerns. The Belarusian refugees were primarily preoccupied with social issues. Refugee representatives from Kaluga province pointed out that Belarusians there wanted to see strong state power until the convocation of the Constituent Assembly, in order to prevent chaos and devastation.⁶⁵ This statement was directly linked to the reportedly miserable living conditions and restrictions imposed by the local administration, forbidding the refugees from leaving the province, which had been plagued by food shortages.⁶⁶ People

⁶³ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 25.

⁶⁴ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 27, 30 October 1917, 3.

⁶⁵ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 33 adv.

⁶⁶ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 26 adv.

were more concerned about receiving immediate support in everyday life and assistance in re-evacuation matters, hoping to see effective administration. They still thought in terms of an indivisible Russian state, as it was the only known form of stable governance for them. In this situation, the insecurities of separatism were not acceptable for the refugees. Nevertheless, they had already started to mention the need for economic self-government for the Belarusian territories.⁶⁷

Further, the disagreement regarding the establishment of the organization for refugee relief revealed competing tendencies between Belarusian national activists in Minsk and Moscow. For instance, when Paluta Badunova, who was present at the September congress as one of the official delegates from Minsk, pointed out the need for a central Belarusian refugee organization and suggested the creation of a corresponding committee under the auspices of the Central Rada of the Belarusian Organizations in Minsk,⁶⁸ the congress decided to establish the central refugee department run by the People's Hramada in Moscow.⁶⁹ The creation of a separate system of Belarusian national schooling, suggested by Liavon Dubejkaŭski,⁷⁰ resulted in debates and another cautious resolution, which nearly ignored the issue, suggesting instead the convocation of the All-Russian congress of all Belarusian educational workers for the Christmas period.⁷¹

There was another Russian-based Belarusian political force, which had a completely different character. Although Belarusian Christian Democrats were not as numerous as the People's Hramada in Moscow, they demonstrated more consistent and principled⁷² approaches to the national question. They started to set up official structures

⁶⁷ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 33 adv.

⁶⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 28 adv.

⁶⁹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 29 adv.

⁷⁰ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 32.

⁷¹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 32 adv.

⁷² For instance, this was reflected in the position of the Belarusian Catholic clergy towards the use of language. The Catholic priest Aliaksandr Sak walked out of the first meeting of the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations on 5 August 1917, protesting against the use of the Russian language by Petraškevič, who chaired the meeting. He requested that the chair use Belarusian or leave. Šantyr,

with the establishment of the Christian Democratic Association in May 1917 in Petrograd. Led by Belarusian Catholic priests F. Abrantovič and L. Hviec'ka, it united not only the clergy, but also its secular supporters. In 1917, it boasted nearly 300 supporters and started to publish the Belarusian journal *Krynica* in October 1917, in accordance with the resolution accepted at the Congress of Belarusian Catholic priests in Minsk.⁷³ Like other Belarusian organizations in 1917, the Christian Democrats did not mention any independence plans either, repeating the familiar slogan of autonomy within the Russian democratic federative republic.⁷⁴

The First Congress of Belarusian National Organizations (25 – 27 March 1917)

The slow pace of Belarusian national self-identification was further complicated by the influence of All-Russian political parties, which knew how to use social tensions to their own advantage, while national activists did not want to give up their idealistic faith in the revolutionary gains. This became evident as early as March 1917, during one of the first large official events in Belarusian national life – the First Congress of Belarusian National Organizations. It demonstrated contradicting approaches to the Belarusian question between the nationally oriented activists and the far more numerous followers of the All-Russian parties. The Congress opened in Minsk on 25 March 1917 with the objectives of estimating the power of the Belarusian movement, establishing its main aims, determining the level of popular support, and finally “show[ing] its face to the world.”⁷⁵ About 150 civilian and military representatives attended the Congress. Most of them had been already involved in national work and felt

Cvikič, and others pointed out that a lot of national activists did not have a good working command of Belarusian, due to the heavily Russified school system and did not elect another chair for the meeting. Sak was not satisfied with unprincipled approach of the meeting to the language issue and left the building. See Document Nr. 0030 “Pratakoly pieršaj sesii Central'naj Rady Bielaruskich Arhanizacyjaŭ u Miensku, 5 – 6.08.1917,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 8.

⁷³ Adam Stankievič, *Z Boham da Bielarusi. Zbor tvoraŭ* (Vil'nia: Instytut bielarusistyki, 2008), 501.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 499.

⁷⁵ Z. Ž., “Zjezd bielaruskich nacyjanalnych arhanizacyj 25 sakavika 1917 h.,” *Polymia* (1925), Nr. 6: 202.

that the moment was right to make significant progress. According to the observation of one of the delegates, Zmicier Źylunovič, the general mood could be described as excessively optimistic.⁷⁶ It demonstrated enthusiasm for the cause of nation building, but on the other hand it also indicated unwarranted faith in the expectations of the activists. However, more importantly, the lack of unity among the participants of the Congress deserves additional attention, as it reflects general problems which plagued the Belarusian national movement in 1917 – including intolerance and unwillingness to regard Belarusians as a separate nation resulting from the predominance and influence of the All-Russian parties.

In the unofficial conversations before the start of the Congress, some delegates had covertly expressed their skepticism about the Belarusian language and ridiculed the idea of the Belarusian nation. So-called “scientific” explanations of the inexpediency of the national Belarusian revival were expressed more openly.⁷⁷ As will be demonstrated below, this particular theme was not unique for this Congress alone. On the contrary, it would dominate public discussions of the Belarusian national project throughout the revolutionary years.

The Congress opened as a solemn occasion: on the first day a presidium was elected and delegates started to deliver welcoming speeches, sharing reports from their respective localities.⁷⁸ However, the day ended unexpectedly with a heated discussion, which was involuntarily started by a comment made by a certain Ivan Metlin, who had been elected to the presidium as a deputy chairman. Zmicier Źylunovič recalled that at that time, Metlin used to serve as an aide to the Provisional Government Provincial Commissar and sympathized with the views of the right wing of the SR party. Metlin's

⁷⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 5.

exact words, which provoked the incident, were as follows: “it is not the right time to raise the national question. We need to strengthen the freedom that we gained by uniting in the matter of calling the Constituent Assembly. The Belarusian movement is not natural, because it lacks a firm foundation among the masses.”⁷⁹ This statement sparked a chain of fiery protests. Liavon Zajac confirmed that the aim of strengthening freedom was still regarded as a priority, at the same time pointing out that Russia would not be able to survive as a state if it refused autonomous rights to its peoples. Ivan Kraskoŭski, representing Belarusians from Ukraine, fervently urged the Congress not to follow people who were still afraid of “scary” words, such as free nation or federalism.⁸⁰ Lawyer Viktor Čavusaŭ from Minsk also disagreed with Metlin, and said that Belarusians deserved the right to national self-awareness. The most fervent attacks on Metlin came from Ales' Burbis and Pavel Aliaksiuk. The latter remarked in a very emotional fashion that Metlin was a foreigner, a Great Russian, who was unable to understand the feelings of the Belarusians present at the Congress. Metlin was forced to resign from his position of deputy chairman and left, but his departure did not calm down the situation. Apparently, several of the delegates shared his feelings and tried to start a fight with Burbis, while a certain P. Karatkievič demonstrated immature behaviour by running around and deliberately making fun of Taraškievič's linguistic research and the Belarusian language.⁸¹

According to the memoirs of Zos'ka Vieras,⁸² the protocols of the Congress described the incident in a rather “delicate” fashion, since Metlin had been deliberately rude and had referred to the Belarusian flag as a “rag.” There were even more responses from other delegates who were not in the presidium. One of them, an older peasant, knelt and kissed the flag in protest. Apparently, this act impressed the audience more than all

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Z. Ž. “Zjezd bielaruskich nacyjanalnych arhanizacyj,” 205.

⁸² Pseudonym of Ludvika Sivickaja.

the discussions in the presidium of the Congress, providing an adequate response to the sweeping statements about the unpopularity and artificiality of the Belarusian movement.⁸³

The First Congress of Belarusian National Organizations in March 1917 represents a good example of the ambiguities in Belarusian society with regard to the national question immediately after the overthrow of the monarchy. The chauvinistic nature of Metlin's remarks caused such an outrage amongst most of the participants of the Congress, because they associated this kind of rhetoric with the oppressive Russification policies of the tsarist state, but not yet with the policies of some of those in the socialist circles.⁸⁴ The Belarusian delegates at the Congress were under the influence of the liberal achievements of the revolution and were guided by their naive beliefs in democratic ideals. They generally supported the idea of Belarusian autonomy within a federation with democratic Russia as a preferred form of governance, failing to realize that the political establishment of the new Russia would be unwilling to abandon the principle of a “one and indivisible” state. This position was backed by the dedication of the Provisional Government to the continuing war effort, implying that the national question and possible calls for the rights of autonomy were regarded as threats to national security. The March congress also revealed mutual intolerance and excessively emotional reactions, which appear to be typical for the behaviour of the two sides in this conflict. These traits would remain characteristic for the political process throughout 1917, often hindering discussions, debates, and political decisions.

In connection with the Metlin incident, the significance of the SR party on Belarusian territories has to be emphasized separately, since it had numerous supporters

⁸³ Zos'ka Vieras, *Ja pomniu ŭsio: uspaminy, listy* (Harodnia – Wrocław: Haradzienskaja biblijateka, 2013), 54.

⁸⁴ Z. Ž., “Zjezd bielaruskich nacyjanalnych arhanizacyj,” 204.

among the peasantry, government officials, and soldiers of the Western front. A distinctive feature of the SR organizations on Belarusian territories, which numbered up to 30,000 members in 1917, was their popularity with the officer corps and government officials. While this can be explained by their pragmatic behaviour and career concerns, it also indicates that they leaned more towards the right-wing of the party and were more conservative in their actions than could normally be expected from the SR.⁸⁵ Therefore, the activities of the Socialist-Revolutionaries in Belarus were not always fully in accordance with the main program of the party, as can be demonstrated by the example of the national question. The SR party did not have a unified position: often its local organizations, like the Belarus-based SR, were in disagreement with the mainstream of the party. In particular, the SR organization of the Western front did not support the autonomy of Belarus and regarded the latter solely as a part of Russia, despite the party program, where a federation with territorial autonomy for Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Georgia and others was seen as the most suitable form of government for Russia.⁸⁶

The SR party managed to establish and maintain strong party structures in the rear of the Western front, where it had virtually no competitors: the positions of Belarusian nationalists were still marginal in rural areas, due to the weakly developed Belarusian national consciousness among the peasants. The latter often had no permanent contacts outside their traditional communities; even the news of the revolution reached the villages later, often in the form of rumours only. A correspondent of *Vol'naja Bielarus'* from the village of Karpilaŭka (Vilejka district) reported in August 1917 that despite the revolution, life in the village remained unchanged. Peasants showed interest in the land question, only insofar as it concerned their local interests. The correspondent regretted

⁸⁵ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 56.

⁸⁶ Ladyseŭ and Bryhadzin, *Pamiž Uschodam i Zachadam*, 32; Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 58.

that there was no sign of a national intelligentsia with the ability to introduce changes in the popular consciousness of the village. Overall passivity defined the behaviour of its inhabitants in everyday life. The village did not have a school, and showed no initiative to reopen the one that had been used before the war. The news about newly introduced evening or weekend schools was slow to reach the village, since very few were concerned with educating themselves. Subscription to newspapers or reading books were not popular either.⁸⁷ In this situation, the SR had a better chance of gaining the sympathies of the peasants, the majority of whom were interested in the land question, as the above-mentioned example of Karpilaŭka demonstrates. The widespread network of SR organizations guaranteed that their agitation would be most effective too. This explains why peasant congresses on local levels and later the Soviets of Peasants' Deputies were organized and dominated by the All-Russian socialist parties.⁸⁸

The popularity of the All-Russian parties can also be explained by the changes in the demographic situation of the Belarusian territories during the First World War, when significant numbers of ethnic Belarusians, who might have been more responsive to nationalist agitation, became refugees and were resettled.⁸⁹ In contrast to areas under German occupation, the eastern Belarusian provinces were overpopulated.⁹⁰ The influx of armies, refugees, workers, and administrative personnel to the cities further disrupted the

⁸⁷ "Pa Bielarusi," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 14, 17 August 1917, 2. According to the data of the Russian Imperial Census, conducted in 1897, literacy among the Belarusians, aged from 10 to 49 and residing in provinces of Vil'nia, Viciebsk, Hrodna, Minsk, and Mahilioŭ was 22.4%. In comparison, the literacy rate among the non-Belarusian population in these five provinces was at 51.5%. Literacy rates among Belarusians were the highest in the western regions: Vil'nia province – 34.7%, Hrodna province – 34.0%, Viciebsk province – 18.8%, Mahilioŭ province – 17.7%, Minsk province – 16.2%. Literacy was higher in towns than in rural areas. See Steven L. Guthier, *The Belorussians: National Identification and Assimilation, 1897 – 1970* (Ann Arbor, Mich: Center for Russian and East European Studies, University of Michigan, 1977), 46 – 47.

⁸⁸ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 43.

⁸⁹ National activists in Ukraine also complained about the similar situation, noting the "denationalization" of cities. In the Ukrainian case urban centers became more Bolshevik in character. See Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking. Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 184.

⁹⁰ Helena Głogowska, *Białoruś 1914 – 1929: kultura pod presją polityki* (Białystok: Białoruskie Towarzystwo Historyczne, 1996), 24.

ethnic composition of the population, which even initially did not favour the growth of Belarusian nationalism.

According to the memoirs of Kanstancin Ezavitaŭ, the population of Minsk in 1917 consisted of local Jews who dominated in industries, trade and the press, and numerous representatives of Russian military organizations as well as various offices of the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos and Towns. It was very difficult to notice the Belarusian movement, especially if newcomers and strangers were not interested in local national life.⁹¹ The first congress of the delegates of the Western front, which took place in Minsk in April 1917, confirms this, since it declared its support for the Provisional Government without even mentioning Belarus.⁹² Furthermore, soldiers were known for their increased political activity throughout 1917, since they were among the main initiators of creating the soviets in Belarus, both on the fronts and in the cities. The majority of them supported the SR party.⁹³

The municipal elections in Mahilioŭ and Minsk in the summer of 1917 demonstrate to what degree political life on Belarusian territories was influenced by the military on the one hand, and All-Russian parties on the other. Belarusian life in Mahilioŭ cannot be described as particularly vibrant, but the Mahilioŭ Belarusian Committee was established as early as 31 March 1917, declaring its aim as uniting the Belarusian population of the Mahilioŭ province in support of the Provisional Government's efforts to reform Russia as a democratic republic. It also intended to organize elections to the Constituent Assembly, to determine the program for the Constituent Assembly by taking into account the interests of the Belarusian people, and to promote the economic and

⁹¹ Kanstancin Ezavitaŭ, "Pieršy Ūsebielaruski Kanhres," *Bielaruskaja Minuiščyna* (1993), Nr. 1, 26.

⁹² Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 182.

⁹³ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 37.

cultural development of Belarus.⁹⁴ These broad and indefinite aims show that the Committee did not yet possess a firm position on the future of Belarus.

Yet, even with this program, the Mahilioŭ Belarusian Committee experienced competition from the very first days of its existence, by being forced to confront a strong Kadet party on one side, and a number of All-Russian revolutionary parties of an internationalist character on the other. According to the memoirs of one of its members, Michail Kachanovič, who later became its chair, it also had to conduct the municipal elections campaign in a city full of military-related organizations and soldiers. The latter enjoyed voting rights and in this manner also influenced the results of local elections.⁹⁵ The Mahilioŭ Belarusian Committee gained 2,082 votes out of 22,005 submitted votes in the Mahilioŭ municipal election on 13 August 1917, thus winning six places out of sixty-four in the City Duma.⁹⁶ While this could still count as a good result for a new political force, it also demonstrated the difficult conditions for the national mobilization of Belarusians in the city where the Supreme Headquarters of the Russian army (Stavka) had been located since 1915.

Municipal elections in Minsk took place in a similar situation. According to the newspaper *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Minsk was full of soldiers and refugees at that time, hence, among those elected to the City Duma were many non-local people who were expected to leave Minsk once the war was over.⁹⁷ Elections in Minsk also indicated the disregard of the national issue by the socialists. An extensive campaign period preceded these municipal elections. In particular, socialist parties were very active. The Minsk Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies was one of the most vocal supporters of the socialists;

⁹⁴ *Bielaruski Dziaržaŭny Archiŭ-Muzej Litaratury i Mastactva* (hereafter BDAMLIM), f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 137, ark. 20, 20 adv.

⁹⁵ Michail Kachanovič, "Mahilioŭcy i niezaležnasc' Bielarusi (Maje ŭspaminy)," *Spadčyna* (1997), Nr. 6: 4.

⁹⁶ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 16, 28 August 1917, 4.

⁹⁷ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 13, 11 August 1917, 2.

however, in its agitation it decided to omit mentioning the electoral list number twelve, under which the BSH (Belarusian Socialist Hramada) ran together with one Lithuanian, two Ukrainian, and two Jewish socialist parties. The SR party won the majority of votes, gaining sixty-seven seats in the Minsk City Duma out of 102, while the BSH won only two seats (for Smolič and Zajac). While here too it was regarded as a relatively good start for the Belarusian parties, which were making their entrance into politics, the regrettable behaviour of the Minsk Soviet was noted separately. The latter was accused of contributing to the delusions of the city electorate about the actual political platform of the parties represented in the electoral list number twelve.⁹⁸

In this context, the incident of Metlin's speech at the Congress of Belarusian National Organizations in March 1917 can be interpreted not as an exception, but rather as typical behaviour of a government official and a representative of the socialist-revolutionaries. It was also the first sign that despite the emphasis on their wide democratic programs, in practice the All-Russian parties were not prepared to concede any autonomy to Belarusians in 1917. This was in line with the official position taken by the higher governing circles. When the Belarusian delegation visited Petrograd in early October 1917 in order to participate in the work of the Pre-Parliament of the Provisional Government, it joined the United Organization of National Minorities. When the latter demanded a place in the Pre-Parliament presidium for its representatives, the only answer they received was that “it is not an ethnographic museum here.”⁹⁹ Furthermore, when the organization of national minorities expressed the wish at least to read its declarations, the Pre-Parliament presidium offered them the opportunity to do so during the break, when no one was present to hear.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2077, l. 15, l. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

The Belarusian National Committee (March – July 1917)

The Congress of Belarusian National Organizations established the Belarusian National Committee (BNK, Bielaruski Nacyjanal'ny Kamitet), which consisted of eighteen delegates¹⁰¹ and was chaired by Raman Skirmunt. Pavel Aliaksiuk, Usevalad Falski, Liavon Zajac, and Branislaŭ Taraškievič were elected as the presidium members. The BNK announced that its aims were “to organize Belarus in contact with the Provisional Government,” to prepare elections to the *Bielaruskaja Krajevaja Rada*,¹⁰² and to publicize elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly, based on the principle of a federal democratic republic. The BNK declared itself open to cooperation with representatives of the Orthodox and Catholic clergy as well as the delegates of peasant and other Belarusian national organizations.¹⁰³

The chairman of the BNK, Skirmunt, was an experienced politician: a landowner and successful entrepreneur and native of the Pinsk area, he was elected to the First Duma from Minsk province in 1906, where he established a so-called “Territorial Circle,” uniting the representatives of the Lithuanian and Belarusian provinces, which leaned towards local patriotism, commonly known as *krajevasc'*. In the following decade, he acted as a typical representative of the idea of *krajevasc'*, which was associated with a comprehensive expression of patriotism connected to the interests of all territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania.¹⁰⁴ His unusual choice in favour of the Belarusian movement (the majority of *krajeŭcy* switched to supporting the Polish national project) and his career choice of becoming a Belarusian politician are attributed to January 1917,

¹⁰¹ Full list of the BNK members: R. Skirmunt, A. Smolič, P. Aliaksiuk, L. Zajac, E. Budz'ka, U. Falski, B. Taraškievič, V. Hadleŭski, Ja. Kančar, I. Kraskoŭski, A. Burbis, K. Kastravicki, Boborykin, F. Šantyr, M. Kachanovič, V. Ivanoŭski, L. Dubejkaŭski, Z. Žylunovič. See “Pratakol druhoha dnia Zjezdu,” *Spadčyna* (1990), Nr. 4: 33.

¹⁰² In English: “Belarusian Regional Council”.

¹⁰³ “Pratakol druhoha dnia Zjezdu,” *Spadčyna* (1990), Nr. 4: 33.

¹⁰⁴ Stanislaŭ Rudovič, “...Bielaruski dzejač z vialikich panoŭ.” Epizody palityčnaj bijahrafii Ramana Skirmunta,” in *Historyčny almanach* (Horadnia: Bielaruskaje historyčnaje tavarystva, 1999), 18.

when he started to serve as the head of the Minsk section of the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims. His active involvement in the Belarusian national development continued after the February Revolution. Skirmunt was among the organizers of the day of the Belarusian badge on 12 March 1917. At that time, radical socialists and more conservative people like Skirmunt were still inspired by the revolutionary events and proclaimed support for the autonomy of Belarus at a rally. Skirmunt was also able to demonstrate flexibility and support for exclusively Belarusian interests. His speeches were noted for always being carefully prepared, in contrast to the empty slogans of his opponents, and oriented towards specifically promoting Belarusian interests.¹⁰⁵ With such a background, Skirmunt appeared to have been a suitable candidate to lead the BNK. Contemporaries also emphasized that he possessed an established authority and had experience in Russian politics, which was regarded as an important asset for negotiations with the Provisional Government.¹⁰⁶

It should be noted that not everyone interpreted the election of Raman Skirmunt as the chair of the BNK as the best course of action. In particular, Aliaksandr Cvikievič was among the critics of this choice. In his opinion, Skirmunt, as a landowner, was an unpopular figure among the peasant population and therefore easy to manipulate by the opponents of the Belarusian movement to their own advantage. The latter managed to convince the peasantry that the Belarusian movement essentially was an intrigue of Polish landowners, led by one of them, and designed to separate Belarus from Russia with the subsequent goal of enslaving Belarusian peasants to the Polish landowners.¹⁰⁷

Cvikievič pointed out that despite the absurdity of such an interpretation,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 21 – 22.

¹⁰⁶ Vincent Hadleŭski, “Z bielaruskaha palityčnaha žyccia ŭ Miensku ŭ 1917 – 18 hh.,” *Spadčyna* (1997), Nr. 5: 22.

¹⁰⁷ Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk*, 7; F. Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie. Ocherk istorii natsionalnogo i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia belorussov* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1921), 33.

connecting the autonomy of Belarus to the “landowners' intrigue,” it managed to dominate public opinion for a while and initially led to near disastrous consequences for the work of national mobilization. The land question became an important argument in the competition for influence over the peasantry, which was in full swing by March 1917. At that time, the Bolshevik M.V. Frunze (also known as M.A. Mikhailov), who was in charge of the city militia, chaired the newly formed Minsk province peasant committee. It attempted to organize the peasantry on provincial and district levels, in contrast to the intentions of the national consolidation of the peasantry envisioned by the Belarusian National Committee.¹⁰⁸ The failures of the latter became evident during peasant congresses, which were led by non-Belarusian forces under the slogan of Bolshevik struggle for the land. These peasant congresses displayed irreconcilable hostility towards the Belarusian intelligentsia. Personal insults and even acts of violence against the representatives of Belarusian national elites were commonplace.¹⁰⁹ The Bolshevik Mikhailov, who chaired the Peasant Congress of Minsk and Vil'nia provinces on 22 April 1917, was known for his statements which explicitly associated the BNK with the “landowners' intrigue” and accused the BSH of having these connections as well. This news even reached Belarusians in Kazan, who sent their unanimous protest, condemning the “Russificatory” nature of the resolutions passed by the Minsk Peasant Congress.¹¹⁰ However, it should be noted that this congress gathered more than 800 participants from the Minsk and Vil'nia provinces, while, in contrast, another peasant congress chaired by Smolič and designed as a democratic representation of all of Belarus was attended only by fifty-two people.¹¹¹

The influence of pro-Bolshevik forces was a significant factor, and Belarusian

¹⁰⁸ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 85, 87.

¹⁰⁹ Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk*, 7 – 8.

¹¹⁰ “List u redakcyju,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 1, 28 May 1917, 4.

¹¹¹ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 125, 127.

national activists faced serious obstacles in competing with them for popular support. According to a correspondent of *Vol'naja Belarus* from the small town of Zembin (Barysaŭ district, Minsk province), people there did not seem interested in national issues and did not want to hear about them from others. When the author of the article attempted to have some talks with peasants (all of whom were Belarusian speakers in everyday life) about the Belarusian movement, he was interrupted in a very rude fashion with malicious responses.¹¹² They might have been already exposed to a different type of agitation. A report from Sluck district is more precise in identifying the competing forces. A group of national activists observed the activities of the SRs, the Bolsheviks, and representatives of the Minsk Peasant Soviet in the countryside. Their propaganda was directed against the BNK and Skirmunt personally, followed by the denigration of the BSH and accusations of its bourgeois sympathies. This caused a lot of confusion in the villages. Asvencimski, the author of the report, and his colleagues, who were meeting with peasants too, chose a very cautious course of action and did not even use the Belarusian language all the time, switching to Russian or to Polish, if they felt the need to facilitate the reception of their agitation. Eventually, they managed to gather an audience exceeding 500 people. According to Asvencimski, the activists had to provide detailed explanations of the plans of the Bolsheviks, and compare them with the program of the BSH, which previously had been presented to peasants as a plan of the landowners. People did not react favourably to the Bolsheviks; however, the growth of sympathy towards the BNK was explained by the strong positions of Belarusian activists held in this area since 1905, rather than its political program. This example was also presented as a confirmation of the need for the BNK to do practical work with the people and to engage in immediate agitation, stressing the aspect of gaining trust, and of establishing and maintaining personal connections to

¹¹² "Pa Bielarusi," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 14, 17 August 1917, 2 – 3.

peasant communities.¹¹³

The attempts of Raman Skirmunt to recruit to the Belarusian cause other landowners like himself, also made it easier for his enemies to continue labelling the BNK activities as “landowners' intrigue.” However, from a pragmatic perspective, his actions can be interpreted as a means of gaining broader social support and acceptance for the Belarusian movement, and thus giving it greater stability. Initially there were some favourable responses. Landowners from Barysaŭ district, which was previously mentioned in regard to its peasants' hostility toward national agitation, did not display hostility to the Belarusian movement, while some even expressed their sympathies.¹¹⁴ Princess Magdalena Radzivil is an example of a philanthropist and patron of Belarusian initiatives. She established Belarusian schools on her estates as early as the summer of 1917, when the question of Belarusian schooling was only discussed in theory, but had not yet been implemented anywhere in the eastern Belarusian areas.¹¹⁵ Princess Radzivil also provided financial support for Belarusian publishing both in St. Petersburg and Vil'nia before the start of the First World War, and helped Belarusian priests by supporting the activities of the Belarusian Society at the Petrograd Roman Catholic Theological Academy.¹¹⁶ She also showed an interest in the idea of a revival of the Uniate church, seeing therein the potential to represent the “popular faith” of the Belarusians.¹¹⁷

In addition to her cultural activities, Magdalena Radzivil attended the regular session of the BNK on 13 – 15 May 1917, along with the Minsk politician Edvard Vajnilovič and Prince Drucka-Liubecki. However, aside from this, there is no further

¹¹³ “Zjezd delehataŭ ad bielaruskich partyjnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj 8 – 10 lipnia ŭ Minsku,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 9, 26 July 1917, 2 – 3.

¹¹⁴ “Pa Bielarusi,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 14, 17 August 1917, 2 – 3.

¹¹⁵ Paŭlina Miadziolka, *Sciežkami žyccia* (Minsk: “Mastackaja litaratura,” 1974), 96.

¹¹⁶ Aliaksandar Nadsan, *Kniahinia Radzivil i sprava adradžennia Unii ŭ Bielarusi* (Miensk: biblijateka časopisa “Bielaruski Historyčny Ahliad,” 2006), 11 – 13, 19.

¹¹⁷ Hanna Chadasievič, “Magdalena Radzivil – patryjotka nacyjanalnaha i relihijnaha adradžennia,” in *Bielarus' i Hermanija: historyja i sučasnasc'. Materyjaly mižnarodnaj navukovaj kanferencyi*. Vypusk 7, Kniha 1, ed. A. Kavalienia (Minsk: MDLU, 2009), 80 – 81.

evidence of her active involvement in political matters.¹¹⁸ There were only indirect indications that landowners and the nobility could potentially embrace new Belarusian identities. Yet the undisguised radicalism of other BNK members with socialist backgrounds had scared them away. Eventually, only Raman Skirmunt continued his involvement in Belarusian politics, while Princess Radzivil provided some financial support.¹¹⁹

Taking into account the dominant position of the socialists in the Belarusian national movement, Skirmunt's more balanced, realistic and practical approach did not result in any political dividends. The hopes of using his political skills and experience in the negotiations with the Provisional Government were not realized¹²⁰ and contributed to his political demise. Also, Skirmunt did not have enough time, since the BNK turned out to be a short-lived initiative and has already ceased to exist by July 1917, when it was replaced by the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations, dominated by the BSH. This was the main result of the Congress of the delegates of the Belarusian party and public organizations, which took place on 8 – 10 July in Minsk. Among other issues, it revealed that the achievements of the BNK during the first three months of its existence were rather modest. One of the most obvious faults noted was its lack of activities. It turned out that the BNK did not initiate the creation of Belarusian organizations throughout the country, instead registering the existing ones and maintaining contact with them. According to the report of Usevalad Falski, who was in the presidium of the BNK, it was forced to operate under “incredibly difficult” political and financial circumstances. Despite this handicap, it still managed to keep track of existing and new Belarusian organizations and to hold a fundraiser for national needs. Pavel Aliaksiuk, another

¹¹⁸ Vieras, *Ja pomniu ŭsio*, 47.

¹¹⁹ Hadleŭski, “Z bielaruskaha palityčnaha žyccia,” 22 – 23.

¹²⁰ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2077, l. 15.

member of the presidium in the BNK, remarked that its achievements were meagre due to the lack of human resources. Another reason mentioned was that national self-awareness started to manifest itself only when people were away from their homes in foreign lands and tried to find a community there.¹²¹

Other political objectives of the BNK included establishing contacts with the Provisional Government. However, the achievements of the delegation's visit to Petrograd were not very promising, mostly because the BNK failed to communicate a coherent program and to present itself as an influential political force. Pavel Aliaksiuk confessed that the delegates were attempting to promote the idea of creating a university, which received a favourable reaction. At the same time, the government officials vaguely declared that they were unable to do anything to assist in the matter. In the Ministry of the Interior, there was an immediate inquiry as to which real political force was represented by the delegation. Aliaksiuk's statement about the great moral authority supporting Belarusians sounded neither convincing nor impressive.¹²² Such negotiation techniques illustrate political inexperience and a high degree of idealism, combined with the hopes of Belarusian politicians to be taken seriously in contrast to the pragmatism of the government officials and their reasoning based on *Realpolitik*. Belarusian national activists were unable to prove in these first crucial months after the February Revolution that they could be regarded as a consolidated and powerful force to be reckoned with. Unsubstantiated claims of moral authority were not considered as convincing as practical demonstrations of activities directed towards gaining political autonomy. Unfortunately, the Belarusian movement had still not realized this in 1917 and thus failed to make a corresponding statement to the Provisional Government. This is especially evident from

¹²¹ “Zjezd delehataŭ ad bielaruskich partyjnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj 8 – 10 lipnia ŭ Minsku,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 8, 21 July 1917, 2 – 3.

¹²² *Ibid.*

the contrasting examples of Belarusian neighbours to the west and to the south. The cases of Lithuanians and Ukrainians, presented below, show potential courses of action, which were available under the prevailing circumstances of 1917.

Most of the Lithuanian territories were still under German occupation in 1917, and a significant number of Lithuanians were scattered across Russia as refugees. Their sense of national belonging became stronger, as their refugee experiences set them apart from Russians. This was reinforced by significant differences in language and religion. In this situation it was easier for the Lithuanian national activists to set up national refugee relief organizations, promoting the importance of keeping the nation together and preparing for their eventual return home.¹²³ These efforts resulted in more coordinated actions throughout 1917, when all leading Lithuanian parties and organizations came together in Petrograd in March and established the Lithuanian National Council in Russia. It did not hesitate to issue a call for political autonomy. The National Council proceeded with the establishment of a temporary committee to govern Lithuania, which was entrusted with the task of preparing the convocation of the Lithuanian constituent assembly.¹²⁴ On 27 May 1917, the Lithuanian National Council in Russia called a Lithuanian Sejm, which gathered about 330 representatives of various parties in Petrograd. Delegates were elected from all Lithuanian communities across Russia. Similarly to the Belarusian case, unity was also hard to achieve, as the tensions between the left and right were so intense, that the Sejm was in danger of falling apart. The main debates here revolved around the question of autonomy versus independence, which led to sharp divisions. The Lithuanian Bolsheviks left this gathering soon after it opened, while other leftist forces and more moderate delegates later followed. However, even in a

¹²³ Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 161.

¹²⁴ A. Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg: der Fall Ober Ost 1915 – 1917* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993), 159.

situation of intense confrontation between the different political forces, the final resolution of the Sejm called for independence.¹²⁵ The Provisional Government interpreted all of these actions as separatist, and recognized them as a threat, because it anticipated the internationalization of the Lithuanian question, similarly to the Polish case. The Russian Foreign Ministry warned about the dangers of the expanded territorial ambitions of Lithuanians and strongly resented the fact that the Lithuanian Constituent Assembly was preferred by Lithuanians to the Russian Constituent Assembly.¹²⁶

The demands of the Ukrainians after the February Revolution echoed more those of the Belarusians and were also initially limited to an appeal for autonomy in a democratic federal Russian state. Another common feature was the rapid revival of party activities and their drift to the left during 1917. However, the Ukrainian national movement was at a more advanced stage, compared to its Belarusian counterpart. First, it was more organized and possessed different dynamics, relying on solid popular support. Ukrainian identity was already rooted in the consciousness of a significant number of people, as the example of the massive demonstration in support of autonomy in April 1917 in Kyiv indicated. Nevertheless, national agitation was also more successful in combination with social issues, in particular, any issues concerning the land question.¹²⁷ Second, political actions were more resolute in comparison with the vacillating activities of the Belarusian National Committee. The latter's Ukrainian equivalent in early 1917 was the Central Rada, which consisted of more than 600 members, uniting the intelligentsia, representatives of various parties, including delegates from the All-Ukrainian National Congress and representatives from military, workers and peasant congresses. In contrast to the Belarusian scenario, as the Provisional Government failed to

¹²⁵ Ibid., 160 – 161.

¹²⁶ Raimundas Lopata, “The Lithuanian Card in Russian Policy, 1914 – 1917,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, (1994), Nr. 3: 353.

¹²⁷ Serhy Yekelchuk, *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 69 – 70.

address the Ukrainian demands for autonomy, the Central Rada took the initiative and proclaimed autonomy in the First Universal on 23 June 1917. It proceeded with the establishment of a General Secretariat, which started acting in the capacity of an executive authority. The Provisional Government did not have resources to reverse this manoeuvre and was forced to recognize the new Ukrainian government.¹²⁸

Ukrainians were also at the forefront of actively promoting the idea of a federative Russian republic in the summer of 1917, attempting to coordinate the efforts of all national movements of the former Russian empire. The Congress of Nationalities of Russia was organized by the Ukrainian Central Rada and was held in Kyiv on 8 – 15 September 1917. It gathered together 84 delegates, among them Ukrainians, Belarusians, Georgians, Estonians, Latvians, Jews, Moldovans, Tatars, and Azerbaijanis. The majority supported the idea of a democratic republic uniting autonomous units within a federation, with the exception of the Poles and Lithuanians, who stated their intentions of pursuing full independence.¹²⁹ All participants agreed on the need to call local constituent assemblies along with the general Russian Constituent Assembly, in order to determine the forms of internal governance for each nation and to delineate future relations within the federation.¹³⁰ A separate resolution regarding Belarus pointed out the dangers of the existing territorial division, since a significant portion of Belarusian territories still remained under German occupation and were separated from the eastern regions. The resolution urged the Provisional Government to announce Belarusian autonomy, acknowledging the ethnographic borders of Belarusian settlement.¹³¹

While the resolutions of the Kyiv congress reflected the strong aspirations of

¹²⁸ Ibid., 70.

¹²⁹ V. I. Holovchenko and V. F. Soldatenko, *Ukrains'ke pyttannia v roky Pershoi svitovoi viiny* (Kyiv: Parlaments'ke vydavnytstvo, 2009), 118 – 119.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 120.

¹³¹ Ibid., 229; Ladyseŭ and Bryhadzin, *Pamiž Uschodam i Zachadam*, 38 – 39.

small nations towards a federative form of governance, they did not succeed in changing the policies of the Provisional Government. This became evident at the All-Russian Democratic Conference held on 14 – 22 September in Petrograd. Jazep Varonka, who spoke on behalf of the Belarusian delegation, specifically referred to the unwillingness of the Provisional Government to take steps towards granting Belarusian autonomy under conditions of its territorial division, remarking that it accepted the self-determination of Poland under similar conditions, at a time when it was not even a part of Russia. However, the Provisional Government continued to ignore Belarusian demands.¹³²

Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations

Different forms of possible future autonomy continued to be the subject of debates at the Congress of Belarusian Public and Party Organizations, which took place in Minsk on 8 – 10 July 1917. Cvikievič, at that time representing the Belarusian People's Hramada in Moscow, still did not consider political autonomy a necessary step, preferring autonomy only in economic matters. Smolič dismissed this proposition on the grounds that the Moscow organization did not have an adequate picture of Belarusian national life and was thus threatening its development in Minsk. Raman Skirmunt interpreted Cvikievič's words in a similar way – as a suggestion to accept zemstvo self-government with slightly widened authority, preserving the old centralist order. Further, in his passionate response to Cvikievič, he dismissed the latter's remark about the existing unity of the nations of Russia, pointing out that such unity had to be kept in place by force. Skirmunt protested this type of retrograde thinking by stating that “people now cannot and should not endure the old centralist order. Our well-being and the well-being of Russia are founded on the wide political autonomy of lands and peoples. The term “political autonomy” does not necessarily imply one’s own army, money or customs

¹³² Ladyseŭ and Bryhadzin, *Pamiž Uschodam i Zachadam*, 39.

borders. These can be common. However, we cannot and should not give up our genuine needs.”¹³³ For Skirmunt these needs were similar to those of the Ukrainians, as he considered the actions of the Ukrainian Central Rada to be elaborate and mature, with a clear understanding of its own people's interests.¹³⁴

Furthermore, both organizational matters and dissatisfaction with the work of the BNK preoccupied the participants of the Congress. The majority of the delegates remained uncertain and did not have exact plans for a new organization to replace the BNK. Delegate Sušynski, representing the Belarusian People's Party of Socialists, remarked that people were already familiar with the BNK and its activities, therefore it made no sense to establish new organs at every congress, which could be interpreted as a source of confusion.¹³⁵ Discussions led to a choice between two possible options. One was the establishment of the Belarusian Central Rada as a central representation of the Belarusian people, while the other, more cautious in character, suggested only representation for Belarusian organizations. Michail Kachanovič, along with Jazep Dyla and Pavel Aliaksiuk, emphasized the latter option, stressing the need to work with people, instead of getting involved in power struggles and being accused of power usurpation.¹³⁶ In this way, he wanted to make it clear that the new central authority would be uniting only various organizational structures, without any ambitions to represent the whole of Belarus.

The resolution of the Congress of Belarusian Public and Party Organizations turned over control of the BNK to the Executive Committee of the Congress, which was entrusted with the task of calling a meeting of delegates from Belarusian organizations in August 1917. The cultural responsibilities of the BNK were transferred to the Society of

¹³³ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 11, 3 August 1917, 2.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2 – 3.

Belarusian Culture.¹³⁷ It was an attempt to revive national life in light of the inefficient and slow activity of the BNK, which was replaced by a new organization – the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations and Parties. Its structure allowed for the incorporation of representatives from towns, villages, refugee, and military organizations, provided that they recognized the need for the self-government of Belarus and support of language and culture. However, they were allowed to send only one delegate, while Belarusian political organizations could send one delegate for every hundred members.¹³⁸ This uneven representation scheme emphasized that this new organ positioned itself specifically as the leader of the political coordination of Belarusian organizations only. Politically, it was dominated by the BSH, which considered it to be a better option for reflecting radicalizing popular moods during the summer of 1917.¹³⁹ Left-wing tendencies were dictated by the logic of the revolution, where the masses of people supported socialism as the only viable strategy for the future. This also explains why a wide variety of parties had the word “socialist” in their titles. Thus, two major Belarusian socialist parties – the BSH and the BNPS (Belarusian People's Party of Socialists) – were in essence parties of Belarusian patriots, yet the former had a stronger socialist component.¹⁴⁰

The establishment of the new leading organization within the Belarusian national milieu did not run smoothly and revealed disagreements between the BSH and the BNPS. The political struggle had a negative impact on the promotion of national development, which no longer appeared to be a priority for the majority of delegates at the Congress of Belarusian Party and Public Organizations. Some of them specifically pointed out that the national cause was neglected for the sake of party politics and did not

¹³⁷ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 12, 8 August 1917, 4.

¹³⁸ Document Nr. 0030 “Pratakoly pieršaj sesii Central'naj Rady Bielaruskich Arhanizacyjaŭ u Miensku, 5 – 6.08.1917,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 11.

¹³⁹ Ja.Varonko, *Bielaruski ruch ad 1917 da 1920 hodu: Karotki ahliad* (Koŭna, 1920), 4.

¹⁴⁰ Hadleŭski, “Z bielaruskaha palityčnaha žyccia,” 29.

appear to interest anyone at that point.¹⁴¹ A crisis broke out on 9 July 1917, during the elections of the Executive Committee of the Congress, as the BSH and the BNPS were unable to agree on the method of elections. The BSH preferred the majority method, which was criticized as undemocratic and unfair by other delegates. Hramada tried to defend its position by suggesting a coalition list, including representatives of other parties and non-party delegates. According to Badunova, in this manner, the BSH was trying to prevent the election of people who would harm their work in the future. Aliaksiuk did not agree with such an approach and accused the BSH of manipulating the electoral process, trying to get elected only those people who were convenient for the party interests, while a true coalition implied that each party could nominate its own candidates independently, instead of agreeing to the BSH suggestions. Eventually, the BSH agreed to proportional elections. The new Executive Committee consisted of Liosik, Badunova, and Falski from the BSH list and Aliaksiuk and Anton Liavicki (also known as Belarusian writer Jadzvihin Š.) from the BNPS list.¹⁴²

Nevertheless, on 10 July, the rift between the BSH and the BNPS deepened. Dyla from the BSH suddenly made a proposition to hold a re-election of the Executive Committee of the Congress, as in his opinion the results of the previous elections had been unfair. His party colleague Žylunovič joined him, stating that elections took place in haste and parties did not have enough time to agree on the candidates. Smolič was more cautious, stating that the elections were fair, but at the same time admitting that the elected Executive Committee would have trouble working effectively. The BNPS took a stand and defended the results of the elections, pointing out that requests of separate groups or parties were not a valid reason for new elections.¹⁴³ Finally, it became clear that

¹⁴¹ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 13, 11 August 1917, 3.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.

the BSH delegates in particular were opposing the election of Aliaksiuk to the Executive Committee. This confession caused the BNPS delegates Aliaksiuk, Sušynski, and Stul'ba to leave the Congress. Budz'ka joined them, explaining that withdrawal of the BNPS made the Congress lose its all-Belarusian character. The Congress nevertheless decided to hold new elections according to a majority system, as only the BSH and non-party delegates remained. The new Executive Committee as of 10 July 1917 included Liosik, Liavicki, Smolič, Falski, and Halubok. Thus, the BSH finally succeeded in excluding Aliaksiuk from the new organizational structures. Subsequently, the BNPS submitted an official protest against the actions of the BSH, denouncing its political methods and protesting against violations of the rights of party minorities.¹⁴⁴

The first session of the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations, which took place on 5 and 6 August 1917, revealed the predominance of the socialists¹⁴⁵ and new priorities, as was evident from the exchange of opinions between Vanda Liavickaja and Paluta Badunova during the first day of the session. As the participants were delivering reports from various localities, Liavickaja remarked that the delegates did not pay enough attention to the nation in their speeches. Badunova instantly responded that socialism had to go before the interests of the nation.¹⁴⁶

The shift to leftist positions was reflected in decisions as well. On the first day of the session, delegates voted on the proposition made by Fabian Šantyr, representing the Babrujsk section of the BSH. It contained provisions for the basic principles for the work of the Rada. Important to note is its more radical position on the social issue – all land

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁵ The new Statute determined that the Executive Committee of the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations should consist of nine members. The following persons were elected: Liosik, Dyla, Astroŭski, Halavač, Šantyr, Smolič, Kurčevič-Siaŭruk, Badunova, and Žylunovič. All of them were members of the BSH. See Document Nr. 0030 “Pratakoly pieršaj sesii Central'naj Rady Bielaruskich Arhanizacyjaŭ u Miensku, 5 – 6.08.1917,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 12.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 9.

was to be handed over to those who were working on it without any payments.¹⁴⁷ This proposition was later accepted as the first point in the draft of the statute for the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations.

The voting on the statute of the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations was another indication of its leftist leaning. Delegates who voted against it specifically pointed out their reasons, noting this change in political orientation. In particular, Liavicki was disappointed that the congress had been called on national foundations, yet had ended with the acceptance of socialist resolutions. Paŭlina Miadziolka voiced similar reservations. She explained her unwillingness to vote for the proposed statute by stating her concern that the Kyiv Organization of Belarusians would not agree, as it united people of various political views, despite the predominance of socialists.¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

Tensions within the Belarusian movement, which was dominated by socialists, left it internally fractured and weakened. More importantly, the movement failed to establish a strong organization representing the national interests of Belarusians in 1917. The Minsk Committee for the Aid of War Victims in eastern Belarus managed to transform into the Belarusian National Committee. However, from early 1917 onward, it faced strong competition from All-Russian parties and organizations, which enjoyed popularity in eastern Belarus due to the presence there of numerous Russian government officials and large numbers of non-Belarusian soldiers from the Western front.

The BNK could not demonstrate any significant achievements during the three months of its existence. The Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations replaced it in July 1917, opting for a more socialist program to the detriment of national development. The

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 9 – 10.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 11 – 12.

trend towards socialist dominance alienated potential moderate members of the national movement. Moreover, there was no unity among socialist organizations: some, like the Moscow People's Hramada, started to compete for influence, instead of cooperating, thus creating multiple centers.

What all national organizations lacked in 1917 were resources, both human and financial. People were often willing to engage in the work of stronger Russian or Polish structures, considering them to have more potential and prospects for the future.¹⁴⁹ Financial problems were also evident from the inability of the BNK to set up national organizations throughout eastern Belarus or to even reach out to the population. This is a part of a larger problem, namely, the lack of communication. On one level, organizations in Belarus did not have sufficient contact and coordination with organizations of Belarusians in Russia. There was also no connection to the western parts of Minsk and Vil'nia provinces, which were under German occupation at that time. These areas were not as heavily Russified and did not experience such dramatic demographic changes as eastern Belarus, and potentially could have become a more solid base for national work. In sum, the required work was unable to take place, and Belarusian nation-building efforts lagged behind that of the surrounding nations.

¹⁴⁹ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 26, 26 October 1917, 4.

Chapter 3

Between Local and National: the Case of Eastern Belarus in 1917

Što takoe narod, abo nacyja?

Narod, abo nacyja, heta ludzi katoryja havorac' adnej movaj, zaseliajučyja supol'ny kraj i praz heta skladajučyja adnu vialikuju siamju, narod, nacyju.¹

In the early 20th century Belarusian society largely remained traditional and conservative. Most of the ethnically Belarusian population, nearly 98%, was concentrated in the countryside, with few chances of upward social mobility.² Such a social structure was not exceptional in the region, since about 94% of Ukrainians and 96% of Lithuanians inhabited rural areas as well.³ Their archaic lifestyles provided the peasants with a feeling of undisturbed existence which they were reluctant to give up. The peasantry also lacked internal mechanisms which could facilitate the process of its integration into the future national community. Therefore, it first had to be gradually introduced to the idea and values of a nationhood, which was the main task of the educated strata of society who were willing to promote this cause.⁴

Practical challenges encountered by these activists in the process of national mobilization during the revolutionary period are the subject of the following chapter. This

¹ “What is a nation? A nation is made up of people who speak the same language, share life in the common country and therefore make up one big family, a people, a nation.” “Što treba viedac' kožnamu bielarusu,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 28, 11 August 1917, 1.

² Steven L. Guthrie, *The Belorussians: National Identification and Assimilation, 1897 – 1970* (Ann Arbor, Mich: Center for Russian and East European Studies, University of Michigan, 1977), 43; Pavel Tereshkovich, “The Belarusian Road to Modernity,” *International Journal of Sociology* (Fall 2001), Vol. 31, Nr. 3: 82.

³ Henning Bauer, Andreas Kappeler, and Brigitte Roth, eds., *Die Nationalitäten des Russischen Reiches in der Volkszählung von 1897. B: Ausgewählte Daten zur sozio-ethnischen Struktur des russischen Reiches: erste Auswertungen der Kölner NFR-Datenbank* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1991), 69.

⁴ Siarhej Tokc', *Bielaruskaja wioska na miažy epoch: zmeny etničnaj samasviadomasci sialianstva va ūmovach raspadu tradycyjnaha ahrarnaha hramadstva (na materyialach Haradžeńščyny 19 - pieršaj treci 20 st.)* (Hrodna: HrDU, 2003), 18.

analysis will be geographically limited to the developments in eastern Belarus, thus expanding and adding another dimension to the analysis presented in the previous chapter. My primary aim here is to look beyond the political events in Minsk, to see how the majority of the population in the provinces responded to Belarusian national agitation and whether or not there was readiness to accept new forms of national identification.

This chapter is based on the premise that Belarusian national activists faced two chief sets of obstacles after the February Revolution. First, legacies of the imperial policies of Russification of the second half of the 19th century exercised a decisive influence on the development of a modern Belarusian nation. Second, local identity among the Belarusian population still prevailed over the national, as people felt more comfortable avoiding clear-cut national definitions, often professing their belonging to a certain region or even their settlement, rather than “imagining” themselves in a big family, as members of a separate nation. Partly this was a remnant of pre-modern times, and partly also a pragmatic, defensive strategy of survival. The long-lived phenomenon of such national indifference in Belarus is known as *tutejšasc'* and will be addressed below.

In this chapter I will concentrate on three main areas, which I consider to be crucial for the understanding of various aspects of the national mobilization process in 1917. First, the growing social activity of peasants and their reactions to the idea of Belarusianness will be discussed through the prism of political education efforts and various initiatives of national activists. Second, I will discuss the narrower issue of education and the challenges that national activists faced in their attempts to establish a system of national schooling, including the role of teachers as the bearers of competing ideologies. In particular, this chapter will examine how earlier Russification practices of the Russian Empire, implemented in the 19th century, produced devoted proponents of the Great Russian idea among the teachers working in the Belarusian provinces. The political

actions of pro-Russian teachers will be examined in contrast to the organizational activities and attempts to establish the system of Belarusian national schooling in 1917. Finally, I will analyze the connections between Belarusian national agitation and religion. In particular, this chapter will address the religious divide of Belarusians, with attention to the role of the Orthodox church as a tool of the Russification process. However, my priority here is to focus on the degree of the involvement of both Catholic and Orthodox churches in the process of Belarusian nation building during 1917. The following questions will be at the center of the discussion in this chapter: how did national activists carry out their agitation in 1917 in eastern Belarus? Under what circumstances were they able to achieve the most favourable results? How did the population react? Was it ready to abandon a familiar local identity and imagine itself as a nation?

A Mobilized Population: Theory, Factors, and Ideal Type Case

The revolutionary events of 1917 represented new challenges for the Belarusian peasantry, which was slowly forced out of its traditional existence. The process of adjusting to new political circumstances and a democratic system, compared to the previously more repressive conditions of the Russian Empire, required time. Clearly, the process of involving the peasantry in politics was slow not only in Belarusian territories, but in other parts of Europe too, as Eugen Weber convincingly demonstrated in his study on the transformation of French peasants into citizens of the Third Republic in the late 19th century.⁵ According to Weber, the political indifference of peasants gave way to participation, when they abandoned limited thinking in terms of their own local community and thought of themselves as members of a much larger community, namely a nation.⁶ Weber described this increasing involvement of the peasantry in politics and their

⁵ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France, 1870 – 1914* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1976).

⁶ *Ibid*, 242.

following transition to modernity as a “country's colonization by the town.”⁷

This metaphor appears to be appropriate, as the transition to modern forms of politics seemed to be easier in places where people had more connections to the world outside of their villages, were constantly exposed to new ideas and information, and were forced to leave the boundaries of the familiar traditional peasant worldview. These individuals were typical emerging representatives of what Karl Deutsch termed a “mobilized population.” According to Deutsch's theory, economic or social developments in society intensify social communication. Its intensity can be measured by fourteen specific criteria, characteristic for areas with a high concentration of this “mobilized population.” For instance, engagement in occupations other than agriculture, percentage of urban population, payment of direct taxes to the government, military conscription, and receiving monetary wages are all listed among the factors influencing the development of social communication.⁸ Other significant markers include literacy among adults, consistent attendance at public or private schools, participation in elections, regular reading of newspapers, sending and receiving letters, and participating in various leisure activities.⁹ Several of these criteria may be applicable to an analysis of the mobilization processes on Belarusian territories, where society was gradually adopting new forms of interaction in the context of revolutionary transformation and modernization.

With regard to the criteria of defining a mobilized population, it is already remarkable how the level of education, combined with participation in various social and political activities, made some communities stand out in comparison to others. For instance, in contrast to the previously mentioned example of the remote and sleepy village

⁷ Ibid., 241.

⁸ Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication. An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1962), 100.

⁹ Ibid.

of Karpilaŭka¹⁰ (Vilejka district, Vil'nia province), where the majority of the population was politically inert and passive, did not display any interest in supporting schooling initiatives, and did not possess any local intelligentsia,¹¹ the situation in Staryca (Sluck district, Minsk province) in August 1917 was diametrically opposite. The population of Staryca was interested in acquiring an education, as sixteen people there had already completed studies at the pedagogical seminary, while younger children, including girls, attended either a grammar school or a primary school.¹² Staryca was also famous for its young activists' group, established in the summer of 1917 as the "Youth of Staryca" and later renamed as "Zarnica."¹³ The group emphasized cultural development and the popularization of the Belarusian language through a range of activities. For instance, it staged theatrical performances, established a small library, and organized gatherings and lectures for locals.¹⁴ These activities did not go unnoticed and were accompanied by the gradual development of the rural public sphere. Although peasants took time to orient themselves to the situation, eventually they established a peasant committee in the village. In particular, this committee was known for taking a stand in confronting the local landowner Krasickaja¹⁵ and making inquiries about the reasonable use of the land with her estate administrator, demanding that every piece of land was in use. Another of their significant accomplishments was the organization of a cooperative store with a starting capital of 1900 rubles.¹⁶

¹⁰ See previous chapter.

¹¹ "Pa Bielarusi," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 14, 17 August 1917, 2.

¹² *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 15, 23 August 1917, 3.

¹³ In English: "Summer Lightning".

¹⁴ Uladzimer Liachouški, *Ad homanaŭcaŭ da hajsakoŭ: čynnasc' bielaruskich maladzevych arhanizacyj u 2-j palove XIX st. – I-j palove XX st. (da 1939 h.)* (Bielastok: Bielaruskae historyčnaе tavarystva, 2012), 97.

¹⁵ It was not unusual to have female landowners. According to the data from the Vil'nia province, in the early 20th century, about 14.7% of landowners were female. See Tamara Bairašauskaitė, "Lietuvos bajorės ir žemėvalda: nuosavybės santykiai XIX amžiaus antroje pusėje," *Studies Of Lithuania's History* (2013), Nr. 32: 86. Women were treated in the same way as male landowners and enjoyed full property rights: they were able to buy, sell, manage, and rent their lands. See *ibid.*, 97.

Local Identities: Belarusian *Tutejšasc'*

The above-mentioned case of Staryca was rather an exception, representing an ideal type of a mobilized population and its instrumental role in the process of intensified social communication, which in turn contributed to the processes of nation building. Yet the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the provincial villages and towns in eastern Belarus still did not think in national terms. On the one hand, they were preoccupied with social concerns, while on the other, local identities remained a serious obstacle. This trend was common in Europe during the period of transition to nation-building. Local identities were hard to pinpoint. They could be situated between the realms of the private and national, not being conceptually rooted in any way. In this fashion they rather represented a loose set of cultural and traditional ties, uniting people in a certain regional community, which did not possess clear borders from other neighboring communities.¹⁷

National activists of Miroslav Hroch's *Phase B*, who were struggling for the “souls” of potential supporters, had to overcome the major obstacle of these local forms of identification, otherwise described as the national indifference of the masses. Alternative terms range from national ambivalence, national apathy, bi-nationalism to regionalism and backwardness.¹⁸ Jeremy King referred to nationally indifferent populations as non-national or “more-than-national,”¹⁹ while Tara Zahra called them

¹⁶ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 15, 23 August 1917, 3. The price for one pud (approximately 16 kg) of rye was around 10 – 20 rubles. The price for sugar was around 1 – 1.20 rubles for one Russian pound (410 grams). See *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 17, 30 August 1917, 3; *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 20, 17 September 1917, 4.

¹⁷ Paweł Kosiński, “Problem tożsamości narodowej i regionalnej w Prusach Zachodnich w latach 1914 – 1920,” in *Nacjonalizm a tożsamość narodowa w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w XIX i XX w.* = *Nationalismus und nationale Identität in Ostmitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Bernard Linek and Kai Struve (Marburg: Herder Institut, 2000), 62.

¹⁸ Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* (Spring 2010), 69, Nr. 1: 98.

¹⁹ Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848 – 1948* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 5.

“national amphibians”²⁰ and “linguistically neutral hermaphrodites,”²¹ representatives of “imagined noncommunity”²² and carriers of a “hybrid” identity.²³ This variety of descriptions reflects the underlying quality of vagueness of the pre-modern identity, in contrast to the clearly articulated goals of a national movement.

In the Belarusian case, indifference to nation-wide affairs is generally known as *tutejšasc'*, consequently, people with predominantly local identifications are known as *tutejšyja*. Literally this term can be translated as “people from here,” although the connotation is wider and includes a broader meaning of “local-mindedness.”²⁴ Peasants who called themselves *tutejšyja* avoided cultural identification with narrow national projects, but obviously they could not yet be defined as Belarusians. The phenomenon of *tutejšasc'* is sometimes paralleled with *krajevasc'*,²⁵ a regional ideology popular in the time preceding the First World War on the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It represented traditional local patriotism and civic nationalism, inclusive and democratic in character.²⁶ Supporters of *krajevasc'* regarded national movements as their opponents, arguing that the latter demonstrated narrow constrained worldviews, concerned only with the promotion of the primacy of one separate group. As Anton Luckievič noted, Belarusians were not yet prone to this form of ethnic national particularism to the same degree as Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, and Russians already were. Instead, he pointed out the obvious advantages of *krajevasc'*, embodying the notion of a broad civic nationalism, more democratic and free in character as opposed to ethnic

²⁰ Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900 – 1948* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities,” 105.

²³ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁴ Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569 – 1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 40.

²⁵ Also known in the Polish version as *krajowość*.

²⁶ Juliusz Bardach, *O dawnej i niedawnej Litwie* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 1988), 194.

nationalism.²⁷

Tutejšasc' was therefore interpreted as a manifestation of *krajevasc'* by a broad segment of the population, a silent expression of patriotism by the majority,²⁸ implying that the peasant masses had a feeling of belonging to a certain homeland, but were not yet able to articulate it. Belarusian national activists, who initially often sympathized with the ideas of *krajevasc'*,²⁹ tried to build this missing connection by infusing *tutejšasc'* with positive references. In their argument, *tutejšyja* were contrasted with rootless strangers, who had no ties to their own homeland and no historical memories. The main emphasis was placed on precisely the component of belonging to “here,” as a place where one’s ancestors lived, where they had toiled on the land, and where everything was created by the hands of the local people. “Here” was interpreted as another description of the homeland, future, and destiny.³⁰

Yet, on the other hand, the invisibility of non-national attitudes and the lack of their clear manifestation indicated that it was primarily a strategy of the weak, a political statement of avoiding active involvement in politics and rejecting commitments.³¹ According to Alexander Pershai, shifting borders, numerous wars and the continuous domination of foreign powers did not leave the Belarusian population a lot of space for expressing its own political aspirations, therefore *tutejšasc'* can also be treated as a strategy of cultural defense and survival.³² In this way, the population of the periphery,

²⁷ Anton Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu: vybranyja tvory*, ed. Anatol' Sidarevič (Minsk: “Bielaruski kniazbor,” 2003), 65.

²⁸ A.F. Smaliančuk, *Pamiž krajevasciu i nacyjanal'nyj idejaj. Polski ruch na bielaruskich i litoŭskich zemliach 1864 – 1917* (Hrodna: Ustanova adukacyi Hrodzenski Džiaržaŭny universitet imia Janki Kupaly, 2001), 108.

²⁹ One of the most telling examples is Anton Luckievič and his writing before and during the First World War. See Ales' Smaliančuk, “Bielaruski nacyjanal'ny ruch i krajevaja ideja,” *Bialoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (2000), Nr. 14: 107 – 108.

³⁰ *Homan*, Nr. 7, 3 March 1916, 2. This article was written by Anton Luckievič, who signed it with his pseudonym I. Mialeška.

³¹ Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities,” 113.

³² Alexander Pershai, “Tutejšasc' kak taktika kul'turnogo soprotivleniia: o lokal'nosti, sotsialnoi mobil'nosti i belarusskoi natsionalnoi identičnosti,” *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropeskoj istorii i kul'tury* (2012), Nr. 2: 252.

without the potential to influence politics, was able to resist the imposition of other identities from outside.³³ Siarhei Tokc' presents a similar point of view, maintaining that people used *tutejšasc'* as an escape strategy, hiding behind it, in order to keep their familiar traditional world alive.³⁴

The pragmatism of populations, which were not yet nationalized, was a recurring behavior pattern throughout Europe. As Zahra noted in her study of the nationalization of the Czech lands, idealized nationalist appeals often encountered a lack of understanding among the population, as it tended to be rational in its choices. For instance, in the case of schooling in Bohemia people opted for bilingual education for their children, instead of supporting national schools. This choice is interpreted as a way to increase the social mobility of the next generation.³⁵ In the Belarusian case people were usually polylingual, as they had to interact on a daily basis with representatives of various ethnic groups: Russians, Poles, and Jews. Command of several languages was common, and similar to the Czech case, these skills were also used for the purposes of social mobility. The lack of a clear definition of *tutejšasc'* allowed people to retain a greater degree of neutrality and flexibility as opposed to the choice of a certain identity and its resulting social or political limitations.³⁶ This was logical and practical behaviour, as people, in contrast to national activists, consciously chose new national allegiances only when they recognized therein more benefits for themselves.³⁷

Yet the negative attributes of this stance – conformity, invisibility, and a transitory nature – expanded the meaning of *tutejšasc'*, transforming it into a form of continuous and conscious adjustment, which was essential for survival under changing

³³ Ibid., 260.

³⁴ Tokc', *Bielaruskaja wioska na miažy epoch*, 19.

³⁵ Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, 26.

³⁶ Pershai, "Tutejšasc' kak taktika," 262 – 263.

³⁷ Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities," 103.

political regimes. One of the brilliant examples of such evolution of *tutejšasc'* into a strategy of adjustment to ever changing political circumstances is presented in the classic work of Belarusian literature, the play *Tutejšyja*, written by Janka Kupala in 1922.³⁸ The chief protagonist in this play conveniently changes his allegiances depending on what political regime holds power in Minsk, demonstrating what the majority of the population was doing in turbulent times.³⁹

Therefore, the primarily practical importance of being able to stay nationally neutral and the resulting ability to switch sides determined the longevity of this phenomenon. Yet, while indifference continuously proved to be beneficial, its attractiveness was vanishing under the pressures of the modernization processes and the growth of the nationalizing state. As Jeremy King suggested, non-national forms of identification had a viable chance of surviving only as long as people had space for maneuvering and maintaining their neutrality. As soon as national choices started to be forced on the population, non-national aspects became “less-than-national.”⁴⁰

This transition became more evident when nationalizing states started to reinforce the efforts of national activists. Qualitative change in attitudes became visible with the start of Belarusization policies in the 1920s, when the nation-building process was directed from above, reinforcing the construction of national identity with the development of national culture, science, and the promotion of the Belarusian language in

³⁸ The history of bans and prohibitions of Janka Kupala's *Tutejšyja* is also remarkable. In 1926 the play was banned from the stage of the Belarusian State Theatre, while in the following year, the third volume of the collected works by Janka Kupala, containing the play, was also prohibited. After decades in oblivion, *Tutejšyja* was banned again twice in the early 1980s: both from print and theatre. In the 1990s and 2000s, it appeared that censorship was over and the play was revived in the Janka Kupala National Academic Theatre and celebrated its inclusion in the school curriculum. Nevertheless, in recent years it has disappeared again. The continuing politicization of a play from the 1920s suggests that national consolidation and its opposition to indifference and conformity continue to preoccupy contemporary Belarusian society, as was the case at the time of its writing. See <http://www.svaboda.org/content/transcript/1294580.html> (Accessed 2 November 2014), <http://news.tut.by/society/11373.html> (Accessed 2 November 2014).

³⁹ Janka Kupala, *Tutejšyja. Trahična-s'miašlivyja sceny ŭ 4-och dziejach* (Miunchen: Vydavectva Bac'kaŭščyiny, 1953).

⁴⁰ King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans*, 112 – 113.

all branches of education and governance.⁴¹ However, as Tara Zahra persuasively argued, national indifference did not disappear completely with the rise of nationalism, rather it was reinforced by the modernization of politics in the same way as the nationalizing process. In this way, it managed to survive well into the 20th century.⁴² This argument is valid for the Belarusian case too, yet here the weakness of the Belarusian national movement, combined with the incomplete state-sponsored nation-building process from above contributed to the longevity of *tutejšasc'*. The latter adapted to modern conditions, acquired new characteristics and became rooted in the mentalities of Belarusians throughout the 20th century.⁴³

Political Enlightenment Efforts: Newspapers, Theatre, Political Activism

Important steps for overcoming the problem of non-national attitudes were taken by the national activists in the period immediately following the February Revolution. In particular, the delegates of the Congress of Belarusian Organizations in March 1917 pointed out the need for the political enlightenment of the population, bearing in mind the eradication of local or imperially ascribed allegiances. They deliberately sought to rally the peasant masses around the Belarusian national idea. According to the report of the Agitation Committee of the Congress, two goals were to guide the work of activists in the countryside: the education of peasants about political changes and political organization of peasantry. The Belarusian National Committee (BNK) declared that it would promote the new democratic order in the villages along with other revolutionary organizations. The rural teachers were counted on to be the key force for the implementation of these goals. Furthermore, a department of travelling lecturers

⁴¹ Alena Marková, *Sovětská bělorusizace jako cesta k národu: iluze nebo realita?* (Praha: NLN, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2012), 6.

⁴² Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities," 99 – 100.

⁴³ Iulia Cherniavskaia, *Belorusy. Ot "tuteishikh" k natsii* (Minsk: FUAinform, 2010), 48.

and agitators was organized for the countryside. Another important Congress resolution in this sphere concerned the need to establish a daily newspaper and to publish popular agitation brochures, reflecting the views of the BNK. This decision was especially important, as most of the pre-war Belarusian publishing was concentrated in Vil'nia, which had been under German occupation since 1915 and remained cut off from the Belarusian territories to the east of the front line in 1917.⁴⁴

To what degree were these resolutions implemented, and which factors impeded their realization in practice? With regard to the daily newspaper, the BNK initiative can be evaluated as a successful and a timely one. There were hardly any Belarusian periodicals in the early part of 1917 in eastern Belarus, apart from the irregularly published BSH-sponsored *Hramada*. The latter was transferred to Petrograd in the summer of 1917 and nothing was heard of it thereafter. Other attempts to publish a daily newspaper were undertaken by a small group of activists consisting of Jadzvihin Š., Uladzislaŭ Halubok, Fabian Šantyr, Aliaksandar Astramovič⁴⁵ and Zos'ka Vieras. This failed at the planning stage due to disagreements regarding the type of materials that the group wanted to publish. In particular, the Catholic priest Astramovič objected to the publication of a story written by the socialist Šantyr, as he considered the piece to be blasphemous. All enthusiasm and good intentions of the group vanished after this difference in opinions was revealed.⁴⁶

Overall, by August 1917, about fifteen periodicals were published regularly in Minsk. The majority appeared in the Russian language; however, among those fifteen titles there was one Ukrainian, one Polish, and one Belarusian newspaper.⁴⁷ The latter was

⁴⁴ "Pratakol druhoha dnia Zjezdu," *Spadčyna* (1990), Nr. 4: 31.

⁴⁵ Also known by his pseudonym Andrej Ziaziula.

⁴⁶ Zos'ka Vieras, *Ja pomniu ūsio: uspaminy, listy* (Harodnia – Wrocław: Haradzienskaja biblijateka, 2013), 58.

⁴⁷ "Druk u Minsku," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 12, 8 August 1917, 4.

Vol'naja Bielarus,⁴⁸ edited by Jazep Liosik. It was established in accordance with the resolution of the March Congress of Belarusian Organizations. The first issue appeared on 28 May 1917. The newspaper was published regularly, twice a week during 1917, and once a week in the next year, up until November 1918. It aimed to consolidate Belarusian society, with an emphasis on the national revival, democratic traditions, and the struggle for national consciousness, continuing the tradition of *Naša Niva*.⁴⁹

In 1917, *Vol'naja Bielarus'* focused primarily on political life, providing coverage of current affairs, information on national organizations, detailed protocols of political meetings, news from Belarusian towns and villages as well as news from abroad. Every issue also contained a literary section with short stories, theatrical plays, historical essays, folk legends or poems. Advertisements informed the readers about events in Minsk, newly published books, and courses on Belarusian language and culture. The subscribers also received up-to-date practical information about prices for groceries and available job opportunities.⁵⁰

Vol'naja Bielarus' urged all those who were interested in Belarusian affairs to subscribe to and popularize the newspaper, as well as to provide the editorial office with the addresses of potential readers for mailing sample issues. *Vol'naja Bielarus'* was recruiting its writers in a similar fashion: by encouraging every subscriber to act as a newspaper contributor by reporting about local news, spreading the information on newly established Belarusian organizations, and informing the readers about the lives of Belarusians abroad.⁵¹ Given the lack of intelligentsia, this was a viable strategy to involve new people in national work in the peripheries and to encourage others to continue their

⁴⁸ In English: Free Belarus.

⁴⁹ U. M. Konan, "Vol'naja Bielarus'," in *Encykłapedyja Historyi Bielarusi*, T. 2 (Minsk: Bielaruskaja Encykłapedyja imia Pietrusia Broŭki, 1994), 353.

⁵⁰ See for example *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 16, 28 August 1917; *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 16, 5 May 1918.

⁵¹ "Adozva da čytačoŭ," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 8, 21 July 1917, 4.

engagement. The newspaper acted as a recruiter of national activists, creating for them a virtual space of Belarusianness. They were what Benedict Anderson described as “reading classes,”⁵² literate and mobilized parts of the population who were to become the backbone of the national movement. Correspondents of *Vol'naja Bielarus'* were happy to get the news about political activities from different localities, since these were the sources of inspiration for their own work, especially in a situation when their attempts encountered rejection and misunderstanding, as happened for instance with the newspaper's correspondent in Zembin (Barysaŭ district, Minsk province).⁵³

In 1918, *Vol'naja Bielarus'* was supplemented by *Bielaruski Šliach*,⁵⁴ which appeared between March and August 1918 and was edited by Aliaksandr Prušynski.⁵⁵ It was a daily publication, finally implementing in full the resolution of the Congress of the Belarussian Organizations in March 1917. *Bielaruski Šliach* provided detailed coverage of political issues, while *Vol'naja Bielarus'* started to dedicate more space to cultural topics, which is evident from the notable expansion of its literary section.⁵⁶ Both newspapers cooperated, but as a daily, *Bielaruski Šliach* focused more on current events and the activities of the government of the Belarussian Democratic Republic. It was also known for the promotion of Belarussian national and democratic values, its criticism of Bolshevism, and for taking a critical stance against the practices of Russification and Polonization.⁵⁷ Both newspapers aimed to create an imagined community of their readers in the sense of Anderson's thesis.⁵⁸ Another contribution was the improvement of the

⁵² Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 76.

⁵³ “Pa Bielarusi,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 14, 17 August 1917, 2 – 3.

⁵⁴ In English: Belarussian Path.

⁵⁵ Real name of the Belarussian poet Ales' Harun.

⁵⁶ See for instance *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 8, 10 March 1918.

⁵⁷ U. M. Konan, “Bielaruski Šliach,” in *Encyklapedyja Historyi Bielarusi*, T. 1 (Minsk: Bielaruskaja Encyklapedyja imia Pietrusia Broŭki, 1994), 459.

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 46.

status of the Belarusian language, a so-called “print elevation”⁵⁹ of the language, which had been repressed by the Russian imperial authorities during the 19th century and subsequently downgraded to the status of a “dialect.”⁶⁰

On another level, the efforts of national consolidation were supplemented by the theatre. As Miroslav Hroch pointed out, theatre was instrumental in maintaining national culture, both for nations in possession of a state and for national movements without their own statehood. The first treated the national theatre as a “sanctuary” of national art and language, bringing cultural elites together and contributing in this way to the strengthening of national unity. For national movements, this task was taken over by popular theatres or even amateur theatres, especially if these movements were in the phase of active national agitation. In this case, the theatres functioned as complementary mediums of national communication between different social strata.⁶¹ They were indeed viable instruments in promoting national identities, as the Belarusian case indicates. The theatre allowed national activists to combine a political message with leisure activities, thus providing an attractive “packaging” of national agitation for wider circles of the population.

Anton Luckievič, one of the leading Belarusian national ideologists, saw in the theatre a manifestation of the “nation's spirit.”⁶² Its previous history in many ways paralleled national activism, as development of the theatre was affected by the repressive policies of tsarist regime, mainly by the prohibition of publications in Belarusian in the second half of the 19th century. Except for the efforts of Vincent Dunin-Marcinkievič in the 1850s and some private attempts to organize performances in 1890s, the revival of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁰ For more details see section *Suppression of the Belarusian Language* below.

⁶¹ Miroslav Hroch, *Das Europa der Nationen: die moderne Nationsbildung im europäischen Vergleich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 177.

⁶² Anton Luckievič, *Vybranyja tvory. Prablemy kultury, litaratury i mastactva* (Minsk: Knihazbor, 2006), 26.

Belarusian theatre was facilitated only by the lifting of the ban on Belarusian publishing, dating back to the first Russian revolution in 1905. Like the Belarusian national movement, the organized modern theatre with a stable group of actors was a relatively new initiative.⁶³

By 1910, amateur theatre groups and choirs had been created in Vil'nia, Hrodna, Minsk, Sluck, Kapyl', Polack, Dzisna, Radaškovičy, St. Petersburg, and Warsaw. The first travelling theatre group was established in 1911. It toured fifteen townships in Vil'nia, Viciebsk, and Minsk provinces in the summer of 1911. Belarusian plays written by Janka Kupala and Karus' Kahaniec were staged along with plays translated from the Ukrainian, Polish, and Russian languages. Theatres existed due to the enthusiasm of volunteer actors; however, in spite of their amateur nature, performances were popular with the audience. Often spectators were so interested that they got involved as well. During the war, when it was notably harder to organize the visits of existing theatre groups, peasants from the village of Padbrozdze near Vil'nia independently organized a village performance of a play written by a local amateur playwright.⁶⁴

The First Belarusian Society for Drama and Comedy, which was established in May 1917, made its own contribution to the national mobilization of the population by providing leisure activities, while at the same time involving people in politics. According to the founder of the Society for Drama and Comedy, Usevalad Falski, they toured almost all of eastern Belarus in June 1917, with major performances in Mahilioŭ, Orša, Źlobin, Babrujsk, Asipovičy, Sluck, and Radaškovičy. He specifically pointed out that one of the declared primary goals of the Society during this tour was to strengthen the national consciousness of the audiences by acquainting them with Belarusian music and singing.⁶⁵

⁶³ Francišak Aliachnovič, *Bielaruski teatr* (Vil'nia: Vydannie Bielaruskaha Hramadzianskaha Sabrannia, 1924), 83 – 84.

⁶⁴ Luckievič, *Vybranyja tvory*, 27.

⁶⁵ Nacyjanal'ny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielarus' (hereafter NARB), f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 19, ark. 180.

At the railway stations on their journey through the Mahilioŭ province en route to guest performances, they disseminated Belarusian newspapers and proclamations. Peasants, soldiers and station personnel in Žlobin asked for more and eventually a spontaneous rally took place alongside the train with the actors.⁶⁶

The First Belarusian Society for Drama and Comedy included a choir led by Uladzimer Teraŭski, which was gaining popularity in Minsk and surrounding areas during 1917. It attracted a significant number of students, and thus also played an important role in the promotion of national consciousness among Belarusian youth. Despite the young age of many actors and singers, they frequently received invitations to perform at important political events, including the Congress of Belarusian Organizations and Parties in July 1917 and the opening of the All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917.⁶⁷

In comparison to the striking popularity of the theatre, political agitation by national activists was still in its initial phase during 1917, and could not boast comparable levels of success. It is therefore important to evaluate the conditions the national activists had to work under, and to identify the factors that impeded their work at this early stage. Above all, a power struggle for leadership of the Belarusian movement between two major Belarusian socialist parties, the BSH and the BNPS, in the summer of 1917 obscured the importance of national work with the population.⁶⁸ While Minsk politicians were busy determining how to reorganize the Belarusian movement and how to increase their own political capital, examples of ordinary activists provide useful insights into the actual situation in the provinces. In one instance, Asvencimski, who made a report to the Congress of Belarusian Party and Public Organizations in July 1917 about the work of activists in the villages of the Sluck area, specifically pointed out the urgent need to

⁶⁶ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 3, 20 June 1917, 3.

⁶⁷ Liachoŭski, *Ad homanaŭcaŭ da hajsakoŭ*, 96.

⁶⁸ See the detailed description of competition between the BSH and the BNPS during the summer of 1917 in the previous chapter.

communicate with peasants as much as possible, “to go to the people, to agitate instead of playing around with papers.”⁶⁹

National mobilization work appeared to be more effective in places where activists lived and were able to maintain contact with peasants on a constant basis. One such example was the village of Zasmuža (Babrujsk district, Minsk province), where a member of the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations and student of the Minsk Pedagogical Institute Sciapan Kurčevič-Siaŭruk, with the assistance of a student of the Babrujsk Pedagogical Courses Jazep Pyž, organized more than 100 local peasants into the Belarusian National Union. Kurčevič-Siaŭruk noted that despite this small size, all members were prosperous people who declared themselves ready to sponsor the hiring of a Belarusian teacher.⁷⁰ However, his subsequent attempts to create Belarusian schools in Zasmuža and in Žabinka (Sluck district, Minsk province) failed. All that Kurčevič-Siaŭruk managed to achieve was the organization of Belarusian cultural events, the creation of several Belarusian reading rooms, and successful work with children.⁷¹

The situation in more remote regions was less optimistic. According to a report by one of the national activists, who was promoting the Belarusian national idea in Rečyca district in July of 1917, the Belarusian cause was not faring well in the provinces. Furthermore, the political situation remained the source of complications and obstacles, as the First World War continued. Often proximity to the front line resulted in stricter regulations, which limited mobility and transportation in these regions. For instance, the author of the report noted that political rallies in the areas adjacent to the front line or close to railways were prohibited, thus depriving him of the possibility to organize meetings with peasants in public spaces. Likewise, everyday survival matters, such as

⁶⁹ “Zjezd deliehataŭ ad bielaruskich partyjnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj 8 – 10 lipnia ŭ Minsku,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 9, 26 July 1917, 2 – 3.

⁷⁰ “Pa Bielarusi,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 14, 17 August 1917, 3.

⁷¹ Liachoŭski, *Ad homanaŭcaŭ da hajsakoŭ*, 98.

rising prices, war with the Germans and the land question, remained the chief priority for the population under these circumstances.⁷²

The author of the report, alias “A. D.,”⁷³ realized he would be in a better position if he was working for the government. He applied for the job of a census worker for the agricultural census, as it facilitated transportation between the villages in the region. More importantly, he made a correct observation in suggesting that national activists would have more chances for success if they combined their propaganda work with the holding of public offices. For instance, similar to his own case, they could apply to gather statistical information, as this position allowed to reach out to a lot of people.⁷⁴ In addition, the status of a state official provided the incumbent with significant levels of authority and security. This proved to be useful in some situations: as this activist decided to use only Belarusian for his everyday communication with the population, in one instance he was mistaken for a German spy, since people⁷⁵ did not expect state officials to communicate in Belarusian and concluded that he was not capable of speaking any Russian at all and therefore was working for the enemy.⁷⁶

A. D. was assigned districts, which in his opinion had the most unfavourable conditions for national agitation. This happened in part because the Minsk Provincial Zemstvo Executive Board suggested that the local Teachers' Union appoint its own eight census workers, who chose more accessible districts, leaving the newcomer with the most remote one in the vicinity of Naroulia, which had strong Ukrainian influences. Furthermore, teachers did not allow A. D. to even visit their districts in the capacity of an

⁷² A. D. “Maja propaganda idei adradžennia Bielarusi ŭ Rečyckim paveci,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 22, 4 October 1917, 3.

⁷³ The report was printed in *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 22, 4 October 1917 and signed by A. D. It is likely that the author did not want to disclose his identity due to safety concerns.

⁷⁴ A. D. “Maja propaganda idei adradžennia,” 3.

⁷⁵ Rečyca district was located in the region of Palesse, which had its own dialect with notable Ukrainian influence, different from most Belarusian dialects.

⁷⁶ A. D. “Maja propaganda idei adradžennia,” 3.

ordinary note-taker in the census, as they were aware of his previous national work in Rečyca and did not want to have him around. Eventually, A. D. was assigned to the Chojniki and Jurevičy districts, where he had been working for nearly two months, moving between fifteen villages, explaining to the peasants the meaning of the agricultural census for future land allocations, and inquiring about the national identification of his respondents in the meantime. The combination of these two themes proved to be a successful approach, as peasants were genuinely interested in the land question and often even left their work in the fields to gather more information on possible developments. Thus, conditions for national agitation were not completely hostile, rather, instead of a straightforward approach, they required attention to the everyday concerns of the population and a necessary adjustment of tactics. After having established trust among the population of these fifteen villages, A. D. proceeded with distributing proclamations, brochures, and books in the Belarusian language, speaking about history, collecting the addresses of sympathizers for maintaining the contact lists, and patiently explaining the differences between religious and national identification. Noting that peasants and their children were especially fascinated with Belarusian poems, he managed to establish a reading room in the village of Rudnoje with the help of a local student.⁷⁷

Teachers and the Problem of National Education

Successful political education depended upon the readiness of individuals to identify, accept, and internalize national values. The basis for this could be provided to them from early childhood, through the system of national education. According to Miroslav Hroch, the development of school networks in the rural regions and the activities of teachers involved in patriotic movements, are to be singled out amongst the

⁷⁷ Ibid.

factors determining the intensity of the national activities and agitation.⁷⁸ The situation in the eastern Belarusian areas in 1917 revealed a sad picture in this regard. In contrast to the territories under German occupation, where the first Belarusian schools appeared in Vil'nia during the winter of 1915 – 1916,⁷⁹ schools which used Belarusian as the language of instruction did not exist in eastern Belarus in 1917, with the rare exception of a few private initiatives, such as the Belarusian school on the estate of Princess Radzivil.⁸⁰ The system of national education still had to be developed. Teachers who were committed to the Belarusian national movement remained a rarity. Moreover, as will be explained below, a small group of Belarusian teachers in the Minsk, Viciebsk, and Mahilioŭ provinces in 1917, who supported the nationalization of the school system, were by far outnumbered and overshadowed by their colleagues, who had been educated in the Great-Russian imperial tradition with disdain towards Belarusian national aspirations.

The BNK recognized the crucial role of teachers in promoting national identity, as they were in constant contact with the peasantry. By March 1917 it had already adopted a resolution, which provided for the calling of peasants' and teachers' congresses, support for travelling lecturers, and the translation of political materials for their subsequent distribution among the population.⁸¹ Branislaŭ Taraškievič emphasized the importance of Belarusian schooling in his report to the Congress of the Belarusian Organizations. The schooling commission unanimously agreed on the need for instruction in the Belarusian language, yet it recommended a gradual transition due to the lack of corresponding textbooks and competent teachers able to work in Belarusian.⁸²

⁷⁸ Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups Among the Smaller European Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 168.

⁷⁹ Uladzimir Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja ŭ Bielarusi padčas niameckaj akupacyi (1915 – 1918 h.)* (Vil'nia: Instytut bielarusistyki: Belaruskae Histaryčnae Tavarystva, 2010), 120.

⁸⁰ Paŭlina Miadziolka, *Scieżkami žyccia* (Minsk: "Mastackaja litaratura," 1974), 96.

⁸¹ "Pratakol druhoha dnia Zjezdu," *Spadčyna*, Nr. 4, 1990: 31.

⁸² Ibid.

Interestingly, a significant number of ethnic Belarusians were employed in the educational sector in eastern Belarus. In terms of its potential for successful national activism, qualitatively, eastern Belarus fared better than the western regions. According to data from the Russian Imperial Census of 1897, the share of ethnic Belarusians in the pedagogical professions was gradually increasing from 8.7% in the Western Palesse and 19.7% in the Western region to 24.1% in the Eastern region.⁸³ Yet when these numbers are transferred to the dimension of national politics, ethnic origin turned out to be less important than the ideological allegiances of the majority of the teachers in eastern Belarus, who often displayed conservative worldviews and acted as reliable and blind instruments of Great-Russian chauvinism. In this context, the remark of the former public school inspector Kachanovič, describing all teachers in the Mahilioŭ province as Great-Russians,⁸⁴ illustrates the high degree of Russification among educated Belarusians.

The indifference of teachers towards the calls of Belarusian national mobilization and even their hostility became obvious after a scandalous congress of rural teachers of the Minsk province in late May 1917. One of the Russian newspapers even compared this gathering to a meeting of parish priests debating the best way to express their “feelings of infinite love for the worshiped monarch.”⁸⁵ This congress took an unambiguous position towards Belarusian national mobilization: after one of teachers decided to deliver her speech in the Belarusian language, she was ridiculed, rudely interrupted and insulted. The demand for an autonomous solution for the Belarusian territories was regarded as a deceptive ruse, and the Belarusian movement was readily labeled as a Polish intrigue or suspected of being inspired by German espionage. Some of

⁸³ P. V. Tereshkovich, *Etnicheskaia istoriia Belarusi XIX – nachala XX v. v kontekste Tsentralno-Vostochnoi Evropy* (Minsk: BGU, 2004), 140; Valer Bulgakov, *Istoriia beloruskogo natsionalizma* (Vil'nius: Institut belorusistiki, 2006), 174.

⁸⁴ “Pratakol druhoha dnia Zjezdu,” *Spadčyna* Nr. 4, 1990, 31.

⁸⁵ Jazep Liosik, “Nastaŭnicki Zjezd,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 3, 30 June 1917, 1.

the attendees bought up Belarusian newspapers, which later became part of a public performance at the congress: they were torn to pieces, thrown to the floor and trampled on. Nevertheless, teachers who were represented at the congress also realized that their relationship with ordinary people left much to be desired. According to one of the speakers, peasants did not show any respect for them, mocked them as idlers and parasites, and refused to provide them with essentials. Unofficially, some of the delegates confessed that if they were to accept the legitimacy of Belarusian national demands, they would automatically lose their jobs, since their chief task in schools was the promotion of the Great Russian ideology and the denigration of everything connected to the manifestations of Belarusianness. The majority of them were no longer capable of providing instruction in Belarusian, should it have been required.⁸⁶

At this point, in order to determine the underlying structure of the nation-building processes on Belarusian territories in 1917, the division of the population into several crucial groups, as suggested by Karl Deutsch, can be useful. In particular, his primary differentiation between mobilized and underlying or inactive sections of the population is relevant for the present analysis. Deutsch also distinguished between the assimilated population – in the sense of speakers of the predominant language who identify with local culture – and the differentiated population, implying that these particular people are carriers of a different language and culture.⁸⁷ He predicted the emergence of a national conflict situation, if groups with the following combination of factors were formed: first, a mobilized population of the dominant language and culture, also described as the “national spearhead,”⁸⁸ and second, mobilized populations assimilated to a foreign language and culture who were aware of their differences and

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*, 102.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 103.

therefore were likely to confront the first group. As these two groups are entering the stage of conflict, the first can use the pool of the non-mobilized but assimilated populations to reinforce its ranks, while the second can dip into the reserves of the non-mobilized and unassimilated population, which in this case will be acting in the capacity of a fifth column against the dominant nation.⁸⁹

This theoretical model can be applied in analyzing the activities of Belarusian national activists in 1917, who can be presented as mobilized carriers of a dominant language and culture on the one hand, and their political adversaries, in most cases belonging to the All-Russian parties, as mobilized but assimilated to a foreign culture, on the other. The conflict between these two groups increasingly involved the majority of ordinary Belarusians in 1917, representing the non-mobilized population, both assimilated and not assimilated. If Deutsch's scheme of conflicting national interest is applied in the particular case of teachers, they emerge as mobilized but not assimilated to the dominant language, i.e. politically active supporters of Russian culture and language. The majority of them essentially represented the opponents of the Belarusian nation-building efforts, instead promoting the interests of another nation.

The attitudes of teachers in other cities did not differ a lot from those in the Minsk province, which only confirms the trend described above. According to the BSH activist Paluta Badunova, the teachers' congress in Homiel' on 22 June 1917 followed an almost identical pattern. Teachers who attended this provincial gathering were encouraged by a Russian chairman and enthusiastically spoke against the autonomy of Belarus.⁹⁰ Badunova noted that “intimidated teachers” feared that even the mere introduction of the Belarusian language to schools would completely separate Belarus from Russia and cause

⁸⁹ Ibid., 104.

⁹⁰ “Zjezd delehataŭ ad bielaruskich partyjnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj 8 – 10 lipnia ŭ Minsku. Praciah,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 9, 26 July 1917, 2 – 3.

the former's takeover by the Poles. They were convinced that Belarus lacked sufficient political organization to resist this drift.⁹¹ Their fears in fact reflected one of the tenets of the imperial Russification policy: demonizing and exaggerating the Polish threat. It is therefore not surprising that participants of the Homiel' teachers' congress were convinced that the Belarusian language did not exist. However, there was no unanimity of views on this issue, as some delegates expressed a wish to learn more and inquired about where they could buy Belarusian books.⁹²

In these circumstances the Belarusian national cause needed consistent and well-planned long-term educational projects, which had to start with the publishing of Belarusian textbooks and the establishment of educational institutions both for children and adults. The BNK recognized these challenges and drafted plans for the establishment of a university. Yet despite the far-reaching goals of the BNK, there were other basic needs to be satisfied first – schools required adequate textbooks in order to recruit and train more teachers. As of July 1917, this work was still underway: Taraškievič was working on a grammar textbook, Dušeŭski – on geography, while the Society of Belarusian Culture announced a contest for ten other new school textbooks.⁹³

Legacies of the 19th Century Russification Policy

The congress of rural teachers of Minsk province in late May 1917 demonstrated that teachers were hostile to the idea of Belarusians as a separate nation. What were the causes of this attitude, which resulted in such a deplorable situation in the national school system? The answers are to be found in the legacies of the Russification policy, which in the Belarusian case clearly pursued assimilation goals. In the eyes of the

⁹¹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 19, ark. 266.

⁹² “Zjezd delehataŭ ad bielaruskich partyjnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj 8 – 10 lipnia ŭ Minsku. Praciah,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 9, 26 July 1917, 2 – 3.

⁹³ Ibid.

tsarist officials all Eastern Slavic people were essentially Russian. Assimilation was considered to be a realistic approach by the Russian imperial authorities, but only for those ethnic groups that they believed could be assimilated. Both Belarusians and Ukrainians were not perceived by the Russian Empire as separate nationalities, and in line with this logic they were to dissolve into the Great Russian nation.⁹⁴ This view crucially impacted all imperial policies in the Belarusian provinces, which were designed in the first place to “bring back” Belarusians to the allegedly closely knit East Slavic family by way of eradicating all influences considered to be Polish or perceived as such.

Imperial Russian policies towards different ethnic groups varied, depending on pragmatic reasons. While de-Polonization measures were vigorously pursued in the North-Western⁹⁵ provinces, this was not the case for the Polish provinces, since Russian authorities did not think that they could realistically assimilate all Poles. Therefore, with regard to the Poles from the Kingdom of Poland, only segregation measures were implemented.⁹⁶ In contrast, Belarusian territories, along with Lithuanian lands, were seen as the place of an essential confrontation of Russian and Polish interests. Since the Russian imperial administration considered Belarusian territories to be inherently Russian, it attempted to purify them of the Polish component, particularly by emphasizing the de-Polonization aspect of the new policy design for the North-Western provinces in reaction to the failed uprising of 1863 – 1864. The principal measures concerned administration, the judicial system and education, where they were most consistently implemented. Restrictions on occupying official positions for persons of Polish descent

⁹⁴ Darius Staliūnas, *Making Russians. Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus After 1863* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 303. See also Theodore Weeks, “Us” or “Them”? Belarusians and Official Russia, 1863 – 1914,” *Nationalities Papers* (June 2003), Vol. 31, Nr. 2: 213; A. I. Miller, *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism. Essays in the Methodology of Historical Research* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 57.

⁹⁵ Vil'nia, Minsk, Koūna, Hrodna, Mahilioū, and Viciebsk provinces.

⁹⁶ Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 301. See also M. D. Dolbilov and A. I. Miller, *Zapadnye okrainy Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006), 209.

were introduced. In particular, this resulted in the removal of those officials, who by the nature of their duties were in constant contact with the peasant population.⁹⁷ They were replaced with a Russian bureaucracy and the Orthodox clergy, which became the main tools of new Russian policies in the region. Notably, officials of Great Russian origin could count on additional income and benefits if they agreed to assume posts in the North-Western provinces.⁹⁸

De-Polonization also included the gradual elimination of Polish landownership in the region,⁹⁹ along with an increase in discrimination against Catholics, thus gradually introducing the concept of equating religious affiliation with nationality.¹⁰⁰ However, in order to determine the nationalities of its subjects in the North-Western provinces, the Russian imperial government used a mixture of criteria. Religion as a factor of national identification was suggested by the statistician P. Erkert, who also admitted the importance of self-identification.¹⁰¹ In contrast, Pavel Bobrovskii, who did some research on Hrodna province, considered linguistic and cultural aspects to be the decisive determinants, while self-identifications did not matter much. As both Erkert and Bobrovskii were recognized as experts by the Russian officials, both their criteria sets were used interchangeably, depending on the desired result. Religion as a national marker was used in designing measures against the nobility, whose Catholicism was interpreted as a sign of their Polishness, yet at the same time the Belarusian Catholic peasantry was described to be “Belorussian”¹⁰² and therefore potentially subject to assimilation.

However, the intention of the Russian Empire to assimilate Belarusians and include them in the Russian nation-building process faced one obstacle: in order to

⁹⁷ Miller, *The Romanov Empire*, 58; Dolbilov, *Zapadnye okrainy*, 211.

⁹⁸ Aleksandr Kravtsevich, Aleksandr Smolenchuk, and Sergei Tokt', *Belorusy: natsiia Pogranich'ia* (Vil'nius: EGU, 2011), 153.

⁹⁹ Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 71.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰¹ Kravtsevich, *Belorusy: natsiia Pogranich'ia*, 154.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 156.

assimilate an entire ethnic group, first it had to be recognized and constructed as such. The Russian ethnographic discovery of Belarus after 1863 was a part of this attempt, primarily designed to prove the existence of unbreakable ties between all East Slavic peoples, allegedly united by a common history, religion, and blood. Eventually, these efforts led to the emergence of the ideology of West Russism.¹⁰³ Belarusian identification was to remain strictly regional, one subordinated to the large All-Russian project.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, even this directed construction of the new national identity from above, though it occurred in a colonial context, contributed to the development of modern Belarusian nationalism, as it allowed citizens to “imagine” Belarus in a completely new way.¹⁰⁵

By the early 20th century, West Russism had firmly taken hold in the eastern Belarusian regions, often serving as an encouragement and an excuse for radical rightists, whose behaviour caused the indignation of the local intelligentsia.¹⁰⁶ After the February Revolution, West Russism was notable for presenting itself under the guise of Belarusian organizations, as was the case in 1917 with the Belarusian National Union in Viciebsk or the Homiel'-based Union of Belarusian Democracy.¹⁰⁷ These organizations belonged to the right-wing, conservative current within West Russism, denying the possibility of a separate Belarusian nation. However, over time West Russism also proved to be capable of evolving. In particular, its second current was more liberal and socialistic in character. It displayed considerably less chauvinism, admitted the existence of ethnic and cultural characteristics specific to Belarusians, and eventually supported the creation of a separate administrative unit on all ethnically Belarusian territories. Although it was not yet a

¹⁰³ Bulgakov, *Istoriia belorusskogo natsionalizma*, 151.

¹⁰⁴ M. D. Dolbilov, *Russkii krai, chuzhaia vera. Etnokonfessional'naiia politika imperii v Litve i Belorussii pri Aleksandre II* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), 195.

¹⁰⁵ Tereshkovich, *Etnicheskaia istoriia Belarusi*, 187.

¹⁰⁶ Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas (hereafter LCVA), f. 368, ap. 1, b. 10, l. 110.

¹⁰⁷ See previous chapter for more details on these organizations.

demand for autonomy, this approach nevertheless foresaw a certain degree of economic self-sufficiency and self-administration.¹⁰⁸ A typical representative of this current was the Belarusian Oblast' Committee, formed by Belarusians within the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Soviet of the Peasants' Deputies after the October Revolution. Along with the Great Belarusian Rada, it is mostly known as one of the organizers of the All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917.¹⁰⁹

Suppression of the Belarusian Language

The Belarusian language was interpreted by the Russian imperial authorities as merely another manifestation of Polish influence. This perception resulted in restrictive linguistic measures, implemented over the course of the Russification policies in the 19th century, which coincided with the development of the modern literary Belarusian language. The first publications appeared in the 1840s and 1850s and used the Latin alphabet, since their authors usually belonged to the local Catholic nobility. Also, as noted by Vincent Dunin-Marcinkievič, who wrote plays in Belarusian and translated Adam Mickievič's *Pan Tadeusz* into Belarusian in 1859, the use of the Latin alphabet made more sense, since there were more literate peasants who could read the Latin alphabet than those who were able to read Cyrillic.¹¹⁰ This was a valid observation, as literacy rates among the Catholics were almost three times higher by the end of the 19th century than among the Orthodox.¹¹¹

Early attempts to develop a modern form of the Belarusian language in the mid-19th century did not produce numerous texts. Accordingly, Russian imperial authorities did not initially perceive them as a harmful threat, due to their marginal

¹⁰⁸ Stanislaŭ Rudovič, "Zachodnerusizm va ŭmovach revalucyi 1917 hoda: pamiž imperskasciu i bielaruskaj idejaj," *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (2001), Nr. 16: 63 – 64.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹⁰ Jan Zaprudnik, *Belarus: At a Crossroads in History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 54 – 55.

¹¹¹ Tereshkovich, *Etničeskaia istoriia Belarusi*, 172.

influence.¹¹² However, alarmed by the spread of Ukrainian language publications, the government soon decided in favour of a safe course of action and banned the use of the Latin alphabet both for Belarusian and Ukrainian publications in 1859.¹¹³ This was followed by the prohibition of publications in Belarusian after the January uprising in 1863. Overall, in the period between 1863 and 1900 only nine Belarusian books were published in the Russian Empire, making up about 160 small format pages of content limited to moralizing stories or folk tales.¹¹⁴ The content of these publications predetermined the lower status of the Belarusian language as well as its image of being merely a peasant vernacular.

On an official level, Russian imperial authorities were the first to denigrate Belarusian language and culture. By the early 20th century, the tsarist bureaucracy was deeply convinced of the inferiority of the Belarusian language. It was commonly referred to as a “dialect.”¹¹⁵ Official reports rarely even mentioned Belarusians, describing them either as “peasants” or “Russians.”¹¹⁶ At the turn of the century, the language continued to be used primarily by rural populations, who constituted the majority of ethnic Belarusians. Social mobility was connected to the adoption of literary forms either of Russian or Polish, which were considered to be markers of belonging to the elites. Since the use of Belarusian often signaled the existence of social rather than national differences, the majority of the population did not hesitate to abandon the Belarusian

¹¹² Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 284 – 285.

¹¹³ For a detailed description of the development of the Latin alphabet in the Belarusian and Ukrainian cases in the 19th century and a comparison of their usage see Alexei Miller and Oksana Ostapchuk, “The Latin and Cyrillic Alphabets in Ukrainian National Discourse and in the Language Policy of Empires,” in *A Laboratory of Transnational History Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography*, eds. Heorhii Kasianov and Philipp Ther (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), 178 – 181. See also Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 285.

¹¹⁴ Sergei Tokt', “Latinita ili kirillitsa: problema vybora alfavita v belorusskom natsional'nom dvizhenii vo vtoroi polovine XIX-nachale XX veka,” *Ab Imperio: Studies Of New Imperial History And Nationalism In The Post-Soviet Space* (2005), Nr. 2: 301.

¹¹⁵ Weeks, “Us” or “Them,” 216.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

language even without extensive outside pressures.¹¹⁷

More importantly, the bulk of its native speakers did not identify the language with a separate national ideology. It functioned rather as a means of everyday communication, a so-called “simple language.”¹¹⁸ The newspaper *Bielarus* lamented in 1914 that a majority of the young people who left for the towns in search of education, turned away from their homeland, repressed the memories of their origins, denied their native “simple” language, turned into degenerates, and started to work for foreign forces. Suggested explanations of this phenomenon included a lack of understanding of the national cause, insufficient upbringing of the children, and feelings of shame. The latter had its roots in the relations of the peasantry to the educated circles of society, who enjoyed the respectability of a higher social class. Assimilation to another culture, be it Polish or Russian, transformed them in their minds into so-called *panstva*,¹¹⁹ implying that their social standing became close to that of the nobility.¹²⁰ It is obvious that a majority of educated society adopted and internalized the view of Belarusian as an underdeveloped language, as it was not associated with the elites. Perceptions of the Belarusian language on the local level by the early 20th century did not differ a lot from those within Russian governing circles.

Despite the fact that Belarusian continued to be widely used in everyday life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it failed to acquire high social prestige, which would have facilitated its transformation into a powerful and effective factor of national mobilization. Since the language was not embedded in the national ideology and failed to develop a symbolic value for its speakers, the likely possible outcome was their

¹¹⁷ Ryšard Radzik, *Vytoki sučasnaj bielaruskasci. Bielarusy na fone naciyatvorčykh pracesaŭ u Centralna-Uščodniaj Europe 19 st.* (Minsk: Medysont, 2012), 214 – 215.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹¹⁹ In English: nobility, privileged class.

¹²⁰ “Kirusak naszaj adukacyi,” *Bielarus*, Nr. 29 – 30, 25 July 1914, 1.

assimilation. This indifference towards the native language proved to be hard to eradicate. Belarusian national activists were among the first of those who attempted to reverse this trend and to introduce the language as an integral component of the idea of Belarusianness. Initially, their chief task was to argue and struggle against the prevalent idea that Belarusian was a poor and undeveloped “dialect” with no potential to develop into an effective means of communication for all spheres of social life. On another level they also sought to increase the symbolic value of the language, by turning it into a factor uniting the Belarusian nation. For instance, in an attempt to improve the image of the language, Francišak Aliachnovič pointed out that connotation of a “simple” language should be interpreted as simple in understanding for its native speakers, but by no means as primitive by nature. He referred to the use of Belarusian not only in the rural areas, but also in towns across Viciebsk, Mahilioŭ, Minsk, Hrodna, and Vil'nia provinces. Aiming to create an image of a prestigious language, he noted that historically the nobility and dukes also spoke Belarusian.¹²¹ By revealing to the public its connections to the past of once powerful people, Aliachnovič was also linking modern Belarusian nationalism to a more distant historical tradition.¹²²

In contrast to the agitational materials written for the newspapers, local politics reveals the less optimistic situation for the Belarusian language in the public sphere. In particular, the picture of linguistic assimilation and serious challenges for national agitation in the eastern Belarusian territories bordering with Russia are evident from an analysis of the documents of the Mahilioŭ Belarusian National Committee from 1917. The protocols of the Committee disclose that most of its members had russified backgrounds. Despite the sincere efforts, they had trouble communicating in Belarusian.

¹²¹ *Homan*, Nr. 93, 20 November 1917, 3.

¹²² Lithuanians were able to exploit historical connections to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania more successfully, in contrast to Belarusians. See Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations*, 45.

Yet, these documents display a peculiar linguistic feature throughout the year 1917: while written almost exclusively in Russian, they also have a tendency to use more Belarusian expressions, while still adhering to the Russian orthography.¹²³

The BNK and other organizations in Minsk also struggled with the language issue, which was widely debated at that time. Both languages were used interchangeably: Belarusian in its form close to the contemporary version along with Russian. The difference was in the approach, as activists in Minsk recognized that in order to switch to the use of Belarusian, they needed to practice the language. For instance, in the case of the Belarusian soldiers of the 12th Army it was decided to hold meetings during the general assembly in Russian and use it for recording the protocols, due to the insufficient knowledge of Belarusian of the majority of the participants. However, soldiers specifically pointed out that they would attempt to have all their correspondence with national organizations in Belarusian, they welcomed the attempts to speak Belarusian during the meetings, and vowed to completely change to literary Belarusian in due course.¹²⁴

Yet for the Mahilioŭ activists in eastern Belarus it still was unthinkable to switch completely to the use of Belarusian.¹²⁵ When they discussed the possibility of publishing a newspaper in June 1917, the debates almost immediately shifted to the choice of language, reflecting its problematic status in the province. The committee members were unanimous in their opinion that the newspaper could not be published in Russian, as it would be perceived as an instrument of Russification, but at the same time they hesitated to publish it in Belarusian, as the language appeared incomprehensible to them (this statement was based on their experiences after reading the BSH newspaper

¹²³ See for example “Protocol from 12 April 1917,” *Bielaruski Dzieržaŭny Archiŭ-Muzej Litaratury i Mastactva* (hereafter BDAMLIM), f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 136, ark. 20.

¹²⁴ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 8.

¹²⁵ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 136, ark. 32.

Hramada, which was published in the spring/summer of 1917). Delegate Kakašynski emphasized the futility of discussions as to whether Belarusian was a dialect¹²⁶ or a separate language. In his opinion, there was no language suitable for the publication of a newspaper. Other delegates shared similar thoughts,¹²⁷ despite the fact that Belarusian newspapers had already been published in the previous years, starting with *Naša Dolia* and *Naša Niva* back in 1906. Kachanovič tried to find a compromise solution, suggesting the use of both languages, limiting the use of Belarusian to feuilletons and local news, while others opted for a simplified version of Russian in order to be closer to the people.¹²⁸ Obviously, there was no common ground even in such a crucial matter as determining the status of the language. This incident also illustrates that Mahilioŭ province was prone to a higher degree of Russification, as compared to western provinces, where Belarusian in general received more acceptance and was used for newspaper publications during the revolutionary period.¹²⁹

While the reduction of the status of the Belarusian language and its marginalization were direct consequences of the Russification policies of the 19th century, with extensive limitations and prohibitions imposed by the Russian state, marginalization was reinforced in a negative sense by the weak resilience of the language, which only started to develop its modern literary form in the 19th century. In lieu of a unified linguistic norm, people often used a variety of different dialects, especially in the borderland areas. Moreover, linguistic closeness to other Slavic languages – Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian – prevented the development of the perception of Belarusian as a

¹²⁶ This word was underlined in the original protocol document.

¹²⁷ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 136, ark. 32 adv.

¹²⁸ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 136, ark. 32.

¹²⁹ *Vol'naja Bielarus'* which was published in Minsk in 1917 is one such example. *Homan* was published since 1916 in Vil'nia.

separate and unique language.¹³⁰

Russification in Education

Along with the linguistic assimilation of Belarusians, education was one of the spheres where Russification practices were implemented widely and left a lasting legacy. Russian imperial authorities saw the educational system as one of the most effective tools for bringing Belarusians closer and finally merging them with the Great Russian nation.¹³¹ Therefore, instilling loyalty to the Russian Empire was to become the priority in educational designs. De-Polonization methods prevailed in the sphere of education as well: Russians received preferential treatment in hiring processes, while, in contrast, Poles faced more restrictions regarding employment opportunities at educational institutions. One such example was the replacement of Polish headmasters in grammar schools by Russians after the failed uprising of 1863 – 1864. Furthermore, the 1868 decree was even more restrictive by prohibiting Catholics from the Kingdom of Poland and the western provinces from holding positions of authority in schools, since the Russian Empire was growing suspicious of their political loyalty.¹³²

Generally, the tsarist regulations in the sphere of education entailed the distrust of local teachers, regardless of their religion.¹³³ This was evident from the practices of newly established people's schools in the western provinces, and from the methods of recruiting teachers for these new schools. The primary goal was to reduce Polish and Catholic influences. At first, in order to secure politically reliable personnel, teacher-training colleges were established in smaller cities in the western provinces, aiming to

¹³⁰ Timothy Snyder actually pointed out the advantages of the Lithuanian language in this context: belonging to the Baltic language family, it was different from Slavic languages and had more practical value for the peasantry there, who often could not understand Russian and Polish, unlike their counterparts on the Belarusian side. See Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, 47.

¹³¹ Weeks, "Us" or "Them," 213.

¹³² Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 94.

¹³³ Sviatlana V. Snapkoŭskaja, *Adukacyjnaja palityka i škola na Bielarusi ŭ kancy XIX - pačatku XX stst* (Minsk: Ministerstva Adukacyi Respubliki Bielarus', Nacyjanal'ny Instytut Adukacyi, 1998), 41.

recruit local teachers belonging to the same social class as their students. The new students were expected to be educated according to the Russian spirit, i.e. loyal to the idea of East Slavic unity. Subsequently this ideology was to be passed on to their potential peasant pupils.¹³⁴ The new teacher colleges preferred admitting Orthodox students, as Catholics were not considered to be good candidates.¹³⁵ Yet Russian imperial authorities soon started to intensify the process of teacher Russification by bringing teachers to the western provinces from inner Russia, who had graduated from Orthodox seminaries. They were considered to be the most reliable cadres educated in an Orthodox spirit, who were already speaking the correct version of the Russian language, in contrast to the locals.¹³⁶ Moreover, due to the lack of teachers in 1863, special scholarships were established for Orthodox students in Russia, who were to be sent to work in the western provinces after graduation.¹³⁷

The system of Polish language education on Belarusian territories was dismantled, and primary schools were placed under the subordination of the Orthodox church. The Belarusian language was banned from primary schools.¹³⁸ The quality of education and number of subjects decreased, while emphasis shifted to the instruction of the Russian language and dogmas of the Orthodox faith.¹³⁹ Moreover, the Belarusian population was deprived of higher institutions of learning on its territories after the tsarist powers closed the Vil'nia university in 1832, following the November uprising, and the Hory-Horki Agricultural Institute in 1863, in reaction to the January uprising. These measures further reinforced the provincial status of the Belarusian territories, forcing

¹³⁴ Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 250. See also Rudolf A. Mark, "Die nationale Bewegung der Weißrussen im 19. und zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* (1994), Bd. 42, H. 4: 503.

¹³⁵ Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 251 – 254.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 256 – 257.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹³⁹ Radzik, *Vytoki sučasnej bielaruskasci*, 177.

people to seek opportunities for higher education in other parts of the Russian Empire or abroad. Some of them chose to never return home after graduation, thus leaving their homelands without capable intellectual forces¹⁴⁰ and possibly also without potential national elites in the future. By comparison, the Ukrainian national movement in the 19th century could rely on the intellectual forces educated on Ukrainian territories at the universities of Kyiv, Kharkiv, and L'viv.¹⁴¹

The main principles in the development of schooling on Belarusian territories were determined by the Provisional Regulations for People's Schools in the North-Western Provinces approved on 23 March 1863. These and most of the other regulations introduced in the second half of the 19th century remained in force until 1917,¹⁴² laying the foundations for the long-term state-sponsored Russification of the Belarusian population and keeping the region backward. The illiteracy rate for Belarusians by 1897 was at 74%, while in the Kingdom of Poland it was less than 70%, and in Galicia only 56%.¹⁴³ Those peasant children who went to schools would usually not return to the rural areas, opting for possibilities to remain in towns. Upward social mobility would also mean the abandonment of peasant Belarusian culture and the adoption of either Polish culture or, increasingly, Russian culture. Later, Russification and Polonization practices were to be observed not only in relation to culture, they also influenced the choices of national identifications. Belarusian national identification in the 19th century was not an attractive option, as the constructed image of a Belarusian at that time was connected predominantly to characteristics of the peasant world. The Belarusian idea still did not incorporate higher social circles, as, for instance, in the literature of that period, only

¹⁴⁰ Liachouški, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 23.

¹⁴¹ Christophe v. Werdt, "Trans- und multikulturelle Entwicklungspfade am Rande Ostmitteleuropas. Belarus und die Ukraine vor dem Anbruch der Moderne," in *Ein weißer Fleck in Europa. Die Imagination der Belarus als einer Kontaktzone zwischen Ost und West*, eds. Thomas M. Bohn, Victor Shadurski, and Albert Weber (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), 96.

¹⁴² Snapkoŭskaja, *Adukacyjnaja palityka*, 41.

¹⁴³ Radzik, *Vytoki sučasnaj bielaruskasci*, 178.

peasants spoke Belarusian, in contrast to the landowners, who mostly were presented as Polish-speaking. This focus on the peasant aspects of national identity eventually failed to create an inclusive community, attractive for all social circles, and especially for those with high hopes of social mobility.¹⁴⁴ In this context educated people, who opted for Belarusian national consciousness, grew more aware of social differences.¹⁴⁵ By 1917, this had resulted in clearly articulated socialist leanings of the majority of Belarusian national activists.

Yet fortunately for the emerging Belarusian national movement, a consistent and full implementation of the assimilation program of the Belarusian population was limited by a shortage of funding in the Russian Empire.¹⁴⁶ Overall, even on the eve of the First World War, the Russian Empire still conceived Russification policies to be an integral part of De-Polonization measures, while Belarusian peasants remained passive subjects. Russian officials did not even think of the possibility that they might produce their own national ideology. In rare cases when it was mentioned, it was invariably connected to “Polish intrigues.”¹⁴⁷

Considering specifics of the Russification policies, described above, it is evident that by 1917 their application to the education system was one of the greatest concerns for the Belarusian activists. Another danger, albeit on a smaller scale, was the growth of Polish cultural influences, which is attributed to the significant numbers of Polish refugees during the First World War who had fled to Belarusian territories. The

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 320.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 178.

¹⁴⁶ Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 303; see also Theodore Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia. Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863 – 1914* (DeKalb, Ill: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 12.

¹⁴⁷ Weeks, “Us” or “Them,” 220 – 221. The theme of “Polish intrigue” in fact outlived the Russian Empire. This is exactly what was repeated in 1917, but this time not by the governing circles but by the opponents of the Belarusian national movement, who presented it as the idea of Polish landowners trying to enslave the Belarusian peasantry. See A. Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk vozniknoveniia Belarusskoi narodnoi respubliki* (Kiev, 1918), 7; F. Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie. Ocherk istorii natsionalnogo i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia belorussov* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1921), 33.

influence of Poles was noted first and foremost in the cities of eastern Belarus, where they often replaced the Russian population, which was evacuated further east in 1915.¹⁴⁸ After the February Revolution, Poles also started to make use of the climate of political liberalization and established the Polish Council of the Minsk province (Rada Polska Ziemi Mińskiej). Similar councils also appeared in the Mahilioŭ and Viciebsk provinces.¹⁴⁹ The number of Polish organizations reached twenty in Minsk alone; they represented a broad spectrum of activities, including the political, cultural, educational, and charitable spheres.¹⁵⁰ Polish refugees were allowed to open and operate their own schools with Polish as the language of instruction. These schools remained in place even after the Poles were repatriated after the end of the war, and were subsequently attended by the children of Belarusian Catholics. They were considered to be effective instruments of Polonization and another type of competition to Belarusian national consolidation.¹⁵¹

The local Polonized population, represented by the landowners and Catholic clergy, also contributed to the polarization of society along national lines. In Buda (Vilejka district, Vil'nia province) one of the young graduates of pedagogical courses established a school as early as March 1917 on her own initiative, gradually trying to introduce teaching in Belarusian. In response, a local landowner and a Catholic priest established a Polish school. They managed to win over students from the Belarusian school by promising them “all free of charge” education. The correspondent of *Vol'naja Bielarus'* who reported this case sarcastically commented that instead of free food all they

¹⁴⁸ Dariusz Tarasiuk, *Między nadzieją a niepokojem: działalność społeczno-kulturalna i polityczna Polaków na wschodniej Białorusi w latach 1905 – 1918* (Lublin: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2007), 111. See also Piotr Wróbel, *Kształtowanie się białoruskiej świadomości narodowej a Polska* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1990), 51; Smaliančuk, *Pamiž kraevasciu i nacyjanalnaj idejaj*, 249. In 1915 the number of Polish refugees in Minsk province alone was estimated at more than 90,000. See Tadeusz Zienkiewicz, *Polskie życie literackie w Mińsku: w XIX i na początku XX wieku, do roku 1921* (Olsztyn: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna, 1997), 111.

¹⁴⁹ Wróbel, *Kształtowanie się białoruskiej świadomości*, 52.

¹⁵⁰ Stanisłaŭ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru. Prablema samavyznačennia Bielarusi ŭ 1917 hodzie* (Minsk: “Technalohija,” 2001), 152.

¹⁵¹ *Bielaruski Śliach*, Nr. 30, 27 April 1918.

got in the end was the Polish language everywhere. Ensuing local efforts to establish a separate four-year school proved to be slow in implementation due to a lack of funds.¹⁵²

Nevertheless, educational institutions gradually started to have a more active and positive role in the process of national consolidation in eastern Belarus in 1917. It is remarkable at this stage that initiatives displayed by the students contrasted with the rigid conservatism of the majority of the teachers. In the new liberal conditions of 1917, young people experimented with various forms of organizations and involved the public in their activities. Soon after the February Revolution a small student group was formed in Hory-Horki (Mahilioŭ province). At first, all of the work focused around group meetings and discussions. With time, they moved to organizing social gatherings with poetry declamations, which eventually grew into an amateur theatre.¹⁵³ University students, who spent their vacations visiting their home regions during the summer of 1917, were known for organizing Belarusian student groups. Although later they formed a foundation for future student associations, e.g. the student division of the Belarusian People's Hramada in Moscow, this initiative proved to be short-lived and failed to realize its ambitious program in Belarus in the prevailing conditions of 1917.¹⁵⁴

This situation had qualitatively changed only by November 1917, when a more permanent Belarusian Student Hramada was formed in Minsk by Mikalaj Mickievič, Ales' Nazaranka, Barys Platonaŭ, and Michas' Ramanovič.¹⁵⁵ The gradual re-evacuation of educational institutions to the Belarusian territories was especially important in this regard. For instance, among schools that became defining centers of the Belarusian national milieu was the Niasviž Teachers' Seminary, which returned home in September

¹⁵² *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 12, 8 August 1917, 4.

¹⁵³ "Nacyjanalna-kul'turnaja praca Hory-Horackich vučniaŭ-bielarusaŭ," *Bielarus'*, Nr. 15(42), 6 November 1919, 3.

¹⁵⁴ Liachoŭski, *Ad homanaŭcaŭ da haisakoŭ*, 93.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

1917. A youth group named “Association for Education” was established there by one of its students, Michas' Mickievič,¹⁵⁶ immediately upon the re-evacuation of the seminary from Russia.¹⁵⁷

Finally, a step towards strengthening the positions of Belarusian teachers was taken during the Congress of the Belarusian Party and Public Organizations, which occurred on 8 – 10 July 1917 in Minsk. The teachers who participated in the work of the Congress initiated the restoration of the Belarusian Teachers' Union. Originally it was founded in 1905, but due to the arrests of its members it had already ceased to exist by the following year. The proclaimed aim of the revived Union was the nationalization of the Belarusian school and the creation of a Belarusian teachers' community.¹⁵⁸ According to Sviatlana Snapkoŭskaja, this was the time when a “village teacher of a new type”¹⁵⁹ appeared. These teachers contributed to the establishment of the first centers of national education in eastern Belarus in the second half of 1917. Most notable among them were Sluck Zemstvo Belarusian Grammar School, Belarusian primary schools in Minsk, and the school in the village of Žornaŭka (Ihumien district, Minsk province).¹⁶⁰

Orthodox and Catholic Churches in 1917: Religious Struggle for National

Identification

Religion remained a dividing factor in Belarus, rather emphasizing the conflict between Russia and Poland, instead of playing a constructive role in the Belarusian national project. Nevertheless the option of national divide within one single church structure still remained open.¹⁶¹ Taking into account the long-term repercussions of the

¹⁵⁶ Brother of the Belarusian poet Jakub Kolas.

¹⁵⁷ Liachoŭski, *Ad homanaŭcaŭ da haisakoŭ*, 98.

¹⁵⁸ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 11, 3 August 1917, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Snapkoŭskaja, *Adukacyjnaja palityka*, 79.

¹⁶⁰ I. Ramanava, “Kultura,” in *Historyja Bielarusi u šasci tamach*, T. 5, ed. Michail P. Kasciuk (Minsk: VP Ekaperspektyva, 2005), 127.

¹⁶¹ Radzik, *Vytoki sučasnaj bielaruskasci*, 312.

banning of the Uniate church in 1839 on the one hand, and the strong ties of the Orthodox clergy with Russian imperial power and administration on the other, only the Catholic milieu in Belarus had the potential to become an alternative source of national consolidation. Participation of Belarusian Catholics in the national movement started relatively late, only during the Revolution of 1905 – 1907, and they did not play such a prominent role as in the Lithuanian case. Yet Catholic involvement followed the Lithuanian pattern, although in a less pronounced manner due to the greater religious diversity of the population. As in Lithuania, Catholic priests were recruited from the local population and were not sent to serve in the western provinces from inner Russia, as in the case of the Orthodox priests. National and social divisions in Belarusian and Lithuanian societies also coincided, leading to the belief that national elites were “stolen” through the Polonization process. Thus, the clergy stepped in and assumed the role of national activists.¹⁶²

Belarusian Christian democracy, connected to the Catholic milieu, started to spread through student circles in the first decades of the 20th century.¹⁶³ The first of such circles was established in Hrodna in 1909, among the students of Hrodna grammar school, under the leadership of Catholic priest Francišak Hrynkevič. Later similar student organizations were established in Vil'nia Theological Seminary (1911).¹⁶⁴ A weekly Catholic newspaper *Bielarus* was published in the Latin script during 1913 – 1915 in Vil'nia. Another emerging center of the Belarusian movement with clergy participation was St. Petersburg, which gained more influence after the start of the First World War. A Belarusian Society (*Bielaruski hurtok*) was operating in the Petersburg Roman Catholic

¹⁶² Wiktor Sukiennicki and Maciej Siekierski, *East Central Europe During World War I: From Foreign Domination to National Independence*. Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 54.

¹⁶³ Andrej Čarniakievič, “Partret na fone interjera: štodzionnaje žyccio bielaruskaha dzejača ŭ Hrodna,” in *Białoruś w XX stuleciu: w kręgu kultury i polityki*, ed. Dorota Michaluk (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2007), 155.

¹⁶⁴ Smaliančuk, *Pamiž kraevasciu i nacyjanalnaj idejaj*, 187 – 188.

Theological Academy starting in October 1913, bringing together eleven students of the Academy out a total of seventy. All of them strongly identified with the Belarusian movement and were influenced by the personality of Professor Branislaŭ Epimach-Šypila, who worked at the Petersburg University library and taught Greek language at the Academy. This Belarusian Society united not only the theology students, but also famous cultural figures and future leading politicians, who found themselves in Petrograd at the start of the First World War, among them Janka Kupala, Branislaŭ Taraškevič, Zmicer Žylunovič, Jazep Varonka, Alaiza Paškevič, Tamaš Hryb, and Liavon Zajac.¹⁶⁵ The Journal *Svietač* was published in Petrograd in 1916 (in the Latin alphabet). According to one of its contributors, Adam Stankievič, it had a Christian and Belarusian national character, although due to censorship it had to maintain a very moderate stance. In contrast, another Belarusian journal published in Petrograd, *Dziannica*, used the Cyrillic alphabet and was edited by Zmicer Žylunovič, who was known for his Marxist views.¹⁶⁶

According to Adam Stankievič, Belarusian Catholic priests were among the active promoters and popularizers of the Belarusian language throughout 1917–18, especially in the western part of the unoccupied territories around Dzisna and Vilejka.¹⁶⁷ In practice they faced the same challenges as any other national activists. The Catholic priest Astramovič from Smilavičy provides an interesting account of his national agitation during 1917. When he started to state in public that peasants from his congregation were Belarusians, like himself, people first reacted with surprise. With time, the acceptance of his ideas grew, especially among the younger generation. Astramovič described Ihumen district, where he was working, as “remote” (despite being located within 60 km of Minsk). Belarusian newspapers and books remained a rarity there. Astramovič identified

¹⁶⁵ Uladzimir Konan, *Ksiondz Adam Stankievič i katalickae adradženne ŭ Bielarusi* (Minsk: Pro Chrysto, 2003), 13 – 14.

¹⁶⁶ Adam Stankievič, *Z Boham da Bielarusi. Zbor tvoraŭ* (Vil'nia: Instytut bielarusistyki, 2008), 497.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 499.

the religious divide as the most serious problem, as it dangerously interfered with national identification. Peasants kept referring to their faith either as “Polish” or “Russian.” Belarusian Catholics got so used to hearing the Polish language in churches, that they wished to be able to speak “like in Warsaw.” However, after being exposed to an alternative national agitation they could be persuaded to change their minds.¹⁶⁸ The challenge was to make national work consistent and far-reaching.

The promotion of the national idea by spiritual leaders of the community appeared to be an effective strategy. Peasants from Viciebsk province, Drysa¹⁶⁹ district, displayed a friendly attitude to the idea of national mobilization due to the pro-Belarusian attitudes of the local Catholic priest. At first, he introduced Belarusian psalms in the church, and also did not hesitate to speak the same language as his congregation. Later, those who were elected to the local zemstvo supported the election of a convinced Belarusian activist as the chair of the zemstvo assembly. Moreover, the meeting was conducted in Belarusian and greeted the initiative of establishing a Belarusian primary school, leaving only one Russian school for a local community of Old Believers.¹⁷⁰ Peasants in the village of Pasadziec (Vilejka district, Vil'nia province) started to take an interest in Belarusian matters after they heard a sermon in their mother tongue from the priest Vincent Hadleŭski, who came from Minsk to a neighboring village in 1917. The local correspondent of *Bielaruski Šliach* wished for more frequent visits of the Belarusian clergy, as they apparently were beneficial for national work in the province.¹⁷¹

According to the report by the priest Hadleŭski, Belarusian Catholics were in reality stronger than they appeared.¹⁷² When Bishop von der Ropp (he was known for

¹⁶⁸ “Zjezd delehataŭ ad bielaruskich partyjnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj 8 – 10 lipnia ŭ Minsku,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 9, 26 July 1917, 3.

¹⁶⁹ The contemporary name of the town is Vierchniadzvinsk.

¹⁷⁰ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 29, 14 November 1917, 4.

¹⁷¹ *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 96, 17 August 1918, 2.

¹⁷² *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 27, 30 October 1917, 3.

displaying a favourable attitude towards Belarusian as the language of the catechism and as a possible option for additional divine service¹⁷³) visited the Belarusian provinces in summer of 1917, he heard requests from congregations to allow sermons in Belarusian. During his stay in Dzisna in July 1917 he chaired the first diocesan congress of Catholic clergy and delegates from the congregation of the Dzisna deanery. Jazep Drazdovič, representing the congregation from Hiermanovičy, delivered an official address to the bishop in Belarusian. Von der Ropp was pleased to hear it and regretted that he was not able to respond in the same language. He stated that he had never been an enemy to national movements, be they Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian or even Jewish. He knew about the difficulties in the matter of establishing Belarusian schooling, noting that Belarusians were under strong assimilatory pressures from neighbouring cultures. Finally, he supported the efforts of the Catholic clergy in Belarus to talk to Belarusians in their mother tongue in church and beyond.¹⁷⁴

Such encouragement resonated well with the wishes of the congregations. People were genuinely happy to hear their native language in churches. The news that Catholic priests were becoming national activists was spreading in the form of a rumour, a very hopeful and optimistic one, as in the village of Mačynauščyna (Vilejka district, Vil'nia province).¹⁷⁵ For instance, parishioners in Kryvičy threw flowers at the priest who spoke in Belarusian. However, an example from Radaškovičy was less favourable: there was visible opposition to Belarusian sermons right in the middle of the church service. Yet only about fifty people from about two thousand present at the church service left in protest.¹⁷⁶ Several younger Belarusian priests who delivered speeches after the bishop's address in Dzisna also complained that the reactionary moods of the parishioners were

¹⁷³ Smaliančuk, *Pamiž kraevasciu i nacyjanalnaj idejaj*, 187.

¹⁷⁴ "Pa Bielarusi," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 13, 11 August 1917, 4.

¹⁷⁵ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 23, 9 October 1917, 3.

¹⁷⁶ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 27, 30 October 1917, 3.

slowing down their progressive attempts.¹⁷⁷

The importance of the Christian Democratic movement in 1917 should not be overestimated, as initially it appealed primarily to the Catholic population, acquiring an All-Christian character only in the 1920s.¹⁷⁸ Generally, the number of Catholic priests interested in the Belarusian national movement remained low. For instance, their largest official meeting – the Congress of Belarusian Catholic clergy in Minsk on 24 – 25 May 1917, chaired by A. Abrantovič – barely gathered over twenty other participants from Minsk, Mahilioŭ, and Vil'nia provinces.¹⁷⁹ The resolutions of the Congress emphasized the need for the wide autonomy of Belarus within the Russian federative democratic republic, the need for school instruction in Belarusian, the gradual introduction of sermons and additional divine service in Belarusian, support for petitions to introduce the instruction of Belarusian language and history in the Petrograd Roman Catholic Theological Academy and Mahilioŭ Theological Seminary in Petrograd, and support for the transfers of Belarusian priests from Zhytomyr and other dioceses to Belarusian parishes.¹⁸⁰ By November 1918, a Catholic seminary headed by Fabian Abrantovič was opened in Minsk with Belarusian as the language of instruction.¹⁸¹

Some sources provide similar information about a much larger gathering of Orthodox clergy in Moscow, claiming it was attended by over 700 Orthodox priests. Allegedly, it laid the foundations for the union of Belarusian Orthodox clergy.¹⁸² However, there are doubts among historians concerning this event, mostly because the information

¹⁷⁷ “Pa Bielarusi,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 13, 11 August 1917, 4.

¹⁷⁸ Stankievič, *Z Boham da Bielarusi*, 503.

¹⁷⁹ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 3, 20 June 1917, 4.

¹⁸⁰ Stankievič, *Z Boham da Bielarusi*, 499.

¹⁸¹ Helena Głogowska, *Białoruś 1914 – 1929: kultura pod presją polityki* (Białystok: Białoruskie Towarzystwo Historyczne, 1996), 41. See also Anatol' Hryckievič, *Udział u Adradżenni*, <http://media.catholic.by/nv/n5/art19.htm#refs> (Accessed 6 November 2014).

¹⁸² Stankievič, *Z Boham da Bielarusi*, 503; Głogowska, *Białoruś 1914 – 1929*, 31. See also “Report on the Situation in Eastern Belarus,” written by Anton Luckievič in Vil'nia, dated 3 April 1918, BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 134, ark. 34.

about this congress came from Vil'nia, which at that time was under German occupation, cut off from Belarusian political life east of the front line. Since no other sources corroborate this account, this information is therefore considered to be included in the category of wishful thinking.¹⁸³ Moreover, there are no further documents confirming any significant organized activities of the Orthodox clergy in support of the Belarusian national movement later on. In some ways this could also have been the church equivalent of the Viciebsk Belarusian National Union, where the national attribute in the name served merely as a cover for conservatism.

Nevertheless, there were instances when Orthodox priests supported the national movement, as the case of Iaan Karčynski demonstrates. A former arch-priest of the monastery of St. Barys and Hleb in Hrodna, he became interested in the Belarusian movement in 1917 during the time when he was a refugee in Russia.¹⁸⁴ After returning to Hrodna, Karčynski actively participated in public life, even trying his luck in municipal elections. His views on the Belarusian issue experienced a certain evolution over time, reflecting the process of an evolving and developing national identification. In 1918, Karčynski did not yet support the use of the Belarusian language in the church, as in his opinion it was a premature step and ordinary people could perfectly understand the Church Slavonic language of the Orthodox services. However, already by spring 1919, he had started delivering services in Belarusian himself. Later, Karčynski was also known as one of the active participants of the Belarusian anti-Polish struggle in cooperation with Lithuania.¹⁸⁵

Other examples of Orthodox priests who became involved in the Belarusian national movement indicate that they started with the popularization of the Belarusian

¹⁸³ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 99.

¹⁸⁴ Čarniakievič, "Partret na fone interjera," 155.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

language in an attempt to propagate the role of the church among the Belarusians and increase its presence in local affairs. Another goal was to reverse the common stereotype that the Orthodox church was totally dependent on directions sent from Moscow. Andrej Kornilovič, who served as a priest in Chožava (Vilejka district, Minsk province) edited a collection of sermons in Belarusian. Ioan Chrucki, deacon in Lebedzeva (Vilejka district, Minsk province), worked on translating prayers from Church Slavonic into Belarusian. Popular reception of their activities appeared to be encouraging and positive, as people were happy to grasp the meaning of everything that was going on during the church service, as opposed to their earlier experiences which required the mechanical memorization of unfamiliar words and expressions in Church Slavonic.¹⁸⁶

These “national conversions” of the Orthodox clergy, as described above, remained rather exceptional scenarios. As a rule, the Orthodox Church dismissed the Belarusian movement as a “Polish intrigue.” The overly conservative positions of the majority of the Russified clergy, along with their chauvinistic and arrogant attitudes, alienated them from their congregations in 1917. Orthodox priests often did not feel the needs of a revolutionary society and openly displayed nostalgia for tsarist times. Exhibiting such behaviour in public was not always met with understanding by the population, and did not raise their popularity either. For instance, peasants from Semkaŭ Haradok (Minsk district) even submitted an official request to replace their Orthodox priest Samojlovič in the summer of 1917, complaining that he never spoke in defence of the revolution and the interests of the working people. On the contrary, he was accused of defending the tsar and his good deeds and referring to the supporters of the revolution as “a bunch of hooligans.” The congregation was offended and expressed dissatisfaction with Samojlovič’s behaviour, collecting forty-eight signatures to support the request for

¹⁸⁶ “Bielaruski ruch siarod pravaslaŭnaha duchavenstva,” *Homan*, Nr. 85, 29 October 1918, 2.

his replacement.¹⁸⁷

This opened the way for the Christian Democrats, who started to gain sympathy across the religious divide. Some of the Catholic priests were able to gain the trust not only of their congregations but also of the Orthodox population, which resulted in their elections as chairs of volost committees, such as in the case of M. Šalkievič from Mosar (Dziszna district).¹⁸⁸ Even the modest efforts of some nationally conscious Catholic clergymen in 1917 – delivering some speeches in the Belarusian spirit in meetings and gradually using Belarusian in their sermons – made a positive impression on the local people. The first sermon in Belarusian in Dziszna caught the parishioners by surprise, and they listened to it with unusual attention and reverence. The correspondent of *Vol'naja Bielarus'* contrasted this reaction to the previous practice of sermons delivered in Polish.¹⁸⁹ It is evident that popular reaction to the introduction of the native language in the church service in the case of Catholics was identical to the reception of Belarusian in Orthodox churches.

Another characteristic feature of 1917 was the intensification of the religious struggle for national identification both in Orthodox and Catholic milieus. In the village of Haruciški (Minsk district), the local Orthodox priest was calling peasant meetings, trying to discourage peasants from sending their children to Belarusian schools. In addition, he even hired people to confiscate Belarusian books. Such behaviour did not gain him sympathy and some people started to contradict the priest in public. The Catholic part of the village displayed similar trends towards polarization. The landowners, so-called “local Poles,” were using the priests to deepen the divide between Catholics and Orthodox.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 16, 28 August 1917, 3.

¹⁸⁸ Stankievič, *Z Boham da Bielarusi*, 498.

¹⁸⁹ “Pa Bielarusi,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 15, 23 August 1917, 3.

¹⁹⁰ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 13, 11 August 1917, 4.

The population appears to have been able to differentiate between the political affiliations of the clergy. The zemstvo election campaign in the autumn of 1917 revealed several cases where the Catholic priests were aggressively agitating for Polish electoral lists. In particular, in the Minsk district some of them did not hesitate from turning their sermons into political campaigns. The head of the electoral commission in Piaršaj, the Catholic priest Vrubleŭski, along with several other commission members, was arrested on charges of conducting agitation by the ballot-boxes.¹⁹¹ However, the majority of peasants opposed Polish electoral lists due to social tensions, while the national aspect did not yet play a significant role. All Poles were regarded as the equivalent of landowners. Peasants did not want to see Poles win more power through elections, as they were convinced that should the latter win, they would allow the landowners to take away the land from the peasantry.¹⁹²

Conclusion

The resolutions of the Congress of Belarusian Organizations adopted in March 1917 prioritized the political education of peasants and their organization as immediate goals. The initial experiences of activists in the provinces, who were dispatched there solely with the purposes of national agitation, revealed the need for consistent and expanded efforts in this direction. The majority of the population was more concerned with matters of everyday survival, choosing local identity as the most suitable strategy. Under what circumstances, then, could activists achieve the best results? First, the national message benefited from being delivered indirectly, “packaged” in a more attractive and accessible form for the population in the provinces. For instance, traveling amateur theatres could gain vast popularity, which facilitated their national agitation

¹⁹¹ “Vybary ŭ valasnyja zemstvy,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 23, 9 October 1917, 3.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

efforts. Second, the establishment and dissemination of Belarusian newspapers allowed the expansion of a space of virtual Belarusianness, as the example of *Volnaja Bielarus'* demonstrates. The newspaper aimed to act as a means to recruit more activists and provide them with the feeling of a growing community of like-minded people. Primarily designed to promote national values, newspapers successfully reached out to wider population circles, as sources of daily information, containing job listings, announcements, and entertainment sections.

Furthermore, local initiatives, among them the establishment of youth organizations by the students and various cultural activities, appear to have been successful strategies, although they were not as widespread and popularized as desired. Those activists who lived in the provinces had better chances to win over the sympathies of the population, as they were constantly engaged in local life and were able to gain respect among members of their communities, as the case of Sciapan Kurčevič-Siaŭruk in Babrujsk district clearly shows. National activists also benefited from the already engaged “mobilized populations” in the localities, in addition to their own efforts.

For those activists not associated with pre-existing governmental or religious structures, it was notably harder to carry out national agitation. They had to establish a network of reliable contacts, which was often a time-consuming and tedious task. One of the options was to combine national activism with the holding of public posts, in order to reinforce the influence of national agitation with the authority provided by the governmental position, as was the case with the census instructor in the Chojniki and Jurevičy districts. Another option was to involve spiritual leaders of the community in the national cause, as the cases of the Belarusian Catholic priests from Dzisna demonstrate. Last but not least, paying attention to the local everyday concerns of the population, and taking a personalized approach, combined with consistency and long-term dedication,

were indispensable qualities in improving the image of the activists and their cause.

However, in the background, nation-building work was still influenced by the legacies of earlier Russification policies. The latter still exercised their influence by inertia, since the Russian Empire no longer existed. In particular, these policies continued to contribute to the negative image of the Belarusian language, representing it as a part of peasant culture, thus making Belarusian national identification seem unattractive both for educated society and for those aspiring to achieve a superior social standing, i.e. the potential pool of future national activists. Qualitative changes regarding the status of Belarusian could be introduced only from a position of authority. If the governmental officials, teachers, and priests used it, it could acquire a more symbolical value for its native speakers; for instance, this is evident from the popular reactions to the attempts to incorporate the Belarusian language in church services. Here the use of pre-existing structures, as the example of Belarusian Catholics indicates, also played a role, although it should not be overestimated. Their influence was limited exclusively to the western areas (parts of Minsk and Vil'nia provinces). On the other hand, the persistent conservatism of the Orthodox church and its unwillingness to cooperate in the Belarusian nation-building project had a stronger negative effect on national consolidation. In addition, rural teachers, who were optimistically counted on to become the key actors in the Belarusian national movement, in reality exposed their anti-Belarusian positions in a series of congresses held throughout 1917. Nationally-engaged teachers at this time remained in the minority.

Apart from the legacies of Russian imperial policies, the chief obstacles for national activists in this period included the political power struggle between the leading parties in the Belarusian movement, which distracted them from “work with the people” in 1917. Another factor was the lack of constant communication with the provinces, as

activists did not visit some localities at all, whether due to financial constraints or to repercussions of the political situation along with the ongoing war. Newspapers also did not reach every settlement on a regular basis. In retrospect, Belarusian activists needed more time, yet by October 1917 they already had to combine their peaceful task of national agitation with more serious and far-reaching political decisions, which will be the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 4

The First All-Belarusian Congress

Focusing on the preparation and the convocation of the First All-Belarusian Congress on 5 – 17 (N. S. 18 – 31) December 1917 in Minsk, this chapter will address the consolidation attempts of the Belarusian national forces in the second half of 1917. The first notable development within the national milieu at this time was the effort of the newly formed Central Belarusian Military Rada to establish Belarusian army units. Simultaneously, the ineffective organization of the Belarusian movement in Minsk was rejuvenated by the creation of the Great Belarusian Rada, which was more inclusive in character than its predecessor, the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations, and oriented towards a broader program of national integration. Its main competitor for political leadership was the Belarusian Oblast' Committee, which originated from the All-Russian Soviet of Peasants' Deputies in Petrograd in November 1917. In contrast to the Great Belarusian Rada, it prioritized the maintenance of a very close connection to Russia. Despite the fundamental differences in their programs, these two rivalling centers emerged as the main co-organizers of the All-Belarusian Congress. Often described by contemporaries as a Belarusian version of the constituent assembly,¹ it was one of the key events of 1917 in the Belarusian national life. By looking at its most important aspects, including organizational difficulties, political issues of greatest concern, internal disagreements between various factions, and Bolshevik attempts to disrupt the work of the Congress, resulting in its violent dissolution and an assault on the Belarusian national movement on the whole, this chapter will provide an analysis and evaluation of the

¹ Ja. Varonko, *Bielaruski ruch ad 1917 da 1920 hodu. Karotki ahliad* (Koŭna: n. p., 1920), 7; A. Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk vozniknoveniia Belarusskoi narodnoi respubliki* (Kiev: n. p., 1918), 8.

significance of the Congress for the process of national mobilization.

The All-Belarusian Congress marked an important transition in the political positions of Belarusian activists. Its outcome eventually convinced them to abandon aspiring to achieve the status of an autonomous unit within a federative Russian republic, an attitude prevalent throughout 1917.² Yet while some researchers optimistically point to the secessionist moods of the Congress participants,³ my argument is going to be slightly different in the way that I regard not the Congress itself, but rather the consequences of its violent dissolution by the Minsk Bolshevik authorities as constituting the turning point in the political outlook of the Belarusian national movement.

While Belarusian historiography has produced a number of studies, incorporating the analysis of the First All-Belarusian Congress within the broader context of the revolutionary period,⁴ English-language research does not yet offer detailed accounts of this event. Apart from the most obvious explanation – the unpopular and rather marginal position of Belarusian studies in the West⁵ – this particular omission can also be explained by the scattered and incomplete documentation pertaining to the Congress. Full archival records of the proceedings were not preserved, while the fate of many important documents, including the shorthand records, remains unknown.⁶

² See Chapter 2 for the detailed analysis of their political positions in 1917.

³ Nicholas P. Vakar, *Belorussia: the Making of a Nation, A Case Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 100; Jury Vesialkoŭski, *Biellarus' u Pieršaj Susvietnaj vajne: historyčny narys* (Belastok-Liondan: n. p., 1996), 124; Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906 – 1931* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 77.

⁴ U. F. Ladyseŭ and P. I. Bryhadzin, *Pamiž Uschodam i Zachadam. Stanaŭlienne dzjaržaŭnasci i teryтарыjajnalaj celasnasci Biellarusi (1917 – 1939)* (Minsk: BDU 2003); Stanislaŭ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru. Prablema samavyznačennia Biellarusi ŭ 1917 hodzie* (Minsk: “Technalohija,” 2001); M. Ja. Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žycio na Biellarusi ŭ peryjad Liutaŭskaj i Kastryčnickaj revaliucyi: sakavik 1917- sakavik 1918 hh.* (Minsk: Biellaruski dzjaržaŭny pedahahičny universitet imia Maksima Tanki, 2001).

⁵ See for instance David Marples, “Belarusian Studies in the West,” *Belarusian Review* (Spring 2015), Vol. 27, Nr. 1: 2 – 3, <http://thepointjournal.com/fa/library/breview-271.pdf> (Accessed 31 March 2015); M. Paula Survilla, “Retrospective Positions and Introspective Critiques: A Belarusist in the Academic Trenches,” *Belarusian Review* (Spring 2015), Vol. 27, Nr. 1: 11 – 16, <http://thepointjournal.com/fa/library/breview-271.pdf> (Accessed 31 March 2015).

⁶ Vital' Skalaban, “Usiebiellaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: perspektyvy vyvučennia,” *Bialoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (2001), Nr. 15: 69.

According to the memoirs of Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ,⁷ the Congress produced a lot of materials, including the resolutions of separate sections, reports, summaries, and speeches. All of these documents were submitted to the Presidium of the Congress. Tamaš Hryb, in his capacity of secretary, was put in charge of keeping the official archives. He immediately declared his intention to prepare a publication of selected materials, yet any trace of the Congress archives is lost after 1918.⁸ Partly, Bolsheviks were also to blame, as they destroyed the documentation of some commissions during the violent dispersal of the Congress.⁹

Currently, preserved official Congress documents are available in the collections of the National Archive of the Republic of Belarus and the Lithuanian Central State Archive, although materials are scarce, not systematized and scattered across different archival holdings.¹⁰ Reports on the Congress proceedings were also available in the press in 1917. *Vol'naja Bielarus'* and *Belorusskaia Rada* provided coverage, while *Bielaruski Šliach* published some statistical data and summaries in 1918.¹¹ *Belorusskaia Rada* in particular is a valuable primary source, as it published a series of detailed records of the Congress proceedings compiled by Captain Jaruševič.¹² Moreover, memoirs of the

⁷ Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ (1893 – 1946), a native of Dzvinšk (Daugavpils) was a graduate of Viciebsk Teachers' College, earning a reputation as a prominent Belarusian national activist in the Russian army during the First World War. As the deputy chair of the Central Belarusian Military Rada in 1917, he supported the creation of the Belarusian army and participated in the First All-Belarusian Congress. In 1918, Jezavitaŭ served as the minister of defense in the government of the Belarusian Democratic Republic and later as its official representative to Latvia and Estonia. Between 1921 and 1944 he lived in Latvia, promoting Belarusian cultural initiatives and schooling. Arrested by the Soviets in 1945, he died in prison under unclear circumstances. See Vital' Silitski and Jan Zaprudnik, *Historical Dictionary of Belarus* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 165 – 166. More on Jezavitaŭ's activities in Belarus see Aleh Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR* (Bielastok: Bielaruskae Histaryčnaje Tavarystva, 2009), 44 – 63, 77 – 81, 132 – 136; in Latvia – Eriks Jekabsons, “Belorusy v Latvii v 1918 – 1940 godakh,” in *Bielaruskaja dyjaspara jak pasrednica ŭ dyjalohu cyvilizacyj. Materyjaly III Mižnarodnaha kanhresa bielarusistaŭ* (Minsk: Bielaruski knihazbor, 2001), 47 – 71.

⁸ Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, “Pieršy Ŭsiebielaruski Kanhres,” *Bielaruskaja Minuŭščyna* (1993), Nr. 1, 29.

⁹ “Bielaruski Konhres,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 25, 22 April, 1918, 1.

¹⁰ See f. 325 at Nacyjanal'ny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielarus' (hereafter NARB) and f. 582 at Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas (hereafter LCVA).

¹¹ See for instance “Ŭsiebielaruski Zjezd (Ahliad),” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 36, 31 December 1917, 1; “Bielaruski Konhres,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 26, 23 April 1918, 1.

¹² Due to the efforts of the archivist Vital' Skalaban, who traced the rare issues of this newspaper, protocols were re-published in *Bielaruski histaryčny časopis*. See issues Nr. 1 – 4 for 1993.

participants, as well as early attempts of historical analyses made by the contemporaries offer an additional perspective for research.¹³ However, in regard to the former, I take a critical approach, as sources of this type tend to be too optimistic in evaluations and suggestive in conclusions. In comparison, the available official protocols and minutes-style records taken by Jaruševič appear to be of greater value.

The Struggle for the Belarusian National Army During 1917

Given that it spread over the whole region of eastern Belarus, the Western front represented a considerable political factor during 1917. By February 1917, the 2nd, 3rd, and 10th Armies of the Western front altogether numbered more than 1.6 million soldiers, officers, and military personnel, most of whom were of non-Belarusian origin and therefore were not likely to care about local politics and concerns.¹⁴ By contrast, the Belarusian movement was surprisingly well-known and supported on the distant Romanian front, where a lot of ethnic Belarusians served.¹⁵ After the February Revolution, encouraged by the Petrograd Soviet, soldiers started organizing their own soviets in the armies, holding meetings and congresses, and electing soldiers' committees. The democratization of the former imperial army was enthusiastically welcomed by the rank-and-file. By September 1917, the number of soldiers' committees on the Western front reached more than 7,000.¹⁶ The central organization was formed earlier, in April, when military representatives of the Western front and its rear gathered in Minsk and formed the Executive Committee of the Western front (also known as the Front Committee); it was to become one of the leading political organizations on the Western

¹³ Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, "Pieršy Ŭsebielaruski Kanhres," *Bielaruskaja Minuŭščyna* (1993), Nr. 1: 25 – 29; Makar Kraŭcoŭ, "Razhon. Uspamin," *Bielaruskae žyccio*, 18 March 1920; Evsevii Kančer, "Iz istorii Graždanskoi voiny v Belorussii v 1917 – 1920 gg. Fragmenty 5-oi glavy," *Bielaruskaja Dumka* (2010), Nr. 1: 92 – 97; F. Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie. Ocherk istorii natsionalnogo i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia belorussov* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1921).

¹⁴ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 40.

¹⁵ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 52.

¹⁶ I. M. Ignatenko and G. V. Shtykhov, *Istoriia Belorusskoi SSR* (Minsk: "Nauka i tekhnika," 1977), 231.

front. At the time of its creation, it included thirty-two Socialist Revolutionaries, twenty-nine Social Democrats, and fourteen unaffiliated members.¹⁷

In regard to the establishment of national organizations of soldiers, the Russian army command at first adopted a cautious approach. However, as the year 1917 progressed, this idea started to gain more popularity, as it was assumed that the formation of national-territorial units would revitalize the army, fostering discipline and fighting efficiency.¹⁸ For instance, the command of the Romanian front supported the creation of national units in order to compete with the growing popularity of the Bolsheviks.¹⁹ Changing approaches of the Russian military command to the nationalization in the army are also illustrated by the case of the Polish units on the Western front. In June 1917, Poles who served in the Russian army held a general congress and decided on the formation of a Polish army. Initially, their efforts were fruitless, since Kerensky, who was the war minister at that time, did not support the idea of dividing the army along national lines. Permission to create Polish army units was granted by General Kornilov only in late July. After establishing the headquarters in Minsk, General Józef Dowbór-Muśnicki proceeded with the organization of the First Polish Corps.²⁰

Initially, Polish military units within the Russian army took the position of non-interference in Russian politics. Their main concern was their eventual return to Poland. Yet both Stavka and the soviets were closely observing the actions of the Polish Corps, worried about the reluctance of the latter to follow the order of democratization in the army.²¹ Dowbór-Muśnicki and his Corps were stationed on Belarusian territories and thus

¹⁷ Later the Executive Committee of the Western front fell under Bolshevik influence and in line with the primacy of class over nation, started to oppose national divisions and the creation of national organizations within the army. See Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 42.

¹⁸ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 139.

¹⁹ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 54.

²⁰ Wiktor Sukiennicki and Maciej Siekierski, *East Central Europe During World War I: From Foreign Domination to National Independence*. Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 330.

²¹ Siameńczyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio na Bielarusi*, 89.

are to be regarded as one of the external players in Belarusian politics after the October Revolution. At the time of the Bolshevik power takeover in Minsk in late October 1917, Polish troops declared neutrality, however, they also promised to protect the population of the city if needed.²² Later they confronted the Bolsheviks, in protest against the arrest of the commander of the Western front, General Baluev.²³ It is obvious that the Corps was gradually abandoning their declared neutral attitude. More importantly, Polish soldiers felt compelled to interfere in order to protect the interests of the Polish population in the regions of eastern Belarus, as the estates of many local landowners were pillaged and destroyed.²⁴ In November 1917, the Polish Corps headquarters were moved away from Minsk to the east, to the area encompassing the triangle of Rahačoŭ – Žlobin – Babrujsk.²⁵ In an attempt to boost its numbers, it conducted active agitation among the soldiers of the Western front. In particular, nationally indifferent Belarusian Catholics often chose to identify with the Polish national cause and joined the Corps.²⁶ Often they were not aware of alternatives, as Belarusian national activism in the army, not to mention the issue of national units, was still in the making and could not demonstrate comparable levels of recognition and appeal as did the Polish Corps. Polish military units would remain a factor to consider later in winter, when the Bolsheviks fled from Minsk in February of 1918.

The first organization of Belarusian soldiers emerged on 8 May 1917 in Riga, due to the efforts of Jazep Mamon'ka, who had been active in the national movement before the war and during his service in the 12th Army on the Northern front. The creation of the Belarusian Military Organization in Minsk followed on 15 May 1917. Yet at that

²² "U Minsku," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 29, 14 November 1917, 4.

²³ Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe During World War I*, 465.

²⁴ Józef Dowbór-Muśnicki, *Krótki szkic do historii I-go Polskiego Korpusu*. Cz. 2 (Warszawa: Placówka, 1919), 68 – 71, cited in Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe During World War I*, 465.

²⁵ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio na Bielarusi*, 89.

²⁶ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 43.

time, the need for establishing a Belarusian army was not addressed at all. Initially, the goals and demands of these groups were only cultural and social in character.²⁷ Such an approach can be explained by the fact that Belarusian political actors in 1917 preferred to act from a premise that assumed the continued existence of the Russian state, renewed as a democratic federation. An intention to establish a national army in these circumstances would have automatically signalled separatist tendencies. However, such a cautious approach did not enjoy unanimous support in the Belarusian national milieu. For instance, delegate Sušynski, representing the Belarusian People's Party of Socialists (BNPS) at the Congress of Belarusian Public and Party Organizations on 8 – 10 July 1917, criticized national activists for thinking of the future with only Russia in mind, while forgetting about the priority to take care of the Belarusian people and to consolidate all national forces. Sušynski specifically emphasized the need to organize activists in the military.²⁸

However, as Sušynski's party, the BNPS, was defeated in the political struggle with the BSH in July 1917, it also lost the ability to influence the decision-making process. The BSH became a dominant voice in the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations, established as the leading organ of the Belarusian movement in July 1917. It retained a reluctant attitude towards the creation of Belarusian army units. For instance, this is evident from the official approval of the regulations for establishing Belarusian groups in the army, adopted on 5 August 1917. These groups were to be subordinated to the Rada, while primary goals were defined to be cultural and educational in character. Remarkably, soldiers were forbidden to proceed with the establishment of the Belarusian regiments without the explicit consent of the Rada.²⁹

Yet the voices of the soldiers from already existing organizations rather proved

²⁷ Ibid., 40 – 41.

²⁸ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 11, 3 August 1917, 3.

²⁹ See Prilozhenie Nr. 11 “Statut Bielaruskich Nacyanalnych Kul'turna-Pras'vetnych Hurtkoŭ u Vojsku,” in Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 94.

to indicate the opposite, namely, that there was a genuine need for Belarusian regiments among the rank-and-file soldiers. Activists in the army pointed out that the masses of nationally indifferent Belarusian soldiers urgently needed strong leadership, which would motivate and encourage them by setting an example and demonstrating the attractiveness of the national cause. For instance, in June 1917 a group of Belarusian soldiers from Veliž (Viciebsk province) sent a collective letter to the Belarusian National Committee, expressing their gratitude for the BSH newspaper *Hramada*. They mentioned that both the newspaper and the proclamations of the Belarusian National Committee enjoyed a lot of popularity, as all copies were very quickly distributed. The chairman of the group, Andrej Kaliadka, also felt compelled to share his experiences of organizing a Belarusian group. He regretted that it was a slow process, mostly due to the fact that soldiers in his regiment were “downtrodden people”³⁰ *en masse*. Apparently, ordinary soldiers felt ashamed to join the Belarusian group and communicate in Belarusian, as they experienced strong peer pressure from Russians, who outnumbered them in the regiment. Most likely, these feelings had roots in the legacies of the Russification policies, and the resulting image of the Belarusian language as a backward “peasant dialect.” Among other major obstacles, Kaliadka identified the weak sense of national belonging and the lack of Belarusian officers. The latter became an especially clear issue for those activists in the army, who had the ability to observe the much stronger army organizations of the Ukrainians, and compare these to their own modest successes. Soldiers from Veliž suggested the creation of exclusively Belarusian regiments as a potentially effective solution for their problem, yet they realistically noted the lack of a central organization which could enforce such a decision.³¹

A different example from the Northern front shows that the presence of

³⁰ “Bielaruskamu Nacyanalnomy Kamitetu ŭ h. Minsku,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 3, 20 June 1917, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

dedicated activists and stronger organizational structures were crucial to spearheading soldiers' involvement in national affairs. In July 1917 Belarusian soldiers from the 12th Army created a temporary committee uniting about 1,000 members in its ranks.³² Their general assembly, held on 2 August 1917, was attended by nearly 600 soldiers. It elected an executive committee consisting of twenty members, including Jazep Mamon'ka. The committee decided to establish contacts with central Belarusian organizations immediately, so as to find resources for the creation and support of already existing national groups within the army. They also intended to start cultural propaganda in order to develop and strengthen national self-consciousness among Belarusians serving in the army.³³ Similarly to the soldiers serving in Veliž, their counterparts from the Northern front were also under pressure to identify as Russians. Assembly proceedings of the 12th Army indicate high levels of assimilation: soldiers decided to hold the meetings and keep the protocols in Russian due to the insufficient knowledge of Belarusian by the majority of participants. Remarkably, they also made a conscious choice to overcome and reverse the assimilation process, as they opted to keep all correspondence with the central national organizations exclusively in Belarusian, welcomed the attempts to speak Belarusian during the meetings, and planned to change to literary Belarusian completely in due course.³⁴

Belarusian soldiers' organizations were able to move forward from cultural to political demands as the political situation radicalized during the summer of 1917, and it became clear that the Russian state was falling apart along with its army. Another factor was the unwillingness of Kerensky to consider Belarusian requests for national military units, while similar requests had been granted to Ukrainians, Poles, and Latvians. Jazep

³² Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 41.

³³ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 10.

³⁴ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 8.

Varonka interpreted this discriminatory position of the Provisional Government as an obstacle for the “most necessary and vital manifestation of the national movement.”³⁵ By the fall of 1917, considerations of the Provisional Government were cast aside, as it was decided to act in “a revolutionary way.”³⁶ The Belarusian national movement in the army “exploded suddenly and spontaneously.”³⁷ According to the report from the 10th Army (South-Western front), soldiers enthusiastically decided to proceed with Belarusian groups, elected a delegation for the front congress in Kyiv, and voiced a clear demand for a Belarusian army.³⁸

General disillusionment with the state authorities contributed to the growing feeling among the soldiers to take matters into their own hands. One of the sources of dissatisfaction with the government was its neglect in keeping the promise of the right to national self-determination. Soldiers from the 12th Army were disappointed that the Russian central government was depriving nationalities of even those rights which the latter received through the revolution, noting that throughout the revolutionary year Belarusians always supported Russian democracy, in the hope that the rights of all nations, including the smallest ones, would be guaranteed. Moreover, central authorities were accused of being unable to establish order, instead encouraging anarchy. In particular, soldiers were embittered that national self-determination had to be achieved through struggle and that the first Belarusian regiments in Minsk and Viciebsk were emerging spontaneously, in “a revolutionary manner,” facing severe restrictions from the army command.³⁹

Another source of discontent in the army was the scope of the refugee problem.

³⁵ Ja.Varonko, *Biellaruski ruch ad 1917 da 1920 hodu: Karotki ahliad* (Koŭna, 1920), 5.

³⁶ Lietuvos Mokslų Akademijos Vrublevskių Biblioteka, Rankraščių Skyrius (hereafter LMAVB, RS), f. 21, b. 2077, l. 15.

³⁷ “Dopisy,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 32, 30 November 1917, 3.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Biulleten' Belorusskoi Rady XII armii*, Nr. 1, 18 December 1917, 1.

It convinced even less politically-involved soldiers that the state was no longer capable of protecting its own citizens. For instance, when the delegates from the 10th Army returned from their trip to Moscow and Petrograd, where they travelled in order to receive more information regarding refugee relief, the news of the unfortunate situation of the refugees and the ineffective work of responsible committees offended many in the army. Soldiers who had spent years in the trenches were outraged to learn that in addition to their privations, their families too were subjected to humiliation, hunger, and distrust.⁴⁰ This loss of faith in the state powers made it notably easier to appeal to the patriotic feelings among the refugees and soldiers, encouraging them to engage in political activities.⁴¹

Central Belarusian Military Rada

A crucial event for the national organization in the army was the Congress of Belarusian soldiers of the Western front, which met in Minsk on 18 – 24 October 1917. The 12th Army of the Northern front, the Baltic fleet, Finland, and the Romanian front also sent their representatives to this Congress. All participants agreed that creation of a Belarusian army was a necessary and urgent matter. In an attempt to coordinate the work of all Belarusian organizations in the army, the Congress agreed to establish the Central Belarusian Military Rada (CBVR, Central'naja Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Rada), which was put in charge of organizing Belarusian army units.⁴² The CBVR closely cooperated with the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations, which at this time was transformed into the Great Belarusian Rada.⁴³

One of the main initiators of the army congress on the Western front was Symon Rak-Michajloŭski, who was in many ways a typical example of a national activist:

⁴⁰ "Dopisy," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 32, 30 November 1917, 3.

⁴¹ Zachar Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi: 1795 – 2002* (Minsk: Encykłapedyks, 2003), 187.

⁴² NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 40.

⁴³ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2077, l. 15.

he started his career as a teacher in the Svianciany and Vilejka districts, where he collected local folklore and songs and became involved in local politics. In 1906, he distributed revolutionary proclamations of the BSH and travelled to St. Petersburg to the State Duma in the capacity of a peasant petitioner. The Russian authorities treated him as a politically unreliable person. Later this forced him to seek higher education opportunities far away from home, in Feodosiia. Nevertheless, Rak-Michajloŭski maintained strong patriotic feelings, subscribed to *Naša Niva* and *Biellarus*, and even named his children after Rahvalod and Rahnieda (the legendary Polatsk ruler and his daughter who lived in the 9th century). With the start of the First World War he was mobilized into the Russian army and sent to the Western front. Immediately after the February Revolution, Rak-Michajloŭski reappeared on the Belarusian political scene, joined the revived BSH, and participated in the work of the First Congress of Belarusian National Organizations in March 1917. He was active both in promoting Belarusian national schooling and advocating for the cause of the Belarusian army, assisting in the organization of the army congresses.⁴⁴

It is a lesser known fact that Rak-Michajloŭski was not able to supervise the organization of the Congress of Belarusian soldiers of the Western front personally, as he could not voluntarily leave his regiment stationed near Maladzečna. All technicalities became the responsibility of Zos'ka Vieras,⁴⁵ who was later known as the only woman present at the Congress. According to her memoirs, she was treated in the same manner as

⁴⁴ Ales' Paškievič, "Symon Rak-Michajloŭski: staronki žyccia i dziejnasci," *Kuferak Vilenščyny* (2007), Nr. 1 (12): 6 – 7.

⁴⁵ Zos'ka Vieras (real name Ludvika Sivickaja) was known as a public figure, a writer, and a translator. During 1917 she worked for the Minsk branch of the Belarusian Society for the Aid of War Victims and the Belarusian National Committee. She was actively engaged in national politics and served as a secretary for the majority of Belarusian congresses in 1917. See I. U. Salamievič, "Vieras," in *Encyklapedyja history Bielarusi*, ed. M. V. Bič, T. 2 (Minsk: Bielaruskaja Encyklapedyja imia Pietrusia Broŭki, 1994), 246.

any other participant.⁴⁶ Following the example set by the overwhelming majority of the Congress participants, she also entered her name in the lists for future Belarusian regiments.⁴⁷

The core of the CBVR formed on 20 October 1917, and consisted of fifteen persons. On 24 October Rak-Michajloŭski was elected as the head of the temporary Executive Committee of the CBVR, while Jazep Mamon'ka and Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ acted as his deputies. Viačaslaŭ Adamovič, Vasil' Zacharka, Ihnat Dvarčanin, and Fabian Šantyr were all counted among its notable activists on the Western front.⁴⁸ On 25 November 1917 the Executive Committee of the CBVR started publishing its own newspaper, *Belorusskaia Rada*, edited by Captain Jaruševič. Its primary goal was to promote the All-Belarusian Congress, while later, in December 1917, the newspaper also closely followed the proceedings of the Congress.⁴⁹ Another initiative of the Executive Committee of the CBVR was the preparation of separate Belarusian congresses of the Northern, South-Western, and Romanian fronts in Viciebsk, Kyiv, and Odessa respectively. The aim was to consolidate support at these fronts for the CBVR as the central military organization.⁵⁰ All congresses delegated their representatives to the CBVR. Its first expansion included fifteen persons, elected at the Congress of Belarusian

⁴⁶ The contributions of women to the Belarusian national movement were recognized and valued by their contemporaries, who also noted that the amount of work in already existing national organizations prevented women from organizing women's national groups. Women in turn considered the creation of their own national organization to be a more private and less urgent matter, which could wait until better times. See A. Vilejski, "Žanočy ruch," *Bielarus'*, Nr. 22 (49), 14 November 1919, 1. the same attitude regarding the question of women as a part of a larger project persisted in the interwar period, when they were perceived as a part of a class in Soviet Belarus and as a part of a nation in the eyes of Belarusian activists in the Second Polish Republic. As Elena Gapova has argued, in both cases it was assumed that the success of the larger project would result in liberation for women too. See Elena Gapova, "The Woman Question and National Projects in Soviet Byelorussia and Western Belarus (1921 – 1939)," in *Zwischen Kriegen: Nationen, Nationalismen und Geschlechterverhältnisse in Mittel- und Osteuropa, 1918 – 1939*, eds. Johanna Gehmacher, Elizabeth Harvey, and Sophia Kemlein (Osnabrück: Fibre, 2004), 128.

⁴⁷ Zos'ka Vieras, *Ja pomniu ūsio: uspaminy, listy* (Harodnia – Wrocław: Haradzienskaja biblijateka, 2013), 55 – 56.

⁴⁸ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 42, 44; Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk*, 8.

⁴⁹ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio na Bielarusi*, 101.

⁵⁰ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 36.

soldiers of the Northern front, which took place on 15 – 20 November 1917 in Viciebsk. By late December, Belarusians serving at the Romanian and South-Western fronts sent to the CBVR two further groups of fifteen representatives.⁵¹ Overall, by January 1918 the CBVR numbered over one hundred delegates, working in Minsk, its surroundings, and on the fronts.⁵²

The front congresses of Belarusian soldiers served the dual purpose of political organization along with national agitation. The latter aspect was sometimes even more distinctly expressed. According to a report from the South-Western front, many of the delegates showed up at the front congress without any previous knowledge of the Belarusian movement, while some delegates were even in opposition to it, as apparently they were deeply convinced that it was nothing more than a dangerous separatist trend.⁵³ Yet the majority of them also cared deeply about the future of their homeland, and therefore they could be convinced that the fate of Belarus had to be decided upon by Belarusians themselves. The congress eventually revealed the strong wishes of all Belarusians to protect their own interests and needs. Further, it demanded Belarusian autonomy together with the organization of a Belarusian army to protect the country from the chaos, while the resolutions were dominated by the theme of “Belarusian People's Power.”⁵⁴

Thus, by the end of October 1917, the situation was favourable for proceeding with the practical steps for implementing resolutions concerning Belarusian army units. By that time General Kipryjan Kandratovič had drafted a plan, which was to be presented to the Supreme Commander-in-Chief. However, the timing of this request was rather

⁵¹ Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, “Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Rada,” *Kryvič*, Nr. 1 (7), 1924, 45.

⁵² Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, “Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Rada,” *Kryvič*, Nr. 9, 1925, 89.

⁵³ “Zjezd voinaŭ-bielarusau paudz.-zachod. frontu ŭ h. Kievi,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 36, 31 December 1917, 4.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

unfortunate, coinciding with the October Revolution.⁵⁵ Bolsheviks were busy securing their grip on power and setting up new government structures. Reorganizations in the army promptly followed, when the responsibilities of the former imperial Ministry of War were transferred to a Committee for Naval and Military Affairs.⁵⁶ Despite the general support of the military for Soviet power, especially considering the popular Decree on Peace, Bolsheviks still had to assert themselves against the old Russian military command, the officer corps, and generals at the Stavka in Mahilioŭ, who in an attempt to preserve the army, adopted a “wait-and-see” approach after the October Revolution, hoping that Bolsheviks would not last long in power.⁵⁷

The days of the old General Headquarters (Stavka) were numbered, when Lenin ordered the Commander-in-Chief General Nikolai Dukhonin to start negotiating a separate peace with the Germans. Dukhonin faced a dilemma, since by obeying this demand he would have recognized Bolshevik power, while ignoring it would have increased his unpopularity among the soldiers. The general hesitated in implementing the order, which only resulted in his removal from the position of Commander-in-Chief. His replacement was a former ensign, Bolshevik Nikolai Krylenko, who immediately started his journey to Mahilioŭ to take charge of the Stavka, accompanied by a group of Baltic sailors.⁵⁸ The army was split, as the Northern front and some parts of the Western front recognized the command of Krylenko, while Romanian, South-Western, and parts of the Western fronts hesitated to switch sides and formally still remained under the command of Dukhonin, who was desperately trying to retain some semblance of control over the

⁵⁵ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 35.

⁵⁶ John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command. A Military-Political History, 1918 – 1941* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 12; Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse. The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 227.

⁵⁷ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 264 – 265.

⁵⁸ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 14 – 15.

disintegrating military structures.⁵⁹

It is clear that under these circumstances, the issue of a future Belarusian army was not among the top priorities for either side in the Russian Revolution. Therefore, to maximize their efforts, Belarusian representatives petitioned both Dukhonin and Krylenko, seeking support and approval for the Belarusian regiments. By that time General Kandratovič had already developed a plan for the establishment of the Belarusian regiment in Minsk and the Belarusian Corps on the Western front, but he hesitated to implement it independently. As any loyal officer would, he was still patiently waiting for an official order from the Stavka.⁶⁰ In late October a delegation from the Western front, consisting of Symon Rak-Michajloŭski, General Kandratovič, Jaruševič, and Ščerba went to Mahilioŭ to see Dukhonin, who kept them waiting for a week, eventually refusing to give a conclusive and straightforward answer.⁶¹ Distracted by the Bolshevik takeover of power, Dukhonin ignored Belarusian matters and limited his actions to allowing the formation of the First Belarusian Regiment in Minsk.⁶²

The second delegation, headed by Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, was sent to the Bolshevik authorities by the Congress of Belarusian soldiers of the Northern front. Belarusians managed to meet Krylenko in his railway carriage in Viciebsk on 19 November 1917, when he and his sailors were en route to Mahilioŭ to advance on Stavka.⁶³ The Belarusian delegation requested permission for the formation of the first Belarusian regiment, and in contrast to the modest results achieved by the first delegation, in negotiating with Dukhonin, this request was granted. Another request for the formation of the Belarusian Corps, following the scheme for the formation of the Polish Corps, did

⁵⁹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 35.

⁶⁰ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 45; Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 187.

⁶¹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 35.

⁶² K. Jezavitaŭ, "Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Rada," *Kryvič*, Nr. 1 (7), 1924, 40.

⁶³ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 46. See also report of Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ: NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 36.

not meet any obstacles, however, in this instance the delegation was offered to present a detailed plan for examination and approval.⁶⁴

By the time Krylenko arrived in Stavka, the Mahilioŭ Military-Revolutionary Committee, consisting of the representatives of the Mahilioŭ Soviet and the Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Western front, had proclaimed itself as the highest authority in the city.⁶⁵ After Dukhonin was murdered by an angry mob on 20 November, the resolution on the creation of the Belarusian regiments was forwarded to the main headquarters of the Western front, which prepared a draft of a corresponding order. It had been signed by the commander of the Western front Aleksandr Miasnikov (Miasnikian) and even sent to the press to be published. However, when the Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Western front learned about this, it urged Krylenko to cancel his approval. The latter did not completely obey this demand, but used it as an excuse to postpone the decision on the Belarusian regiments until the convocation of the All-Belarusian Congress. He also suspended the formation of the unit, which already numbered 350 soldiers. His initial order was not released from the printing house.⁶⁶

According to Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, people from the rear and the fronts were unaware of these rapid developments and continued to arrive in Minsk, in hopes of joining the national army. The Executive Committee of the CBVR managed to obtain a permit to send volunteers to one of the Minsk-based regiments (289th Reserve Infantry Regiment), cherishing the secret hope to make it Belarusian by that fact, thus bypassing the lack of an official order.⁶⁷ Eventually, Bolsheviks discovered a growing Belarusian presence in the 289th Reserve Infantry Regiment and attempted to remove it from Minsk.

⁶⁴ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 37.

⁶⁵ A. I. Azarov, ed., *Iz istorii ustanovleniia sovetskoj vlasti v Belorussii i obrazovaniia BSSR: dokumenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii*. T. 4 (Minsk: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk BSSR, 1954), 279.

⁶⁶ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 37.

⁶⁷ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 38.

They managed to achieve this goal in a peaceful way by promising the soldiers lucrative work in bread convoys. In this manner the regiment members were persuaded to leave the city.⁶⁸ It is assumed that CBVR could not afford to secure soldiers' provisions. The regiment was spread along the railway lines connecting Minsk with Viciebsk, Smolensk, and Orel. Later it disintegrated from within, as in the absence of any strong leadership, soldiers decided to abandon the regiment and return home.⁶⁹ With regard to the events in December 1917, this meant that there would be no loyal soldiers in Minsk to guard and protect the work of the All-Belarusian Congress.

Unfortunately for further attempts to organize the Belarusian army, the Bolsheviks started to panic, alarmed by their conflict with the Ukrainian Rada, which caused them to reconsider their position on national regiments.⁷⁰ Already by 8 December 1917, Krylenko ordered to stall the nationalization process in the army, prohibited national congresses in the front zones, resolutely stopped the Ukrainization in process, and issued an order to the Polish armed forces, requiring absolute subordination.⁷¹ According to some reports from the army, this order was not implemented strictly. Rather, the Bolshevik authorities tried to use it as leverage in bargaining for the recognition of Soviet power. Rank-and-file soldiers pointed out the hypocrisy of the Bolshevik army commanders, who in their opinion were abusing the idea national self-determination.⁷² One of the examples which was published in the press was the incident involving delegates from the Belarusian Rada of the 12th Army and a certain S. Nakhimson, who was the chair of the Executive Committee of the Soviet of the Soldiers' Deputies of the 12th Army, also known as Iskosol. In exchange for a written recognition of the power of

⁶⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 43.

⁶⁹ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 54.

⁷⁰ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio na Bielarusi*, 89.

⁷¹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 42.

⁷² *Biulleten' Belorusskoi Rady XII armii*, Nr. 1, 18 December 1917, 1.

the people's commissars, Nakhimson promised the members of the Rada assistance in obtaining permission for the establishment of the Belarusian national army units, thus de facto offering them an exemption from Krylenko's order. Belarusian soldiers in the 12th Army were outraged that the Bolsheviks were trying to sell them a right which they considered to be theirs by the power of the revolution.⁷³ Protesting the ban on the nationalization of the army, they sent a telegram addressed to Krylenko and Stalin on 9 December, stating that “Belarusians are choosing the way of an open struggle for their rights” and that “as a nationality which recognizes only its own local and elected Great Belarusian Rada, we will join the group of those nations who intend to save the Homeland and the Constituent Assembly.”⁷⁴

In this context, it was unlikely that the delegation sent by the Executive Committee of the CBVR would have been able to make any progress with the Bolsheviks regarding the official permission for national units. Ivan Sierada and Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ still managed to see Krylenko, who promised them to issue a new order for the Belarusian army and suggested establishing contact with the commander of the Western front Miasnikov. Yet for Jezavitaŭ, it was also evident that both Krylenko and Miasnikov were manipulating them, as he saw that in reality Bolsheviks were using various excuses to prevent the organization of the Belarusian army.⁷⁵ For instance, when Miasnikov appointed a special commission to deal with the issue of Belarusian regiments, he deliberately chose such members who were paralysing its work.⁷⁶

Despite the clear presence of support for national units among the rank-and-file soldiers in the army, the crucial official decision authorizing the creation of Belarusian regiments was delayed until late 1917, when political circumstances were rather

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁵ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 52.

⁷⁶ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 43.

unfavourable. Unfortunate timing was reinforced by the marginal influence of Belarusian political organizations on internal Russian politics, and a lack of effective leverage on the decision-making process. Moreover, the cautious actions of the Belarusian officers in charge of national units indicated that they were still reluctant to act as the representatives of a nation, failing to realize that revolutionary times required and, most importantly, justified more resolute steps.

“To All Belarusian People”: The Great Belarusian Rada in Minsk

By October 1917, Belarusian national activists of various political backgrounds realized the growing dangers of being sidelined by external political forces. The idea of calling a country-wide congress was circulating in the Belarusian national milieu even in the early months of 1917, but only the radicalization of the political situation later in the year prompted more actions in this direction, initiated simultaneously by at least four different organizational centers. Among them were the Great Belarusian Rada from Minsk, the Belarusian Oblast' Committee from Petrograd, the Belarusian People's Hramada from Moscow, and the Regional Organizational Bureau, consisting of peasants' deputies of the Minsk and Vil'nia provinces and rightist teachers' unions. All of these organizations did not strive for cooperation; on the contrary, they all preferred to act independently in the matter of the convocation of the All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917, which resulted in misunderstandings. For instance, there was confusion concerning the dates of the Congress opening, as two different days – the 5 and 15 of December – were suggested and advertised.⁷⁷ On a larger scale, this was a reflection of the competition between the two centers which emerged as the leading organizers of the Congress: the Great Belarusian Rada and the Belarusian Oblast' Committee, representing

⁷⁷ Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk*, 8 – 9; Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 167 – 168; Skalaban, “Usiebielaruski Zjezd,” 68.

the broad coalition of national activists in Minsk, and the Belarusians in the All-Russian Soviet of Peasants' Deputies in Petrograd, West-Russist in their ideological outlooks, respectively.

The Great Belarusian Rada was an attempt by Belarusian national activists to consolidate their forces politically, in light of the radicalizing political situation. It was created in October 1917 as an upgraded replacement for the short-lived and ineffective Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations. The latter existed briefly for several months, from July until October 1917, and only caused the structural weakening of the Belarusian movement by privileging the political views of the BSH. The emphasis on the socialist program, along with the intensification of class rhetoric to the detriment of national consolidation, alienated some of the moderate national activists. Consequently, the Central Rada was perceived as a leftist organization, which prevented it from becoming a truly unifying structure. Moreover, the Rada itself had limited ambitions as it preferred to act exclusively as a central organ of existing Belarusian organizations.⁷⁸ Finally, the BSH could not claim large bases of support outside of the Minsk province. Existing organizations in the Mahilioŭ and Viciebsk provinces were leaning towards liberal West-Russism and were not always enthusiastic about including the same amount of Belarusian national rhetoric in their programs as the BSH had.⁷⁹ According to Jazep Dyla, Minsk remained the only likely choice to be the center of Belarusian politics, since Viciebsk apparently was “a nest of former Black Hundreders,” Mahilioŭ was “sleepy,” while so-called “democrats” from Homiel' almost beat up an agitator sent by the Central Rada from Minsk.⁸⁰

In terms of efficiency the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations did not

⁷⁸ See Chapter 2.

⁷⁹ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio na Bielarusi*, 167.

⁸⁰ “II-ja sesija Central'naje Rady Bielaruskich Arhanizacyj,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 26, 26 October 1917, 4.

achieve anything of significance. Delegates who arrived to attend its 2nd session on 15 – 21 October 1917 in Minsk, immediately complained about the work of the Executive Committee, or rather the lack thereof. Later, the reports of the Executive Committee also revealed that only two out of its nine members were making real contributions, while the rest occupied their positions only formally. Criticism and discussion were not confined to the internal debates and spilled over on the pages of *Vol'naja Bielarus'*. The newspaper mentioned the issue of “random people” in the Executive Committee, who “did not understand the tasks of the national revival,” and were “unfit for political and cultural work.”⁸¹ Apparently, Smolič and Badunova were offended by the criticism and reacted to this article with protests.⁸² A larger problem however, was pointed out by Dyla, who chaired the 2nd session of the Central Rada, addressing the issue of the local intelligentsia, whose origin was Belarusian, yet most of whom were known to have been working for other national organizations. These individuals were often even praised as the most devoted “Russians” and “Poles.”⁸³ Other delegates echoed Dyla’s realistic assessment, regretting that national forces were scattered, while the intelligentsia and peasantry still remained undecided.⁸⁴

Further discussion uncovered financial difficulties due to insufficient donations from lower level organizations. All that the Central Rada managed since July 1917 was to send its representatives to various congresses, including the Congress of Nationalities of Russia in Kyiv, the All-Russian Democratic Conference held in Petrograd, and the Refugee Congress in Moscow.⁸⁵ These efforts were not completely in vain, as in regard to the Moscow event, Prušynski noted that refugees in Russia were not informed about the

⁸¹ “Vialikaja Bielaruskaja Rada,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 27, 30 October 1917, 1.

⁸² *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 28, 8 November 1917, 4.

⁸³ “II-ja sesija Central'naje Rady Bielaruskich Arhanizacyj,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 26, 26 October 1917, 4.

⁸⁴ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 27, 30 October 1917, 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

situation in Minsk at all and generally viewed Belarusian patriots with suspicions, either as “Polish servants” or “intriguers.” Only after several days of communication between the Minsk activists and refugees could both sides reach some understanding.⁸⁶ Similar to the situation in the armies, the need for disseminating information and national agitation were to be regarded as primary tasks. Promotion of the Belarusian national idea among the refugees in the Russian provinces was especially weak and suffered from a lack of funding.⁸⁷

The 2nd session of the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations coincided in time with the 3rd Congress of the BSH, the dominant party of the Rada. The debates from 14 – 20 October revealed that Hramada apparently lacked “organizational unity.”⁸⁸ The right wing of the BSH leaned towards a wider national program, demonstrating more flexibility, while its left wing continued to adhere to the primacy of socialist principles. The uncompromising position of the left faction is obvious from the case of Fabian Šantyr,⁸⁹ the head of the BSH section in Babrujsk. Protocols of the 3rd Congress of the BSH indicate that Šantyr wrote an offensive letter to the Congress of his party after his expulsion from the BSH faction in the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations. He opposed the opening up of the BSH towards broader democratic circles of society, labelling this change in the approach as cooperation with the bourgeoisie and a betrayal of

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Representative of Belnackam (Belarusian National Commissariat) reported in 1918 that Belarusian refugees in the Saratov province were completely apolitical and did not have any information on the situation in Belarus. See NARB, f. 4, vop. 1, spr. 67, ark. 4.

⁸⁸ Z. Žylunovič, “Liuty – Kastyryčnik u bielaruskim nacyjanalnym ruchu,” in *Biellarus'. Narysy historyi, ekanomiki, kul'turnaha i revoliucyjnaha ruchu*, ed. A. Stašeŭski et al. (Mensk: Vydannie Centralnaha Komitetu Bielaruskae Savieckae Socyjalistyčnae Respubliki, 1924), 193.

⁸⁹ Šantyr had a reputation for being a radical leftist and is known as the first Belarusian activist who changed sides and cooperated with the Bolsheviks. In the government of Soviet Belarus he was given the position of the People's Commissar of Nationalities. However, his relations with the Bolshevik authorities were short-lived, as Šantyr disagreed with Bolshevik policy of treating Belarus as a puppet state and dividing its territories at will. Šantyr was arrested in February 1919 and shot by the Bolshevik authorities in 1920. See Vitaut and Zora Kipel, eds., *Byelorussian Statehood. Reader and Bibliography* (New York: Byelorussian Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1988), 354; Uladzimer Arloŭ, *Imiony svabody* (Radye Svobodnaja Eŭropa/Radye Svaboda, 2007), 148 – 149.

the principles of the socialist class struggle. He lamented that the masses were allegedly directed to “the road of chauvinism and loud patriotism.”⁹⁰ Following this incident, the BSH Congress decided on Šantyr's expulsion from the ranks of the party.⁹¹

Šantyr was not the only one who prioritized class struggle over national consolidation. Eventually, the issue of electing the representative to the Council of Nationalities in Kyiv sparked the party split. After a member of the right BSH faction suggested Raman Skirmunt as a possible candidate,⁹² leftists predictably reacted with resolute protests. They considered this proposal outrageous and “compromising to the Belarusian national-revolutionary movement.”⁹³ As Skirmunt's nomination was not dismissed immediately, the left faction of the BSH walked out of the session in protest, thus making prospects of further cooperation impossible. Leftists later endorsed cooperation with the Bolsheviks and supported them after the October Revolution.⁹⁴

With the evident internal weaknesses of the BSH and its failures to guide the work of the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations, the need for a stronger, more authoritative organization able to unify and direct national mobilization efforts was obvious. A major structural change to the Central Rada was agreed on 17 October 1917. The general meeting approved its transformation into the Great Belarusian Rada (VBR, Vialikaja Bielaruskaja Rada).⁹⁵ Anticipating legitimation by popular support, the VBR hesitated to declare its power ambitions immediately. One of the first steps was sending its own members, known as commissars of the VBR, to Petrograd in order to ensure that the interests of Belarusians were represented. Jazep Varonka was among the

⁹⁰ “Adozva Central'naha Arhanizacyjnaha Kamitetu Bielaruskaj Sacyjalistyčnaj Hramady ũ Babrujsku i Vykanaučaha Kamitetu Babrujskaj Rady Saldackich Deputataŭ,” in Anatol' Sidarevič, “Da historyi Bielaruskaj Sacyjalistyčnaj Hramady: ahliad krynicaŭ,” *ARCHE* (2006), Nr. 4: 171.

⁹¹ “Pratakol III Zjezdu Bielaruskaj Sacyjalistyčnaj Hramady,” in *ibid.*, 168.

⁹² Skirmunt's background – he was a landowner – made him an unacceptable candidate for the left.

⁹³ Žylunovič, “Liuty – Kastryčnik,” 193.

⁹⁴ Emanuil Iofe, “Neviadomy Zmicier Žylunovič,” *Maladosc'* (November 2012), Nr. 780: 88; Žylunovič, “Liuty – Kastryčnik,” 194.

⁹⁵ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 27, 30 October 1917, 1.

representatives. On 27 October the VBR issued a “Letter to the Belarusian People,” signed by a broad coalition, including the CBVR, the Belarusian Executive Committee of the Western front, the BSH, and the BNPS. Unification of Belarusians into one big family around the VBR was proclaimed to be the main goal.⁹⁶

The VBR viewed Belarus as a single entity, consisting of Vil'nia, Viciebsk, Hrodna, Minsk, and Mahilioŭ provinces. Belarusians, regardless of their religious affiliations, were addressed as members of one nation, united by a common language and history.⁹⁷ So-called “brotherly ties” to the Russian federative republic were not left out of the declaration, but the emphasis was clearly shifting due to the prevailing circumstances, forcing Belarusians to rely only on their own forces to protect their freedom and secure their national future.⁹⁸ The overall tone of the VBR declaration “To All Belarusian People” suggests that the new organization defined its tasks in terms of the unity of the Belarusian nation. The VBR appealed to the right of Belarusians to remain together, inseparable as a nation, and viewed the formation of the national army units as one of the indispensable guarantees of this unity. Further, it promised fair and free-of-charge redistribution of the land to the people, protection of the existing resources of the country, and prohibition of requisitions in all of Belarus (which was especially important for the population living in the devastated front line regions). Successful implementation of these tasks was to be entrusted exclusively to the local power elected by the Belarusian people. In practical terms, this issue was to be resolved at the congress of the nation's representatives, scheduled to take place on 5 December 1917 in Minsk.⁹⁹

On 18 November 1917, the Executive Committee of the VBR forwarded the

⁹⁶ See Prilozhenie Nr. 12 “Hramata da Bielaruskaho Narodu,” in Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 95 – 96; *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, reprinted in “Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika,” *Bielaruski histaryčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 4: 51.

⁹⁷ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 58.

⁹⁸ Prilozhenie Nr. 13 “Ko vsemu Narodu Belorusskomu,” in Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 97.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

information on the convocation of the All-Belarusian Congress to the provinces, inviting their delegates to Minsk. The creation of local Belarusian democratic power and the protection of the interests of Belarusian people who “could and would not remain indifferent to their own fate” were defined as its main goals.¹⁰⁰ Instructions received by the delegates from their constituencies reflected a popular acceptance of the VBR program. For instance, the Mahilioŭ National Committee prioritized international politics, including the representation of Belarusian interests at the peace negotiations, the establishment of Belarusian autonomy, and the immediate organization of national army units in order to ensure preservation of remaining national wealth and guarantee the right of Belarusians to self-determination.¹⁰¹ Similar moods prevailed among the Belarusians in Smolensk province, as demonstrated by the elections of the delegates to the Congress by Belarusians of the Minsk military district and the civilian Belarusian population of that province. The resolution on autonomy was adopted unanimously with only one abstention.¹⁰²

The VBR endorsed political dialogue and cooperation with other parties, including the BNPS and Christian Democrats, despite the continuing predominance of the BSH representatives in the Executive Committee,¹⁰³ chaired by Viačaslaŭ Adamovič, with Aliaksandr Prušynski¹⁰⁴ and Arkadz Smolič as his deputies.¹⁰⁵ The Rada appeared to be a timely attempt to consolidate national forces, yet the balance was still fragile, as it became clear at the 3rd Congress of the BSH, held on 14 – 25 October 1917. Aside from

¹⁰⁰ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2224, l. 1.

¹⁰¹ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2218, l. 38, 39.

¹⁰² LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2209, l. 5.

¹⁰³ The Executive Committee consisted of twenty-four members, the majority of whom were politically affiliated with the BSH, Christian Democrats were represented by Edvard Budz'ka, the BNPS – by Anton Liavicki and Pavel Aliaksiuk. See Dorota Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa, 1918 – 1920: u podstaw białoruskiej państwowości* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2010), 177.

¹⁰⁴ Belarusian poet Ales' Harun.

¹⁰⁵ Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 185.

the party split, some of the members did not completely agree with the reorientation of the BSH towards a broad national platform.¹⁰⁶ The BSH had not yet overcome its internal crisis, since similarly to Fabian Šantyr, its leadership regarded the VBR to be a step in the wrong direction, leading away from a purely socialist program. In protest, Žylunovič even left the newly elected Executive Committee of the BSH.¹⁰⁷ All these contradictions are indicative of a highly unstable situation within the national forces camp.¹⁰⁸ Stanislau Rudovič is correct in warning against its excessive idealization, pointing out that the Great Belarusian Rada remained a phenomenon of local politics, albeit with the potential to become a full-fledged political actor of its own under the condition of winning over to the patriotic program a considerable number of the adherents of West-Russism. However, the latter were still undecided on the issue of the solution of autonomy, as opposed to the creation of an administrative unit within the future Russian republic.¹⁰⁹

Belarusian Oblast' Committee in Petrograd

A typical case of the West-Russist current was embodied by the representatives of the Belarusian peasantry in the All-Russian Soviet of Peasants' Deputies in Petrograd. Supporting closer cooperation and maintenance of links with Russia, they formed the Belarusian Oblast' Committee (BOK, Belorusskii Oblastnoi Komitet) in November 1917.¹¹⁰ Members of the BOK are also known in the research literature as *oblastniki*.¹¹¹ In contrast to the VBR, *oblastniki* recognized all governing structures established by the

¹⁰⁶ Žylunovič, “Liuty – Kastyčnik,” 193.

¹⁰⁷ Ladyseŭ and Bryhadzin, *Pamiž Uschodam i Zachadam*, 42 – 43.

¹⁰⁸ In this regard the statement of Nicholas Vakar, describing the VBR, the CBVR and the Executive Committee of the Western front as anti-Soviet organizations which attempted “to organize national resistance” appears to be far-fetched. See Vakar, *Belorussia: the Making of a Nation*, 98.

¹⁰⁹ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 141.

¹¹⁰ Stanislau Rudovič, “Zachodnerusizm va ūmovach revalucyi 1917 hoda: pamiž imperskasciu i belaruskaj idejaj,” *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (2001) Nr. 16: 66.

¹¹¹ Another variant is Belarusian-derived *ablasniki*. However, in this case I chose to use transliteration from Russian both for consistency reasons and in order to illustrate the pro-Russian character of this organization.

Bolsheviks, including the Executive Committee of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies of the Western Oblast' and Front. Ideologically, *oblastniki* also were close to the Bolshevik leadership – the Russian Council of the People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), and the People's Commissariat for Nationalities under Stalin. These structures sympathized with the BOK and lent it necessary financial support.¹¹²

Politically, this organization was built around the idea of an oblast'-level organization of the Belarusian lands with a clear pro-Russian orientation.¹¹³ Similarly to other political actors of 1917, the BOK called for an “autonomously-free” Belarus as a part of a future Russian federative republic.¹¹⁴ Yet in this case, the overall context and specific details of the BOK declaration suggest that their statement regarding the autonomy status of Belarus should be interpreted in a broader subordinate sense. As “faithful sons of the Belarusian lands” they lamented that the “great Russia is being torn apart. The rift between various population groups and nations in Russia is increasing and one cannot see the common guiding idea to stop the bloodshed in the state and keep the unity of the Russian republic.”¹¹⁵ The BOK regretted that Russia let Lithuania and Ukraine go their separate ways, and expressed concern that it might be too weak to keep Belarus under its protection. The common fear, completely in line with the West-Russist worldview, was that Russia would have to give up Belarus, which would be “torn to pieces” at once.¹¹⁶ “Monarchic Poland” was demonized as the principal danger to the Belarusian lands, threatening immediate destruction of the revolutionary achievements.¹¹⁷

According to the statement by Jazep Varonka, who was representing the VBR in Petrograd in November 1917, *oblastniki* were shocked to learn about the establishment

¹¹² Anatol' Hryckievič, *Vybranae* (Minsk: “Knihazbor,” 2012), 33.

¹¹³ Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 36.

¹¹⁴ Prilozhenie Nr. 14 “Deklaratsiia Belorusskogo Oblastnogo Komiteta pri Vserossiiskom Sovete Krest'ianskikh Deputatov,” in Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 104.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

of the Great Rada in Minsk, as they still cherished hopes of asserting their own supremacy in Belarusian politics without any serious local competition.¹¹⁸ The BOK essentially started to act as a counterweight to the VBR. Claiming that they would organize Belarusian statehood according to the wishes of the working classes, *oblastniki* hoped to overpower the national activists in Minsk.¹¹⁹ With this agenda and emphasis on peasant interests, the BOK made clear its ambitions to determine the fate of the Belarusian territories, and emerged as a serious contender for leadership in the Belarusian milieu.

The missing component of national mobilization in the BOK rhetoric was compensated for by a deliberate and straightforward focus on class inequalities. *Oblastniki* realistically noted the increasing influence of the VBR and the CBVR among refugees, soldiers, and workers. At the same time, they realized that they were in a better position to work with the peasants. Here, *oblastniki* could also rely on the previous activities of the Bolsheviks, who gained somewhat of an advantage among the peasant population due to the efforts of Mikhailov (Frunze), the notorious organizer of peasant congresses earlier in 1917.¹²⁰ Even if the BOK was mistakenly placing much hope in the peasants, it was nevertheless well aware of the fact that the rural population tended to refrain from the political process, preferring to take the neutral side for the time being. In this respect, the focus of the BOK on the peasantry could also have a positive meaning, since it can be interpreted as the politicization of the nationally indifferent population through formenting a connection of everyday economic interests to the broader issues of future state-organization.¹²¹

On the other hand, by placing their hopes on the Bolsheviks in order to assert

¹¹⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 90.

¹¹⁹ Kancher, "Iz istorii Grazhdanskoi voiny," 93.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 170 – 171.

domination in Belarusian politics, *oblastniki* were unconsciously being used as tools in the hands of the new Russian authorities. While discussing the issue of the organization of power in Belarus in December 1917, the chair of the BOK, Jaŭsej Kančar, mentioned the possibility of a Belarusian People's Soviet Republic during his negotiations with Lenin and Stalin. In response, the Bolshevik leaders admitted that they were in need of “a serious support and elimination of current defects,”¹²² therefore, the BOK was promised assistance in exchange for their complete loyalty to Soviet power.¹²³ In other words, *oblastniki* made a deal and agreed to ensure the deliberate weakening of the VBR, which in the eyes of the Bolsheviks was the leading bourgeois national structure in Belarus.

Several members of the BOK supported Kančar in his intentions to proclaim a Soviet republic in Belarus, but eventually they all agreed that further consultations with Lenin and Stalin were necessary.¹²⁴ Stalin, in his capacity as the Commissar of Nationalities, approved the convocation of the country-wide Belarusian congress, the creation of a statehood, and even its potential separation from Russia,¹²⁵ which theoretically was in line with the Bolshevik *Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia* issued on 2 November 1917, guaranteeing the equality of all nations and granting them the right to free self-determination and even secession from Russia.¹²⁶ However, it was implied that the Belarusian congress should not deviate from the principle of Soviet power, and ought to maintain very close ideological, economical, and cultural ties with Russia.¹²⁷ Aiming to prevent uncontrolled national self-determination, the Bolsheviks used *oblastniki* as a convenient cover to obscure their primary objective to divide and

¹²² Vital' Skalaban, “Jaŭsej Kančar – palityk, historyk, memuaryst,” *Bielaruskaja Dumka* (2010), Nr. 1: 90, citing Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (hereafter RGALI), f. 1345, op. 5, d. 21, l. 17, l. 18.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Kančer, “Iz istorii Grazhdanskoi voiny,” 92.

¹²⁵ Skalaban, “Jaŭsej Kančar,” 90, citing RGALI, f. 1345, op. 5, d. 21, l. 17, l. 18.

¹²⁶ Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia
<https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1917/11/02.htm> (Accessed 10 February 2015).

¹²⁷ Skalaban, “Jaŭsej Kančar,” 90, citing RGALI, f. 1345, op. 5, d. 21, l. 17, l. 18.

subdue the Belarusian organizations in Minsk. Yet they did not trust the BOK completely, despite the latter's solemn promises of loyalty. Alerted by the activities of the VBR and its attempts to establish national army units, the central government sent a telegram to the Minsk Bolsheviks urging them to “take all measures to paralyse the convocation of the Congress.”¹²⁸

The close contacts of the BOK with the Bolshevik government and the possibility of a shift of the political center away from Minsk to the east contributed to the tensions between the *oblastniki* and the VBR.¹²⁹ In his letter from Petrograd, dated 26 November 1917, Jazep Varonka warned his colleagues in the Rada – Dyla, Rak-Michajloŭski, Mucha, Prušynski, Kraskoŭski, Dvarčanin, and Mamon'ka – to be “diplomatic” in negotiations with the delegates from the Belarusian Oblast' Committee.¹³⁰ Varonka pointed to the existence of so-called “prejudiced elements” among *oblastniki*, who were hostile to the BSH in particular, and to the Rada in general.¹³¹ Another warning concerned Bolshevik hypocrisy and their far-reaching promises, including the assurances of Lunacharskii to re-open the Vil'nia university and promises of a loan to cover textbook expenses. Fully aware of Bolshevik political flexibility, Varonka noted that People's Commissar for Nationalities Stalin, who had earlier openly proclaimed guarantees for the self-determination of nations, was not in a hurry to implement all his declarations in practice.¹³²

The political struggle between the VBR and the BOK resulted in confusion around the dates and venues for the Congress. With the approval and financial support provided by the Sovnarkom, the BOK intended to hold the Congress around 15 December

¹²⁸ “Bielaruski Konhres,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 26, 23 April 1918, 1.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 91.

¹³¹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 90.

¹³² NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 91.

1917. Jaŭsej Kančar's memoirs indicate that the BOK vision for the All-Belarusian Congress of Soviets prioritized the unification of revolutionary soviet democracy in a single oblast' organization, a discussion of the political future of Belarus, and the preparation of materials for the autonomy of Belarusian soviets. The venue was not firmly decided upon, as several cities were named as possibilities, among them Minsk, Rahačoŭ, Homiel', Sluck, and Mahilioŭ. The BOK cautiously stated that the final choice of a place of the Congress would be determined by the political situation.¹³³ It is obvious that *oblastniki* were uncomfortable with the thought of having the Congress in Minsk, where the VBR had more influence as compared to Mahilioŭ province, with its traditionally stronger West-Russist attitudes.

Yet the BOK lacked a consolidated, unified position regarding the future Congress, since the meeting of its members on 11 November 1917 revealed serious divisions. In particular, some of them did not object to holding the congress jointly with the Belarusian national organizations, while the others were suspicious of the so-called “anti-Soviet national-chauvinistic activities and intentions to proclaim Belarus a bourgeois republic.”¹³⁴ For instance, Kusse-Tiuz and Makarevič belonged to the moderate faction supporting cooperation, while Karatkievič remained irreconcilable. Eventually, a more inclusive approach prevailed, and the majority of the BOK members supported the participation of the Great Belarusian Rada and the Moscow-based Belarusian People's Hramada in the future Congress.¹³⁵ In this way, the risk of having two simultaneous congresses gave way to a fragile political balance and the possibility of a dialogue. Moreover, according to the observations of Jazep Varonka, who was representing the VBR in Petrograd, some *oblastniki* who used to be hostile to the idea of Belarusian

¹³³ Kančer, “Iz istorii Grazhdanskoi voiny,” 92. See also Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, “Pieršy Űsebielaruski Kanhres,” *Bielaruskaja Minuŭščyna* (1993), Nr. 1: 27.

¹³⁴ Kančer, “Iz istorii Grazhdanskoi voiny,” 92.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

autonomy started to change their minds, reacting favourably to the resolutions of the military congresses and the VBR. Myško, Danilevič, and Savicki were listed among those who were politically flexible.¹³⁶

Despite the general agreement of the VBR and the BOK to cooperate in the matters of organizing the All-Belarusian Congress, each side still continued attempts to enforce their own agendas. In particular, the BOK was keen on scheduling the Congress on a later date and preferred to move it away from Minsk, preferably to Rahačoŭ,¹³⁷ while the VBR intended to start sooner and insisted on Minsk as the congress venue. Acting in the name of the VBR, Varonka and Mamon'ka conducted negotiations with the BOK on the 22 and 23 of November, specifically pointing out that the Rada in its role as the main organizer intended to hold the congress in Minsk on 5 December. While there was still some flexibility with the date, Varonka's handwritten note at the end of his letter to his colleagues in the VBR specifically urged them “not to let Minsk out of their hands.”¹³⁸

Bolsheviks and the October Revolution in Belarus

In contrast to the February Revolution, the spread and pace of the October Revolution outside Petrograd followed a variety of patterns. Taking into account the pre-existing political situation, social structures of the major cities, presence of the military, personalities of the local leaders, and nationality conflicts, Rex Wade delineated the three most common scenarios in the Bolshevik takeover of power. In the first case, the Bolsheviks did not meet significant obstacles and were able to assert their authority quickly. This was a common occurrence in the cities, where their positions were already strong and where they did not encounter significant resistance. In the second type of

¹³⁶ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 90.

¹³⁷ Kančer, “Iz istorii Grazhdanskoi voiny,” 92; Vasil' Zacharka, “Haloŭnyja momanty bielaruskaha ruchu,” *Zapisy* (1999), Nr. 24: 24 – 26.

¹³⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 91 adv.

scenario, the power takeover process extended over a week and was accompanied with confrontation, sometimes resulting in armed clashes.¹³⁹ Finally, the third type extended beyond the initial consolidation of power, and involved the prolonged political struggle of the Bolsheviks and other socialist forces, which had their own interpretations of Soviet power principles. Often, this went hand in hand with the struggle for national self-determination.¹⁴⁰

The revolution in Minsk combined elements of the second and third scenarios. Power consolidation of the new regime went along with the resolute establishment of pro-Bolshevik governing structures against the wide socialist coalition, while the subsequent political struggle culminated in the violent dispersal of the All-Belarusian Congress in December of 1917. As the Bolsheviks were well aware of the strategic geographical location and military importance of the Belarusian territories, they hurried to secure their positions here.

In the spring of 1917, the Minsk Bolsheviks were still a marginal group, which managed to organize a Temporary Bureau of the Bolshevik party, headed by the Armenian Aleksandr Miasnikov (Miasnikian), an ambitious newcomer to politics. His career as a Bolshevik had started only after the February Revolution, when he left his army unit, stationed at the Western front and found himself in Minsk. In June 1917, the Temporary Bureau served as the highest party organ for the entire Western front and Western oblast'.¹⁴¹ Already by the fall of 1917, the Bolsheviks were able to increase their public presence and boost their party membership from about forty members in June 1917 to more than 28,000 in October.¹⁴² The re-election of the Minsk Soviet in late September for

¹³⁹ Wade, *The Russian Revolution*, 251 – 252.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁴¹ Waclaw Solski and S. N. Khomich, *1917 god v Zapadnoi oblasti i na Zapadnom fronte* (Minsk: Tesei, 2004), 42, 74,

¹⁴² Lubachko, *Belorussia Under Soviet Rule*, 14, 16.

the first time resulted in a Bolshevik majority with 184 deputies out of a total of 337, while other large factions included the Socialist-Revolutionaries (18%), Mensheviks (6%), the Bund (6%), and an unaffiliated faction (14%).¹⁴³ On 25 October, the Executive Committee of the Minsk Soviet, chaired by the Bolshevik Karl Lander, issued Order Nr. 1 with the declaration of a power takeover in the city.¹⁴⁴ Bolshevik Presidium members of the Minsk Soviet formed the core of the Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Western front, formally established on 26 October.¹⁴⁵ Soldiers at the Western front were promptly informed of the Bolshevik decrees concerning peace and land, and asked for their support.¹⁴⁶

On that same day, the non-Bolshevik members of the Minsk Soviet protested against these unilateral actions. The Executive Committee of the Western front, the Minsk City Duma, and peasant and national organizations united in the Committee for the Salvation of the Revolution of the Western Front. All demanded the representation of a broad leftist bloc in power.¹⁴⁷ At this early stage of the revolution, neither the Minsk Soviet nor the Committee for the Salvation of the Revolution were strong enough to maintain their claims for power. Both sides signed an agreement, stipulating that the Committee would not send government-loyal troops from the Western front to suppress the revolution in Petrograd and to defend the Provisional Government. In exchange the Minsk Soviet recognized the authority of the Committee in the city.¹⁴⁸ While the latter attempted to maintain neutrality, it had no authority outside Minsk and could not prevent the transportation of army units to Petrograd from other fronts, which in the eyes of the

¹⁴³ Stanislav Rudovich, "Rozhdenie Soveta," in V. I. Adamushko, ed., *Minskii gorodskoi Sovet deputatov: 1917 – 2012. Dokumenty i materialy* (Minsk: Belorusskii dom pečati, 2012), 8.

¹⁴⁴ Document Nr. 25 "Prikaz Nr. 1 Minskogo Soveta o perekhode vlasti v g. Minske v ruki Soveta," in Adamushko, *Minskii gorodskoi Sovet deputatov*, 37 – 38.

¹⁴⁵ Rudovich, "Rozhdenie Soveta," 8.

¹⁴⁶ Document Nr. 26 "Radiogramma Minskogo Sovet voiskam Zapadnogo fronta s prizyvom podderzivat sovetskoe pravitel'stvo," in Adamushko, *Minskii gorodskoi Sovet deputatov*, 38.

¹⁴⁷ Ignatenko, *Istoriia Belorusskoi SSR*, 235; Rudovich, "Rozhdenie Soveta," 8.

¹⁴⁸ Ignatenko, *Istoriia Belorusskoi SSR*, 236.

Bolsheviks could have affected the terms of the agreement. The Committee also chose not to confront the Bolsheviks directly, due to their concerns of unleashing violence and starting a civil war in the city, should the Bolsheviks decide to summon to Minsk army units from the front, where they unfolded broad agitation and enjoyed growing popularity. In other words, the left bloc coalition admitted its own powerlessness, reluctant to abandon the hope that the crisis would be over soon and that only the Committee for the Salvation of the Revolution could emerge as a stable basis for an authoritative and qualified organ to organize power in the city.¹⁴⁹

The Bolsheviks were not as patient, and had already confronted the Committee for the Salvation of the Revolution by 27 October, seizing arms in Minsk and threatening to use artillery weapons against the city in response to the Committee's request to disarm.¹⁵⁰ A stalemate situation lasted for about a week, until 2 November, when the balance of forces changed with the arrival in Minsk of the pro-Bolshevik military units and the armoured train from the Western front.¹⁵¹ The Committee for the Salvation of the Revolution tried to prevent the train from entering the city, as even the rumours of its existence caused panic among the population. However, the Bolsheviks in the Minsk Soviet were more resolute in their actions and immediately arrested the representative of the Committee, Kolotukhin, who had tried to intervene with their plans.¹⁵² Even though the situation in Minsk did not reach a point of open confrontation, the Bolsheviks still felt insecure, since not all army units went over to their side, despite the broad agitation campaign. On 13 November, they panicked and even had to interrupt the session of the Minsk Soviet, due to the arrival in the city of a battalion of soldiers, who were hostile

¹⁴⁹ "Minskaja Horadskaja Duma," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 29, 14 November 1917, 4.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 186.

¹⁵² "Minskaja Horadskaja Duma," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 29, 14 November 1917, 4.

towards the Soviet power.¹⁵³ Martial law and a curfew were declared in Minsk on 30 November 1917.¹⁵⁴

After the newly elected Provincial Commissar I. Metlin¹⁵⁵ and his cabinet resigned on 6 November, the Minsk province was deprived of a civilian administration and left at the mercy of the local Bolsheviks, who started to expand their own political structures.¹⁵⁶ The Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Western Front started to act as the highest authority both on unoccupied Belarusian territories and on the front. Aleksandr Miasnikov (Miasnikian) became Commander-in-Chief of the Western front.¹⁵⁷ An imposition and extension of the military administration structures into civilian life became a specific feature of the Bolshevik regime in Belarus. In order to legitimize their power claims, the Bolsheviks held three large congresses between the 18 and 25 of November in Minsk: the Congress of the Soviets of the Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of the Western Oblast', the 3rd Congress of the Peasant Deputies of Minsk and Vil'nia Provinces, and the 2nd Congress of Armies of the Western Front.¹⁵⁸ Communication between the Petrograd and Minsk Bolsheviks revealed that a disproportionate presence of the front representatives at the peasant congress was allowed and encouraged, to ensure a pro-Bolshevik majority.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, the peasant congress was organized by the Bolshevik Military-Revolutionary Committee without the participation of the democratically elected Soviet of the Peasants' Deputies of Minsk and Vil'nia Provinces.¹⁶⁰

The Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Western Front approved the

¹⁵³ See Document Nr. 28 "Informatsiia v gazete "Zvezda" o zasedanii Minskogo Soveta," in Adamushko, *Minskii gorodskoi Sovet deputatov*, 40

¹⁵⁴ See *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 33, 8 December 1917, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Metlin was infamous in the Belarusian milieu due to his derogatory comments during the First Congress of Belarusian National Organizations on 25 – 27 March 1917. See Chapter 2.

¹⁵⁶ "U Minsku," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 29, 14 November 1917, 4.

¹⁵⁷ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 47.

¹⁵⁸ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 148; Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 188.

¹⁵⁹ "Bielaruski Konhres," *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 26, 23 April 1918, 1.

¹⁶⁰ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 148 – 149.

resolutions of all three above-named pro-Bolshevik congresses, proceeding with the organization of a single power in the Western oblast' (which comprised the unoccupied territories of former Minsk, Vil'nia, Mahilioŭ, and Viciebsk provinces¹⁶¹) and over the region of the Western front. Each of the congresses formed their own executive committees, which merged in the Oblast Executive Committee of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies of the Western Oblast' and Front, more commonly known as Obliskomzap.¹⁶² It declared itself to be the major power over the whole area of the Western front as well as Minsk, Mahilioŭ, Viciebsk, and parts of Vil'nia provinces. Ironically, there was not a single Belarusian in the Presidium of the Obliskomzap.¹⁶³ Representation in this organ was skewed in favour of the Western front military. It was chaired by M. Rogozinkii, with P. Kozlov and M. Krivoshein as his deputies. In order to exercise executive power in the provinces where the Western front was located, Obliskomzap formed the Soviet of People's Commissars of the Western Oblast' and Front, led by Karl Lander. In practical terms, this meant that front organizations representing soldiers instead of the local population were claiming power in the name of that same population.¹⁶⁴ The actual merger of the administrative unit of the Western oblast' with the structures of the front was a unique mix of military and civilian powers, which took hostile positions towards Belarusian self-determination, treating the demands of the

¹⁶¹ The Western oblast' as an administrative unit was established at the Congress of Soviets of Minsk, Vil'nia and Mahilioŭ provinces in June 1917 as a temporary merger of provinces in order to centralize the local Soviets' operations. After the October Revolution it included Viciebsk, Mahilioŭ and unoccupied parts of Vil'nia and Minsk provinces, yet its borders remained fluid and ambiguous, since Obliskomzap dedicated all its efforts towards building up military potential to protect the revolution, instead of taking care of territorial administration. After the majority of Belarusian lands were occupied by the German army in February 1918, the center of the Western oblast' was moved to Smolensk and included Smolensk province. In September 1918, the Western oblast' was renamed into the Western Commune. It ceased to exist on 1 January 1919, due to the proclamation of the Belarusian Soviet state. See Petr Ambrosovich, "K 90-letiiu Vsebelorusskogo siezda," *Bialoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (2008), Nr. 29: 229 – 230.

¹⁶² Abbreviation of the Oblastnoi Iсполnitel'nyi Komitet Sovetov Rabochikh, Soldatskikh i Krest'ianskikh Deputatov Zapadnoj Oblasti i Fronta.

¹⁶³ Ignatenko and Shtykhov, *Istoriia Belorusskoi SSR*, 239.

¹⁶⁴ I. Ihnacenka, "Kastyryčnicki etap revalucyi," in *Historyja Bielarusi ŭ šasci tamach*, T. 5, ed. Michail P. Kasciuk (Minsk: VP Ekaperspektyva, 2005), 41.

national organizations as counterrevolutionary activities.¹⁶⁵

These hectic activities of the Bolsheviks in establishing their own administrative structures can be regarded as a response in reaction to the efforts of the VBR and the BOK to initiate the All-Belarusian Congress. However, even in spite of the organization of the pro-Bolshevik congresses in November of 1917, Obliskomzap lacked legitimation, as it was composed primarily of military representatives of non-Belarusian origin. The Soviet of People's Commissars of the Western Oblast' and Front did not have any single department in charge of Belarusian national matters. The effective authority of the Obliskomzap also left a lot to be desired, as it extended only over the Minsk province and parts of the Vil'nia province, while Viciebsk and Mahilioŭ provinces still remained under the temporary command of local Military-Revolutionary Committees.¹⁶⁶

Similarly to the pro-Bolshevik congresses, which were held in November and resulted in the establishment of the Obliskomzap, the Bolsheviks pursued similar tactics in establishing control over the civilian administrations on the local level. Sluck District Commissar Astroŭski, in his telegram to the VBR, outlined the common Bolshevik strategy of forcing out locals from the Sluck Soviet of Peasant's and Workers' Deputies and replacing them with loyal persons. Bolsheviks then proceeded with a hastily organized peasant congress, apparently modelled after the larger pro-Bolshevik gathering of the peasant deputies of Minsk and Vil'nia provinces in November 1917. Events in Sluck demonstrated that the removal of political opponents along with the legitimization of power takeover were equally important goals for the new authorities. The local congress there was forced to approve arrests of BSH sympathizers, while the arrival in the area of so-called "alien elements from Vologda, Viatka, Kostroma" was designed to

¹⁶⁵ Petr Ambrosovich, "K 90-letiiu Vsebelorusskogo siezda," *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (2008), Nr. 29: 231.

¹⁶⁶ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio na Bielarusi*, 100.

secure Bolshevik positions. Yet apparently it was also confusing for the nationally unconscious population in the district. As news of looting and the disruptive behaviour of Bolshevik supporters were coming from different localities across all of eastern Belarus,¹⁶⁷ Astroŭski urged the VBR to take responsibility and enter the contest for power in order to protect the country from further destruction.¹⁶⁸

The Bolsheviks were not to be underestimated, as they proved able to improve their image significantly due to the progressive and democratic character of their decrees, promising people immediate peace and land redistribution.¹⁶⁹ An extensive agitation campaign among the battle-weary soldiers of the Western front highlighted these aspects, resulting in an overwhelming success for the Bolshevik party in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. It managed to win around 653,000 votes of soldiers out of a total 976,000 at the Western front, while the SR party could boast only 180,000.¹⁷⁰ Leading in the Minsk district, in the city itself, Bolsheviks turned out to be the second most popular party after the Jewish bloc.¹⁷¹

By contrast, Belarusian national parties failed to achieve any success in these elections, mostly as their priorities were shifting towards the organization of the All-Belarusian Congress to the detriment of the electoral campaign for the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, which in the end damaged their public image.¹⁷² Belarusian parties

¹⁶⁷ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 30, 19 November 1917, 4.

¹⁶⁸ "Poklič da Bielaruskæ Rady," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 30, 19 November 1917, 4.

¹⁶⁹ "Padzei apošniaho času," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 30, 19 November 1917, 1.

¹⁷⁰ Oliver Radkey explained overwhelming Bolshevik popularity on the Western front by the factor of its closeness to the center of the revolution in Petrograd. Correspondingly, the SR influences were increasing gradually from the Western to the Southwestern, then to the Romanian and finally to the Caucasian front, where they overpowered the Bolsheviks by a ratio of five to one. See Oliver H. Radkey, *Russia Goes to the Polls. The Election to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, 1917* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 38 – 39.

¹⁷¹ Due to high absenteeism, the total number of voters who participated in the elections to the Constituent Assembly in Minsk was 35,651, representing only about 40% of all the population eligible to vote. The Jewish bloc emerged as the most popular party with 12,624 votes, followed by the Bolsheviks with 9,521 votes and the Polish bloc with 4,261 votes. The SR had 977 votes and the BSH was able to win only 161 votes. See "Pa Bielarusi," *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 33, 8 December 1917, 3.

¹⁷² Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 164.

could not even agree on the formation of electoral coalitions.¹⁷³ In this regard, the electoral strategy disagreement between the BSH and the Moscow-based Belarusian People's Hramada is one of the most telling cases, demonstrating an essential lack of trust within the Belarusian national milieu, where every center tried to achieve dominance at the cost of all others.

Relations of the Belarusian national organizations from Minsk to the People's Hramada were not as strained as with the *oblastniki* in Petrograd, but left a lot to be desired. Edvard Budz'ka, who attended the People's Hramada meeting on 19 November 1917, reported that it recognized the VBR and was eager to send its delegates to the All-Belarusian Congress.¹⁷⁴ In addition, Varonka pointed out that by that time, some of the Moscow-based activists, among them Cvikievič, Vasilevič, and Zajcaŭ, were more likely to make concessions and become cooperative partners for the VBR, but he also considered it necessary to warn his Minsk colleagues that complete trust was out of question.¹⁷⁵ In practice, this attitude resulted in a political failure for the Belarusian national parties during the elections to the Constituent Assembly. The People's Hramada negotiated cooperation with the Russian Socialist-Revolutionaries. In particular, the inclusion of several representatives of the Belarusian organizations into the SR electoral lists was discussed. An adoption of this strategy would have increased their chances of being elected. After the BSH found out details of the negotiations, it immediately accused the People's Hramada of an allegedly lenient West Russist position and refused to form a bloc with the Hramada in the electoral campaign. Yet later, the BSH made an unsuccessful attempt to independently negotiate the same agreement with the Russian SR

¹⁷³ By contrast, Ukrainians showed more enthusiasm and consolidation by winning around five million votes using various methods, including agreements on joint lists and the formation of electoral blocs. See Radkey, *Russia Goes to the Polls*, 20.

¹⁷⁴ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 90 adv.

¹⁷⁵ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 2, ark. 91.

party.¹⁷⁶ It is obvious that on the eve of the All-Belarusian Congress, all major Belarusian political actors – the BSH in Minsk, the People's Hramada in Moscow, and the Belarusian Oblast' Committee in Petrograd – could not overcome their mutual distrust. Their minor disagreements and personal squabbles weakened their appeal for the population, which was prone to falling under the spell of Bolshevik demagoguery, which promised the end of war privations and a satisfying solution to all burning social issues.

Opening of the All-Belarusian Congress

The evening of 5 December 1917 was a busy one in the Minsk city theatre. A mixed crowd of delegates from various localities and organizations, along with guests, sympathizers and undercover provocateurs were waiting for the opening of the All-Belarusian Congress. At 7:30 in the evening, Symon Rak-Michajloŭski, the chair of the Executive Committee of the CBVR, declared on behalf of the Congress organizers that 300 delegates with voting rights out of the total number of expected 900 were present at the Congress.¹⁷⁷ Delays in the arrival of the delegates were caused by the uncoordinated actions of the VBR in Minsk and the BOK in Petrograd, as the former had invited delegates for 5 December and the latter had insisted on the date of 15 December and even sent out corresponding invitations. After the official opening of the Congress on 7 December, *oblastniki* were forced to conform and urged their delegates to join as soon as possible.¹⁷⁸

While waiting for the arrival of the participants, Rak-Michajloŭski suggested proceeding with a meeting in a conference format on the 5 of December. Attending

¹⁷⁶ Rudovič, *Čas vybaru*, 163 – 164.

¹⁷⁷ “Usiebielaruski Zjezd (Ahliad),” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 36, 31 December 1917, 1.

¹⁷⁸ Document Nr. 0057 “Pratakol Nr. 13 pasiedžannia Rady Ūsiebielaruskaha Zjezdu ŭ Mensku 8.12.1917,” in Siarhej Šupa, ed., *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki* (Vil'nia: Bielaruski instytut navuki i mastactva, 1998), 29.

participants decided on electing the Temporary Council of the Congress.¹⁷⁹ Its composition reflected a wide representation, with twenty-three delegates from all major political organizations, including the Belarusian Oblast' Committee, the BSH, the BNPS, Belarusian People's Hramada, the Central Belarusian Military Rada, the Great Belarusian Rada, front and fleet organizations, refugee organizations, Soviet of the Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, professional organizations of railway workers, teachers, district zemstva of Minsk, Mahilioŭ, and Viciebsk provinces, the Regional Bureau, land committees, soviets of peasant deputies, municipal self-governments, and cooperatives.¹⁸⁰ On the same evening, a general conference meeting proceeded with the election of a temporary presidium and formation of eight different thematic panels. The political situation and future of Belarus were the first items on the agenda.¹⁸¹

While delegates of the Congress continued to arrive, the proceedings of 6 December revolved primarily around secondary technical issues of representation in the Council of the Congress, as not every group was content with its allotted numbers. In particular, peasants from Vil'nia and Hrodna provinces demanded the same representation in the Council as the peasantry from the non-occupied provinces. This proposition was supported, contrary to the indignant reaction of the many delegates provoked by a similar request from Fabian Šantyr, who demanded representation for his left wing of the BSH.¹⁸² Šantyr, known for his increasingly pro-Bolshevik leanings, obviously was not a popular figure at the Congress from the very start: when on 5 December he demanded the right to hold a speech, most delegates voted against it. Such an attitude also hinted at the ongoing tensions within the BSH, which had arisen at its recent party congress in October 1917.

¹⁷⁹ It was also known as the Council of the Elders. See protocols of the Congress from *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 6, 8 December 1917, reprinted in *Bielaruski historyčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 1: 66 – 67.

¹⁸⁰ Document Nr. 0045 “Pratakol pryvatnae narady siabroŭ Usiebielaruskaha Zjezdu ŭ Mensku 5.12.1917,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 15 – 16.

¹⁸¹ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 6, 8 December 1917, 66 – 67.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 67.

Šantyr's former party colleagues tried to downplay his activities and denied the fact of the BSH split, pointing out that an expelled party member could not speak on its behalf.¹⁸³ Eventually, the Council of the Congress ruled democratically and granted representation to the left wing of the BSH.¹⁸⁴

The biggest concern for the Council was the issue of the powers of the Congress, as not every delegate was present. According to the data of the credentials commission, 383 delegates with voting rights representing both the civilian population and the army had arrived by the 6 of December. After long debates, the Council decided to open the Congress on the next day and to send additional telegrams to the localities, asking delaying delegates to join the Congress as soon as possible. In particular, this concerned the BOK in Petrograd, which initially planned the Congress for 15 December, and even sent out the invitations for that day.¹⁸⁵ The general meeting on 6 December showed that the overwhelming majority of the delegates were in favour of the prompt opening of the Congress, except for some twenty persons who voted against this proposition. Most delegates realized the dangers of hesitation and urged the Council to act decisively. Mamon'ka from the 12th Army encouraged the Congress to establish power over Belarusian territories, pointing to the recent example of the Bolsheviks, who unscrupulously took power in Petrograd without even bothering to obtain legitimation from a country-wide congress. Cvikievič, representing Belarusian refugees in Russia, had a similar opinion and openly criticized the cynical Bolshevik understanding of self-determination, which in their interpretation had to be directed by orders from above. Even Šantyr, on behalf of the Belarusian Bolsheviks, spoke in favour of self-determination and

¹⁸³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁸⁴ Document Nr. 0050 “Pratakol Nr. 4 pasiedžannia Rady Ūsiebielarskaha Zjezdu ū Mensku 6.12.1917,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 20.

¹⁸⁵ Document Nr. 0050 “Pratakol Nr. 4 pasiedžannia Rady Ūsiebielarskaha Zjezdu ū Mensku 6.12.1917,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 20. See also “Bielaruski Konhres,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 26, 23 April, 1918, 1.

Belarusian revolution, which he contrasted with hypocritical Russian demagogy. Generally, delegates agreed that the Congress was authorized to establish power over Belarusian territories.¹⁸⁶

The formal ceremony of the opening of the All-Belarusian Congress took place in the Minsk city theatre on the evening of 7 December 1917. Rak-Michajloŭski delivered the opening speech, addressing all Belarusian people and their representatives at the Congress with a call to serve the interests of their entire nation. A military orchestra played a Belarusian version of the Marseillaise.¹⁸⁷ The choir, dressed in national costumes, continued with a performance of revolutionary songs, which were enthusiastically received by the audience. The official part of the evening continued with a series of welcoming speeches: Aliaksiuk addressed the delegates on behalf of the VBR, followed by a number of greetings to the Congress delivered by the representatives of various fronts, refugees, teachers, parties, and professional unions.¹⁸⁸

One incident, however, darkened the overall mood on the first evening, as the representative of the Latvian section of the Russian Social-Democrats, Rezauskii,¹⁸⁹ provocatively stated that in his opinion any national divisions were useless. In an even more confrontational manner he pointed to the Belarusian national flag, hanging over the Presidium, and demanded that it should be thrown out. This caused protests among all who were present in the hall, offended by such impudence. After the removal of Rezauskii from the premises, even the pro-Bolshevik Šantyr expressed his indignation at

¹⁸⁶ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 7, 10 December 1917, reprinted in “Pieršy Usiebielaruski Zjezd. Pratakoly,” *Bielaruski historyčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 1: 69. See also “Usiebielaruski Zjezd (Ahliad),” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 36, 31 December 1917, 1.

¹⁸⁷ The song is also known under the title “Ad veku my spali” [We have been Sleeping for Centuries], lyrics written by Aliaksandr Michalčyk. See <http://tuzin.fm/article/1482/piesni-sluckich-paustancau-audyjo-videa.html> (Accessed 1 March 2015).

¹⁸⁸ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 8, 12 December 1917, reprinted in “Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika,” *Bielaruski historyčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 2: 47 – 49.

¹⁸⁹ Later Rezauskii would be among the Bolsheviks who commanded the dispersal of the Congress. See *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr 1, 13 January 1918; LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2283, l. 95.

such an insulting attitude to the national aspirations of Belarusians.¹⁹⁰ This incident was in many ways reminiscent of the similar statement made by the Russian Socialist-Revolutionary Metlin at the first Congress of Belarusian Organizations in March 1917,¹⁹¹ except that in this case Bolsheviks had to be taken into account as more ruthless opponents. After Rezausskii was forced to leave and his covert comrades failed to disrupt the work of the Congress in the following days, the Bolsheviks most likely realized their failure to control and direct it.

Other ill omens preceding the Rezausskii incident on 7 December, were the arrests of the chair of the Minsk Soviet of the Peasants' Deputies, Makarjeŭ, and three Ukrainian representatives of the Front Committee,¹⁹² also indicating a possible Bolshevik plan of action. Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ pointed to the deliberate campaign of the Bolsheviks to breed discord among the Congress delegates from the very first days, managing to confuse some of them. In particular, he was concerned about the weak positions of the Belarusian movement in the peasant milieu.¹⁹³ Jezavitaŭ's point about the insufficient political experience of the broader population was proved by a representative of the Mahilioŭ province peasantry, who noted the following: "Bolsheviks are bullied here. There should not be any parties and splits. We will support everyone."¹⁹⁴

Presumably, this statement could also refer to the need for achieving unity among the delegates, especially considering that a group of *oblastniki* represented an internal obstacle to the work of the Congress. As organizational activities continued, and the temporary Council was replaced by a full Presidium, *oblastniki* were joined by some

¹⁹⁰ Document Nr. 0065 "Pratakol Nr. 12 adkryccia pasiedžannia Ŭsiebielarskaha Zjezdu ŭ Mensku 7.12.1917," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 27.

¹⁹¹ See Chapter 2.

¹⁹² Document Nr. 0065 "Pratakol Nr. 12 adkryccia pasiedžannia Ŭsiebielarskaha Zjezdu ŭ Mensku 7.12.1917," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 26, 28.

¹⁹³ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 6, ark. 14, 15.

¹⁹⁴ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 7, 10 December 1917, reprinted in "Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika," *Bielaruski histaryčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 2: 51.

similarly minded delegates from the Mahilioŭ province, who protested against the election of the Presidium at this point in time, as apparently they were concerned about being underrepresented at the Congress. Nevertheless, a permanent Presidium of the Congress was elected on 9 December by the two largest factions at the Congress: the leftist group and the socialist bloc. The latter also incorporated the unaffiliated delegates. Both factions were comparable in size, as 169 votes were submitted for Presidium candidates from the list of the left faction, while the socialist list won 173 votes. The Presidium was chaired by Rak-Michajloŭski and consisted of eight persons. In addition, each province was allowed to have one representative, thus raising the number of Presidium members to thirteen.¹⁹⁵

By 14 December, it became clear that disagreements between various groupings and factions at the Congress were increasing, and threatening to stall its work. Jazep Dyla hinted at the ongoing attempts of the Bolsheviks to disrupt the work of the Congress and noted the special position of the BOK members, who were not popular among the majority of the delegates.¹⁹⁶ According to the memoirs of the Congress participant Vasil' Zacharka,¹⁹⁷ representatives of the BOK divided their activities between engaging in “awful demagogical agitation against the national organizations and their leaders” and covertly trying to win over to their side the unaffiliated delegates in order to attain the leadership role in the Congress. Seeing the dissatisfaction among the delegates with the prolonged debates, representatives of the Belarusian Military Rada threatened the most disruptive *oblastniki* with arrest and refused to allow the Bolshevik agitators from

¹⁹⁵ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 8, 12 December 1917, reprinted in *ibid.*, 51 – 52; Document Nr. 0063 “Pratakol Nr. 18 ahul'naha pasiedžannia Ŭsiebielarskaha Zjezdu ŭ Mensku 9.12.1917,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 34 – 35.

¹⁹⁶ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 10, 16 December 1917, reprinted in “Ŭsiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika,” *Bielaruski historyčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 3: 63.

¹⁹⁷ In 1918, Vasil' Zacharka worked for the government of the Belarusian Democratic Republic. After the First World War was over, he emigrated to Prague and in 1928 became the president of the Council of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in Exile, serving in this capacity until 1943. See Vital' Silitski and Jan Zaprudnik, *Historical Dictionary of Belarus* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 316.

Obliskomzap access to the Congress meetings.¹⁹⁸

In order to avoid further political splits, representatives of all groups and factions approved structural changes to the Presidium, which was to be assigned more technical functions, instead of serving as a representation of separate groups. It was to be incorporated in full into the revived Council of the Congress, now designed as a broader representation of all factions.¹⁹⁹ Ivan Sierada²⁰⁰ was elected as the new chair of the Congress Presidium, while Aliaksandr Vazila²⁰¹ and Aliaksandr Prušynski served as his deputies. Approved membership of the Council of the Congress consisted of the representatives from twenty-seven various groups, including political organizations, parties, councils of peasants' and soldiers' deputies, city municipalities, districts, land committees, cooperatives, professional unions, and fronts.²⁰²

Organization of Power and Self-Determination Debates

The Congress organized its work by factions and in separate sections, responsible for political, national, agrarian, financial, social, and cultural issues, as well as for setting up a local administration and a national army.²⁰³ Overall, twelve sections were formed; each of them was divided into special commissions to deal with separate

¹⁹⁸ Zacharka, "Haloŭnyja momanty bielaruskaha ruchu," 25 – 26.

¹⁹⁹ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 10, 16 December 1917, reprinted in "Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika," *Bielaruski histaryčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 3: 63.

²⁰⁰ Ivan (Janka) Sierada, member of the BSH, in 1917 and 1918 chaired the Presidium of the All-Belarusian Congress and the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BDR), from 1919 – 1920 a member of the Supreme Rada of the BDR. He decided to remain in Soviet Belarus in the 1920s, choosing an academic career in veterinary sciences and agriculture. Sierada was arrested in 1930 on charges of belonging to the "Union of Liberation of Belarus," and sent to Siberia. His fate after 1943 remains unknown. See Jurka Vasileŭski, "Sierada," in *Encykłapedyja historyi Bielarusi*, ed. M. V. Bič, T. 6 (Minsk: Bielaruskaja Encykłapedyja imia Pietrusia Broŭki, 2001), 291.

²⁰¹ Also known under the pseudonyms of Alek De-Vazilini, Klim Zlobič, Praŭdaliub, Anton Chatynia. A native of Mahilioŭ province, in 1917, Vazila was a convinced Social Democrat. Despite abandoning political activities after 1918, he was persecuted by the Soviet authorities and his fate remains unknown. See V. U. Skalaban, "Vazila," in *Encykłapedyja historyi Bielarusi*, ed. M. V. Bič, T. 2 (Minsk: Bielaruskaja Encykłapedyja imia Pietrusia Broŭki, 1994), 185.

²⁰² *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 10, 16 December 1917, reprinted in "Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika," *Bielaruski histaryčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 3: 65.

²⁰³ Document Nr. 0049 "Pratakol Nr. 5 pryvatnae narady siabroŭ Usiebielaruskaha Zjezdu ŭ Mensku 6.12.1917," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 18 – 19.

problems. With ten different sub-commissions, the section on Education and Culture was one of the most numerous at the Congress, reflecting the pressing needs of national agitation in progress. The Belarusian State-Building section was also popular and usually attracted a lot of attention from all factions of the Congress. All section sessions were open, i.e. every member of the Congress who wanted to make a contribution could participate in their work. Some sessions gathered big audiences of several hundred delegates, thus also serving educational and national mobilization purposes²⁰⁴ and repeating the patterns of the army and refugee congresses held earlier in 1917.

The general meeting on 12 December attempted to sum up the preliminary results of the Congress. The international situation, in particular, the possible repercussions of the planned peace negotiations in Brest-Litovsk, emerged as an area of common concern. Varonka addressed the issue of maintaining the territorial integrity of Belarus, hinting at the danger of a Lithuanian takeover of the Vil'nia and Hrodna provinces. Professor Jaŭchim Karski shared the same concerns and pointed out that the demographic situation was disadvantageous for Belarusians in those areas due to the high numbers of refugees who had left *en masse* in 1915. Assuming that Germany could force the remaining population to recognize Lithuanian authority, Karski urged the Congress to make inquiries with Trotsky concerning the matter of peace negotiations. In response, Cvikievič pessimistically noted that the Bolsheviks did not take Belarusians into account, admitting that the question of Belarusian presence at the peace negotiations could be resolved only by Germany, which he did not consider a possibility.²⁰⁵

This was a realistic evaluation, as German foreign policy in Eastern Europe was oriented first and foremost at the expansion of German influence in the region,

²⁰⁴ Jezavitaŭ, "Pieršy Ŭsiebielaruski Kanhres," 27.

²⁰⁵ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 9, 14 December 1917, reprinted in "Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika," *Biellaruski historyčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 3: 62.

prioritizing strategic military interests and the exploitation of resources. This was to be achieved indirectly, through supporting select national movements and their aspirations for statehood, rather than by means of a straightforward conquest. Armed with the strategy of “limited autonomy,”²⁰⁶ and by using their positive image as the protector of the rights of the oppressed nationalities,²⁰⁷ along with a skillful manipulation of the concept of self-determination, Germany intended to weaken the Russian state as much as possible. This attitude explained the increased German support for the Lithuanian state-building ambitions starting from the early on in 1917.²⁰⁸ Yet Belarus did not feature in any of the German plans in the East.²⁰⁹ In practical terms, the support of Belarusians did not offer Germans anything useful in return. The invisibility of Belarusian national aspirations at the start of the First World War, especially when contrasted against Polish or Lithuanian ambitions, predetermined the attitudes of the Germans, who saw that in terms of resources and influence they did not gain anything from providing support to the Belarusians.²¹⁰

As for the Soviet side, it was even less delicate in obscuring its intentions, as in practice it did not display any semblance of respect for its progressive slogans in regard to the rights of nationalities. Rather, it was clearly appropriating the right of representing all

²⁰⁶ A. Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg: der Fall Ober Ost 1915 – 1917* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993), 171 – 173.

²⁰⁷ Seppo Zetterberg, *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands, 1916 – 1918: ein Beitrag zu Deutschlands antirussischem Propagandakrieg unter den Fremdvölkern Russlands im ersten Weltkrieg* (Helsinki: Finnische Historische Gesellschaft, 1978), 60. On the evolution of German interpretations of occupation and new forms of control throughout the First World War see Jonathan E. Gumz, “Losing Control: The Norm of Occupation in Eastern Europe during the First World War,” in *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe's First World War*, eds. Jochen Böhrer, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Joachim von Puttkamer (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014), 83.

²⁰⁸ See Chapters 5 and 6 for more details on the German national policies in Eastern Europe.

²⁰⁹ Winfried Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918* (Wien: Oldenbourg, 1966), 15; Joachim Tauber, “German Eastern Policy, 1917 – 1918,” *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 13, (January 2008), Historical Abstracts with Full Text, EBSCOhost (Accessed 9 April 2015), 72.

²¹⁰ By contrast, in early 1918, German foreign policy focused on the economic potential of Ukraine, contemplating to sponsor the “creation” of a Ukrainian state. See Frank Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung unter deutscher Besatzungsherrschaft 1918 und 1941/42* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 80. See also Chapter 6.

the peoples of Russia at the negotiations in Brest-Litovsk, where it signed an armistice with Germany on 15 December 1917. By refusing to allow the Ukrainian delegation to cross over the front line to reach Brest in time to join the negotiations, the Bolshevik government blatantly ignored its assurances of national self-determination. Notably, in comparison to the Belarusian case, Ukraine at that time demonstrated more progress on the path towards establishing its own statehood, as the Ukrainian National Republic had already been declared on 20 November 1917, in the Third Universal.²¹¹ Apparently, being aware of the developments in Ukraine, delegate Sušynski boldly suggested to the All-Belarusian Congress to proclaim a Belarusian Republic immediately and enter the peace negotiations in the capacity of a subject of international politics. Some delegates expressed enthusiasm at this possibility, but the voting revealed that the majority was more reserved in their expectations. They agreed only on authorizing the Presidium to establish contact with Trotsky. Depending on the outcome of this mission, delegates were then to be sent to Petrograd and to the peace talks.²¹²

Rumours that circulated regarding the impending discussions in Brest about the possible transfer of several Belarusian territories to Poland worried the Congress and prompted it to request immediate explanations from Petrograd. In an attempt to obtain an official statement from the Council of the People's Commissars on this issue, the Presidium of the Congress conducted telephone negotiations with Commissar of Nationalities Stalin on 14 December. The latter refrained from explaining any details, ambiguously referring to the right of free national self-determination up to the point of secession through a referendum, provided that the option of a federation received support among the working population of Russia. The option of a referendum caused skepticism

²¹¹ Stephan M. Horak, *The First Treaty of World War I: Ukraine's Treaty with the Central Powers of February 9, 1918* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1988), 30 – 31.

²¹² *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 9, 14 December 1917, reprinted in “Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika,” *Biellaruski historyčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 3: 62.

among the delegates, as they were concerned about the vague national identification of the population in regions with strong Polish or Russian influences, taking as examples Vil'nia and Viciebsk provinces, respectively.²¹³

The issue of Belarusian self-determination featured prominently in Jazep Varonka's speech, delivered to the Congress on the next day. In particular, he stressed the leading role of the VBR in trying to protect the interests of the Belarusian people, noting that representatives of the BSH stated these intentions on 17 August in Moscow, and later reiterated them at the All-Russian Democratic Conference on 17 September in Petrograd. In both instances, these requests were typical for 1917, and were limited to an autonomous solution for Belarus within the Russian federative democratic republic which was to guarantee the rights of minority nationalities. Nevertheless, the Russian Provisional Government ignored these demands completely, while the similar but more resolute statements of Ukrainian representatives were met with direct protests by Kerenski.²¹⁴

Varonka stressed the consistent efforts of the VBR in advocating for the interests of Belarusians, despite the lack of funds for organizing a broad agitation campaign. Contrasting it to the BOK, a latecomer on the Belarusian political scene, he reminded the delegates to prioritize the tasks of local power organization and to formulate clear positions regarding the peace negotiations, the redistribution of land, and the occupation of Belarusian territories. The Petrograd power of the people's commissars was to be recognized only in the case if it did not contradict Belarusian self-determination intentions.²¹⁵ The same reasoning was present in an editorial in *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, stating that the Bolshevik government was still recognized, yet at the same time it was rapidly

²¹³ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 10, 16 December 1917, reprinted in *ibid.*, 66 – 67.

²¹⁴ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, 51.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51 – 52.

losing its credibility by instigating unnecessary social unrest. It was noted that this internal matter of Russian politics became a concern for Belarusians, as soon as the Bolsheviks started to use Belarusian territories in their trade for peace. The newspaper protested against the possible division of Belarus and “resolutely warned” that this would not be tolerated.²¹⁶

The West-Russist group of *oblastniki* and their sympathizers at the Congress were more reserved and conservative, but the positions of some of them underwent a slight evolution. This can be traced back to the statement made by their leader Kančar on the 15 of December. On behalf of the BOK he recognized the “Petrograd authority of the commissars,” but stressed that once local Belarusian power was established, it would be recognized as well.²¹⁷ Kančar admitted that Belarusian Bolsheviks experienced a turning point and started to follow their nation. In a manner typical of the BOK, he still exaggerated the threat of “imperialist Poles,” but at the same time, most likely having the Minsk Bolsheviks in mind, he also criticized the “Bolshevik autocracy” which ruled by a “whip.”²¹⁸ The leader of the *oblastniki* expressed his disappointment in the revolution, as in his opinion it was assuming a chaotic character. In particular, hinting at the problematic legitimacy of the Obliskomzap, Kančar stated that Belarus had its own Bolsheviks, able to organize power, as opposed to non-local strangers. He called on the delegates to stop all internal party struggles, as the only question of importance at the Congress, the same as at the peace negotiations, was “to be or not to be” for Belarus.²¹⁹ Yet in Kančar's interpretation, it also had to be without any “collaboration with the bourgeoisie.”²²⁰ In response to questions from the audience, he denied the speculation that a “kingdom” was

²¹⁶ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 35, 21 December 1917, 1.

²¹⁷ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, 51.

²¹⁸ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 11, 17 December 1917, reprinted in “Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika,” *Bielaruski histaryčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 3: 67 – 68.

²¹⁹ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 11, 17 December 1917, 68.

²²⁰ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, 52.

planned for Belarus and criticized Ukrainians for organizing their power from above, which in his opinion made it less democratic in character.²²¹

Despite these signs of the shift in the BOK positions, Petrograd Belarusians continued to slow down the work of the Congress. During the general meeting on the 16 of December, when it had already been in session for ten days, a certain Jafremaŭ suggested to return again to the question about its goals and tasks. *Oblastnik* Vazila, speaking on behalf of the Mahilioŭ province, added that the Congress was not authorized to solve the issue of organizing power in Belarus and that other congresses were required in the future.²²² These statements provoked a large discussion in response. Burbis of the BSH reminded the delegates that they had gathered for the Congress with the clear aim to “build a better future of the Belarusian people. Those who tell us that we do not need the power are blurring our vision.”²²³ In regard to Vazila’s comments, Mamon’ka from the 12th Army bitterly noted that doubts about the competences and authority of the Congress expressed by the Presidium deputy chair, rather than an ordinary delegate, were especially disappointing. Greeted with applause by the audience, Aliaksiuk, on behalf of the CBVR, asked for the support of the “revolutionary democratic power.”²²⁴

Delegates from the military section of the Congress were particularly offended by Vazila's suggestion to take time and postpone important decisions. Pointing to the intrigues and internal struggle that had marked the Congress since its very first days, they equated all delays with sabotage and called for resolute actions of “real revolutionaries.” In his disappointment, Jezavitaŭ even referred to the delegates who played down the issue of self-determination as “black sheep.” This provoked the Mahilioŭ group to demand Jezavitaŭ's exclusion from the Congress, yet the incident was over after voting revealed

²²¹ Ibid., 50.

²²² Ibid., 52.

²²³ Ibid., 53.

²²⁴ Ibid.

that it was outnumbered: 170 delegates supported Jezavitaŭ, while 90 delegates voted for his exclusion.²²⁵ However, these numbers are significant as they show that *oblastniki* were not a marginal group and enjoyed some support among the delegates.

The issue of the organization of power was picked up soon thereafter by another BOK member, Selivanaŭ, who expressed his distrust in the Minsk-based national organizations and continued stressing the internal divisions of the Congress. This provoked another series of passionate and patriotic responses. For instance, Kachanovič, speaking on behalf of the Mahilioŭ province teachers, also regretted the lack of unity at the Congress, but urged the delegates to act instead of delaying decisions, pointing out that otherwise Germany or Polish legions would decide the fate of Belarus. In Falski's opinion, the situation in Belarus required the Congress to take over responsibility for the country, and he considered it to be fully authorized to do so. Kasevič dismissed the question of whether the Congress was competent enough to decide on a state structure as an intrigue. He fully supported the creation of autonomy, while the central power was to be recognized as a temporary one, until the federative power was established. Delegates from Hrodna province added that they were sent to Minsk not to discuss such insignificant issues as the competencies of the Congress, but to determine the fate of Belarus, establish democratic rule, send a delegation to the peace conference, decide on the formation of a national army, and instigate the immediate transfer of land to the people.²²⁶

Debates on 16 December were summed up by the socialist faction resolution, essentially following the opinion of the majority: delays were considered counterproductive. Obviously, delegates were also not sure that they would be able to organize another congress. It was suggested to follow the example of Ukraine, which had

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, 54.

not even had such a representative gathering, yet had managed to get international recognition. However, according to the protocols, at this moment the meeting suddenly switched over to a discussion of the refugee issue. Debates on the self-determination continued on the next day.²²⁷

Dispersal of the Congress

Delegates were aware of the persisting dangers of the Congress dissolution. Jezavitaŭ specifically noted that it had struggled for its existence since the very first day.²²⁸ Vasil' Zacharka pointed out that activities of the BOK members along with the Bolsheviks from the Obliskomzap caused discord and confusion among almost 2,000 people attending the Congress. In addition to the destabilizing internal disagreements and conflicts, Belarusian national organizations failed to find in their ranks a person with good managerial and leaderships skills to direct and guide the work of the Congress, as demonstrated by the constant re-elections of the chair of the Congress.²²⁹

Without knowing that it would be the last day of the Congress, unsuspecting delegates met again in the morning of 17 December in the hall of the Belarusian National House (formerly the Minsk Nobility Association building), resuming the discussion on the goals and tasks of the Congress. An unnamed delegate from Mahilioŭ province expressed his disagreement with Kachanovič (both of them represented the teachers of that province), declaring that it was not yet time to create a republic. He recognized as competencies of the Congress only the ability to set up local power of soldiers', workers' and peasants' deputies as an *oblast'* level authority.²³⁰ The military representatives, including war invalids, as well as the delegates from Vil'nia and Hrodna provinces,

²²⁷ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, 55.

²²⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 6, ark. 14, 15.

²²⁹ Zacharka, "Haloŭnyja momanty bielaruskaha ruchu," 26.

²³⁰ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, 55 – 56.

continued to make straightforward demands for declaring a democratic republic, albeit still as a part of a future federation with the democratic Russian republic. The Mahilioŭ group and *oblastniki* loudly protested against the inclusion of this item in the resolution. During a break in the meeting, it was discovered that one of the delegates had fake credentials and everyone else had to undergo the procedure of mandate check, terminating the debates.²³¹

The meeting resumed at about 1:00 a.m. on the 18 of December, with a reading of the resolution adopted the previous evening by the general meeting of the Congress. Its first point stated the following:

Exercising the right to self-determination, declared by the Russian Revolution and approving democratic republican governance within the boundaries of Belarusian territories, in order to save the homeland and to prevent its division and the possibility of separation from the Russian democratic federative republic, the First All-Belarusian Congress decides to form out of its ranks the organ of local power – the All-Belarusian Council of Peasants', Soldiers' and Workers' Deputies, which is temporarily to act as the highest power in the country, entering into relations with the Central power, which is responsible to the Soviet of the Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies.²³²

The entire resolution consisted of fifteen points. Further provisions stipulated that the new organ of power was designed to implement decisions and resolutions of the Congress with the authorization to prepare the Belarusian Constituent Assembly, which was to decide the future of the country. In order to strengthen its authority, the new Council was to start with the formation of Belarusian army units immediately. Representatives of the Belarusian provisional power were to be sent to the peace negotiations in order to promote the interests of a united and indivisible Belarus.²³³

The resolution makes it clear that the Congress was establishing a new Belarusian organ of power to replace the Bolshevik-controlled Obliskomzap. Despite the

²³¹ Ibid., 56 – 57.

²³² Ibid., 57.

²³³ Ibid.

statements of some delegates calling for a proclamation of the republic, the document appears to be very moderate in character and does not hint at separatist tendencies, let alone at a declaration of independence. On the contrary, just as *oblastniki* intended, the final decision was delayed until the national Constituent Assembly that was to determine the future of the Belarusian republic. The Congress resolution of 17 December disproves assumptions that the Congress was secessionist in character.²³⁴ Rather, it demonstrates that Belarusian activists were assuming responsibility for the future of their country, but had to take into account the opinions of more conservative groups within the Congress. The adoption of a consensus resolution reflected a point on which everyone agreed, namely, that Belarusian people themselves had the right to decide the fate of their country, rather than Bolshevik military authorities. Further, the proposed decision on the national army units signalled that the Congress was moving on a course towards establishing statehood. This might explain why the report from *Vol'naja Bielarus* provided an emotional description of the Congress dissolution as an interrupted proclamation of a republic.²³⁵

The resolution of 17 December was the last official document of the Congress, as at around 2:00 a.m. on 18 December its work was interrupted by two representatives of the Obliskomzap, Krivoshein²³⁶ and Rezauskii, who introduced themselves as “garrison

²³⁴ For instance, this point of view is represented by Nicholas Vakar, see Vakar, *Belorussia: the Making of a Nation*, 100.

²³⁵ “Razhon Usiebielaruskaha Zjezdu,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 36, 31 December 1931, 2.

²³⁶ Nikolai Krivoshein (1885 – 1936) – not to be confused with his namesake, another Nikolai Krivoshein, who in the 1920s was a member of the illegal anti-Soviet military organization *Zialiony Dub*, which led a guerilla war against the Bolsheviks on Belarusian territories. The Bolshevik Nikolai Krivoshein, notoriously known as one of the chief figures in the dispersion of the All-Belarusian Congress, had served at the Western front since the start of the First World War. In 1917, he became a member of the Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Western front in Minsk and chaired the Executive Committee of the pro-Bolshevik gathering of the peasant deputies of Minsk and Vil'nia provinces in November. In December 1918, he became the garrison commander in Minsk. In 1936, Krivoshein wrote memoirs where he positioned himself in the main role during the establishment of the Soviet power in Belarus. He was immediately accused of counterrevolutionary activities and sentenced to death. See Sergei Krapivin, “Provokatory i pogromshchiki dekabria 1917-go,” *Narodnaja Volia*, 30 December 2010, <http://www.nv-online.info/by/140/printed/25693> (Accessed 19 August 2015). The Bolshevik Nikolai Krivoshein is also not to be confused with the Soviet General Semion Krivoshein (1899 – 1978) who along with Heinz Guderian participated in the joint Soviet-German military parade in 1941 in Brest.

commander” and “commissar of the Western oblast,” respectively. They were accompanied by the commander of the First Revolutionary Regiment of the Minsk Soviet, Remnev, and armed soldiers.²³⁷ Denying the request made by the chair of the Congress, Sierada, to present their credentials, the Bolsheviks declared that the building was surrounded by the military. While Hryb was trying to resolve the issue with these unexpected arrivals, the delegates proceeded to vote on the resolution. The first point was supported unanimously, yet the voting procedure on the remaining parts of the resolution was again interrupted by Krivoshein. Having his identity finally confirmed by two delegates, he demanded a time slot for an urgent statement. Krivoshein's rambling speech made it at once clear to everyone that he was in a state of alcoholic intoxication. Eventually, his comrade Rezauskii cut him short, declaring that the Congress was closed. Armed soldiers were ordered to arrest the entire Presidium of the Congress and remove it from the building.²³⁸ According to the memoirs of the Bolshevik Knorin, they acted on orders received from Miasnikov, who was the most resolute among the Minsk Bolshevik leaders in his opposition to the All-Belarusian Congress.²³⁹

Delegates present at the meeting reacted to these developments with a burst of indignation. Even the pro-Bolshevik members of the Congress considered the actions of Krivoshein and Rezauskii to be illegal, violating the interests of the Belarusian people. In response, the Congress quickly proceeded with the elections of a second Presidium, which managed only to adopt a protest resolution behind the furniture barricades, before being arrested as well. The Congress was powerless against the Bolsheviks, as it did not have any guards to protect itself. National army units had not been formed and loyal

²³⁷ Makar Kraŭcoŭ, “Razhon. Uspamin,” *Bielaruskae žyccio*, 18 March 1920.

²³⁸ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, 58; “Razhon Usiebielaruskaha Zjezdu,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 36, 31 December 1917, 2.

²³⁹ NARB, f. 35, vop. 1, spr. 71, ark. 20, reprinted in V. D. Selemenov, ed., *I ianvariia 1919 goda: vremennoe raboche-krest'ianskoe sovetskoe pravitel'stvo Belorussii: dokumenty i materialy* (Minsk: Limarius, 2005), 231.

soldiers were absent from Minsk. The only instance of active resistance occurred when the drunk Krivoshein tried to force Zinaida Jurjeva, the delegate from the BOK and a member of the newly elected second Presidium, to join him for a ride in a car. Apparently, Jurjeva either beat him up or threatened to shoot him.²⁴⁰

The remaining delegates followed the arrested, accompanying their departure with revolutionary songs and a funeral march. Cavalry with machine-guns were waiting outside to escort each group of delegates to their houses. Some marched on Padhornaja street to the building of the Commercial School, where the headquarters of the Council of the People's Commissars were located and where the arrested were transported.²⁴¹ By 5:00 a.m. on 18 December 1917, the All-Belarusian Congress had been dissolved.²⁴² The next day, a detachment of soldiers from the regiment of the Minsk Soviet under the command of Remnev raided the shared offices of the VBR, CBVR, BSH, and Belarusian cultural organizations, detaining the members of the Military Rada.²⁴³

Delegates of the Congress attempted to continue their work underground. They gathered on 18 December to protest the violence against the Belarusian people, condemning the "false socialists" led by Krivoshein and demanding true national self-determination. They called for the establishment of the "Belarusian Democratic Republic within the boundaries of a Russian federation."²⁴⁴ The Council of the Congress was acknowledged as an executive organ of the Congress, entrusted with the task of implementing all its decisions. It replaced all national organizations, including the BOK, VBR, the Regional Bureau, and others. The CBVR was preserved as a subordinate organ

²⁴⁰ Skalaban, "Usiebielaruski Zjezd," 69; Makar Kraŭcoŭ, "Razhon. Uspamin," *Bielaruskae žyccio*, 18 March 1920.

²⁴¹ Padhornaja is currently Karl Marx street. The Commercial School was located in the area of the current main campus of the Belarusian State University. See Zachar Šybeka, *Minsk sto hadoŭ tamu* (Minsk: Bielarus', 2007), 288, 290.

²⁴² *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, 59; Vieras, *Ja pomniu ūsio*, 61.

²⁴³ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 12, 21 December 1917, 60.

²⁴⁴ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 1, 13 January 1918, reprinted in "Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika," *Bielaruski historyčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 4: 61.

of the Council, which declared the convocation of the second All-Belarusian Congress to be its chief priority.²⁴⁵ The Council met on 20 December to elect an Executive Committee of seventeen members, which was later expanded by the inclusion of the representatives of the national minorities and CBVR. However, they had trouble coordinating their activities, and even in maintaining effective communication links between all of its members in the underground.²⁴⁶

Statistics and Representation

The memoirs of the participants and historical research generally agree that the total number of delegates at the First All-Belarusian Congress tallied 1872, out of whom 1167 had voting rights, while the remaining 705 had consultation rights.²⁴⁷ Recently, it has been suggested that these numbers should be regarded with more scepticism, based on the assumption that all of these people could not physically fit into the building of the Minsk city theatre.²⁴⁸ These doubts appear to be ungrounded, as the theatre was not the only place where the Congress convened. Due to the large numbers of delegates, some meetings were moved to the halls of the Minsk Nobility Association, located across the street from the theatre.²⁴⁹ On 10 December, the Congress decided to requisition the building, declaring it to be national property.²⁵⁰

The violent dissolution of the Congress by the Bolsheviks prevented the

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 60.

²⁴⁶ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 86; NARB, f. 567, vop. 1, spr. 11, ark. 3.

²⁴⁷ Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk*, 9; Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 38; Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio na Bielarusi*, 106; Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 190; M. V. Doŭnar-Zapol'ski, *Historyja Bielarusi* (Minsk: "Bielaruskaja encyklopedyja" imia P. Broŭki, 1994), 479; I. Ihnacenka, "Nacyjanal'ny ruch. Usiebielaruski Zjezd i jaho razhon," in *Historyja Bielarusi ū šasci tamach*, T. 5, ed. Michail P. Kasciuk (Minsk: VP Ekaperspektyva, 2005), 92.

²⁴⁸ See endnote 47, Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 339.

²⁴⁹ *Belorusskaia Rada*, Nr. 8, 12 December 1917, reprinted in "Usiebielaruski Zjezd 1917 hoda: svedčannie sučasnika," *Bielaruski historyčny časopis* (1993), Nr. 2: 51. The Minsk Nobility Association building was located on the corner of Padhornaja and Petrapaŭlaŭskaja streets, currently – corner of Marx and Engels streets. The building is not preserved. See Šybeka, *Minsk sto hadoŭ tamu*, 201.

²⁵⁰ Document Nr. 0064 "Pratakol Nr. 19 ahul'naha pasiedžannia Usiebielaruskaha Zjezdu ū Mensku 10.12.1917," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 36.

delegates from completing their work, but there are no reasons for historians to deny their presence in Minsk and suggest that their numbers were inflated to benefit a “nationalist mythology.”²⁵¹ Furthermore, this statement is not corroborated by the available statistical data, collected by the credentials commission of the All-Belarusian Congress, which was in charge of issuing the mandates for the delegates and keeping records on the social and political profiles of the participants. These materials had already been analyzed by Piotra Krečeŭski in the early 1918 in a report of the Congress, published in the first issue of *Belorusskaia Rada* in 1918. However, most issues of this newspaper could not reach the readers, as they were destroyed on the orders of the printing facility administration shortly after being printed. Consequently, this analysis was published again later in the spring of 1918 by *Bielaruski Šliach*.²⁵²

Krečeŭski's report explicitly stated that in the period from the 5 to the 17 of December 1917, the credentials commission issued 1167 mandates for the delegates with voting rights, and 705 mandates with consultative rights. Out of this number, civilians received 812 mandates with voting rights and 344 mandates with consultation rights, while military representatives had 355 and 361 mandates, respectively. Delegates from districts, zemstva and cities had 445 mandates with voting rights, while socialist parties, professional and political organizations were represented by 367 delegates qualified to vote. Krečeŭski explained a considerable number of mandates without voting rights by the insufficient information about the Congress in the provincial organizations, as some of them failed to provide their delegates with adequate credentials to receive full mandates.²⁵³

Analysis of the social and political profiles of the Congress delegates was

²⁵¹ Endnote 47, Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 339.

²⁵² Skalaban, “Usiebielaruski Zjezd,” 70. See also “Bielaruski Konhres,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 25, 22 April, 1918, 1.

²⁵³ “Bielaruski Konhres,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 25, 22 April 1918, 1.

based on a representative sample of 357 preserved questionnaires. The remaining documentation was destroyed by the Bolsheviks during the dispersal of the Military Rada. Furthermore, not all of the questionnaires of the credentials commission had been filled in, due to the premature dissolution of the Congress.²⁵⁴ Available data on the social origin of the delegates reveals that the total number of 357 included 101 peasants, 149 soldiers and sailors, 16 workers, 38 teachers, 29 refugee peasants, and 29 representatives of the intelligentsia. The age of the delegates varied between 19 and 62, but an overwhelming majority was found in the age group between 20 and 40 years old: 86 delegates were aged between 20 and 25 years old, 106 between 25 and 30, and 123 between 30 and 40. Most of them had various degrees of education, which was to be expected, as communities and organizations would strive to send the most qualified people to the Congress. Graduates of the people's schools were represented by 129 persons, another 45 delegates attended different city schools or adult education institutions, while 31 and 25 participants of the Congress were graduates of teachers' seminaries and universities respectively.²⁵⁵

Politically, the Congress gathered together representatives of different parties: among 357 delegates 33 were from the BSH, 6 from the BNPS, 31 identified as Bolsheviks, 73 as Socialist-Revolutionaries, and 57 as Left Socialist-Revolutionaries. Another 57 delegates described themselves as sympathizers of either the SR or the Bolshevik party, while 79 delegates were not affiliated with any party.²⁵⁶ With regard to this variety, Cvikievič called the Congress a “true parade of the democratic forces of Belarus.”²⁵⁷ It is obvious that politically it was dominated by the Socialist-Revolutionaries, who were popular among peasants and soldiers of peasant origin. The number of the BSH-affiliated delegates most likely reflected its better party standing

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk*, 9.

within Minsk and the province, where it had stronger positions in comparison to the eastern russified provinces. The comparable numbers of the pro-Bolshevik delegates indicated their influence over the military of the Western front. It is also likely that these numbers could have been interpreted as a warning sign by the radical Minsk Bolsheviks, who realized that 31 delegates were not enough to control the proceedings of the Congress, in contrast to their recent series of orchestrated gatherings of peasants', workers', and soldiers' representatives in November, where they secured their own predominance by manipulating the membership in order to provide a shade of legitimization for the Obliskomzap.

Conclusion

In the second half of 1917, several overlapping initiatives to organize power in Belarus emerged. First, the Belarusian national movement reorganized itself again around the Great Belarusian Rada in Minsk. The new Rada had more potential for success, as it was based on a broad democratic coalition platform, emphasizing the unity of the whole of Belarus and its people, whose interests it intended to represent and protect. Second, the Belarusian Oblast' Committee at the All-Russian Soviet of Peasants' Deputies emerged as the most influential of the Belarusian organizations in Russia, whereas the political weight of the Moscow-based Belarusian People's Hramada notably decreased. Operating from Petrograd and maintaining close links with the new Bolshevik authorities, the BOK enjoyed financial support from the new power and hoped to profit politically in Belarus.

Last but not least, in the aftermath of the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks proceeded with solidifying their positions in strategically important areas of the Western front, which at that time ran through Belarusian territories from north to south. The Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Western Front established the Oblast Executive

Committee of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies of the Western Oblast and Front (Obliskomzap), effectively replacing previous civilian authorities with military powers. The local Belarusian population was denied representation in this new administration, which was clearly oriented towards military goals and interests, in line with the overall trend in this region during the First World War. Minsk Bolsheviks did not hesitate to demonstrate their outright hostility to Belarusian national aspirations, while their comrades in Petrograd were still referring to the progressive slogans of self-determination, or the rights of nationalities to secession, in order to manipulate their political opponents.

In these circumstances, the convocation of the All-Belarusian Congress in December of 1917 was a combined achievement of all Belarusian organizations, regardless of their political preferences. It was designed to provide a legitimate alternative to the militarized Bolshevik power structures of the Western front. Analysis of preserved Congress protocols indicates the socialist backgrounds of the majority of delegates, who recognized the principle of soviet power, but specifically objected to the interpretation of its principles by the Minsk Bolsheviks. Despite the fact that the VBR was able to enforce its own plan of having the Congress in Minsk, the rivalry between the VBR and the BOK was defining for its proceedings, resulting in disruptive internal discussions, as the faction of *oblastniki* constantly questioned the authority of the Congress and attempted to slow down its work. Meanwhile the supporters of Belarusian national self-determination urged the delegates to assume responsibility for the fate of their homeland, pointing out the dangers of more influential foreign political actors interested in implementing their own agendas on Belarusian territories.

Defined by these debates, Congress resolutions were conciliatory in character. The last resolution of the Congress was a rather moderate compromise to reconcile all the

factions around the points on which they could agree. It did not go further than making calls for autonomy, thus reflecting the dominant trend of 1917. More importantly, it explicitly denied giving recognition to the hastily organized military Bolshevik authorities over Belarusian territories. A majority of the delegates could not accept that strangers and foreigners were voluntarily setting up governing structures and usurping power. Thus, the attitude of the most representative gathering of Belarusians can be interpreted as a cautious first step in the direction of their own independent statehood. Yet only the subsequent violent dispersion of the Congress can be regarded as a major turning point, forcing national activists to acknowledge greater responsibilities for the future of their homeland. Circumstances of the Congress dissolution eventually overshadowed the initial goals of the organizers and exercised greater influence both on the course of historical events and on the image of the Congress, constructed in its aftermath.

Chapter 5

Teile und Herrsche: Belarusians, Lithuanians, and Poles in the Lands of Ober Ost (1915 – 1917)

After the three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late 18th century, all modern Belarusian territories were incorporated into the Russian Empire. This situation remained unchanged until the First World War, when Vil'nia, Hrodna, and the western parts of Minsk provinces were occupied by the German Empire and became a part of Ober Ost,¹ while Viciebsk, Mahilioŭ, and the eastern parts of Minsk provinces remained under tsarist rule. Looking at the crucial period of redrawing borders in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire during the First World War, this chapter focuses on the conditions and challenges for Belarusian nation-building in the western Belarusian provinces under the German regime. Chronologically, it covers the period between 1915 and 1917, which represents the early phase of occupation, when German policies proclaimed the principle of equal treatment of all Ober Ost nationalities, in contrast to a clearly Lithuanian-oriented policy that was in effect by early 1917.

My aim here is to determine to what degree Belarusian national politics benefited from the new political circumstances in the region. Another goal here is to illustrate the influence of German policies in Ober Ost on the intensification of competition between the Belarusian, Lithuanian, and Polish national movements. Jews stood aside from this national struggle, yet some aspects relating to the Jewish population in Ober Ost will be briefly discussed in regard to their relations with the German powers.

¹ Das Land des Oberbefehlshabers Ost – German-administered occupation zone in East-Central Europe during the First World War. It included the territories of contemporary Lithuania, parts of Belarus, Latvia, and Poland.

The Latvian and German populations of Ober Ost are beyond the scope of this chapter.

The occupied areas in East-Central Europe were exploited by the occupying armies with the primary aim of benefiting the military interests and strategic needs of the combatants. Similar to the Russian Empire, which mobilized all resources for the war effort and tightened controls over the activities of the population, especially on the territories adjacent to the front line, the German military command adopted an identical attitude towards Ober Ost. However, the German regime also had one significant peculiarity, connected to the war aims of weakening Russia. Skillfully disguising its intentions of annexation with the attractive and popular slogans of supporting oppressed nationalities, Germany posed as their protector. With this approach,² its non-Russian subjects in the newly conquered territories could enjoy more liberal policies in the spheres of culture and education, in contrast to the period of Russian rule. National movements in the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borderlands did not hesitate to make use of these circumstances in order to strengthen their popular base of support.

This chapter will follow the process of the establishment of the occupation regime in Ober Ost and the interaction between German authorities and local nationalities, with particular attention to plans of annexation and economic exploitation, the situation of nationalities, and the evolution of German attitudes towards Belarusians as a separate ethnicity in Ober Ost. Turning from the German perspectives to those of the Belarusian national activists, I concentrate on the state of national mobilization within the Belarusian milieu in Vil'nia and beyond, discussing challenges encountered both in dealing with the occupation powers and in promoting the Belarusian national cause in Vil'nia and among the population in the countryside. The following aspects are to be

² This strategy was also typical for other empires during the First World War. In order to weaken their enemies, they used the support of national movements. See Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires. The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908 – 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

taken into consideration here: firstly, the dynamics of interaction between the German authorities and Belarusian national elites in Ober Ost, and secondly, the presence of stronger and more developed Polish and, to a lesser degree, Lithuanian national movements.³

Despite concessions to the nationalities of Ober Ost, German military interests always remained a priority in the region, while the concerns and needs of the local population, including national development, were considered to be of secondary importance. Nevertheless, Belarusian national activists were able to act within the parameters defined by the Germans, achieving more in the sphere of nation-building in comparison to the eastern Belarusian provinces which remained under Russian rule. The key question to ask here is whether they were able to advocate for their national needs as successfully as were neighboring nationalities, and able to expand the networks of national activists from Vil'nia into the provinces.

German War Aims in Eastern Europe and Establishment of Ober Ost

Military actions on the Eastern Front started in 1914, but it was not until 1915 that the war reached the territories settled by the Belarusians. Over the course of the

³ With regard to the second aspect, relations of the German occupation regime with Lithuanians and Poles in Ober Ost have been sufficiently explored in the historical research. See Eberhard Demm, *Ostpolitik und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2002); Vejas G. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); A. Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg: der Fall Ober Ost 1915 – 1917* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993); Christopher Barthel, “Contesting the Russian Borderlands: the German Military Administration of Occupied Lithuania, 1915 – 1918,” PhD Dissertation, Brown University, 2011. The weaker Belarusian national movement was only starting to enter international politics, and remained in the background. Its historiography is represented only by a handful of studies. See Uladzimir Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja ŭ Biełarusi padčas niameckaj akupacyi (1915 – 1918 h.)* (Vil'nia: Instytut biełarusistyki: Biełaruskae Histaryčnae Tavarystva, 2010); Jerzy Turonek, *Białoruś pod okupacją niemiecką* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1993). On the wider context of the emerging concepts of modern Belarusian statehood in Ober Ost see Dorota Michaluk and Per Anders Rudling, “From the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Belarusian Democratic Republic: the Idea of Belarusian Statehood during the German Occupation of Belarusian Lands, 1915 – 1919,” *Journal Of Belarusian Studies* (2014) Vol. 7, Nr. 2: 3 – 36; Dorota Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa, 1918 – 1920: u podstaw białoruskiej państwowości* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2010), 130 – 148; Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906 – 1931* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 68 – 75.

summer of 1915, the Russian army was forced to leave Poland, Kurland, Lithuania, Galicia, and parts of the Belarusian territories. On 3 September 1915, German armies took Hrodna, while Vil'nia was occupied by the 19 of September. The offensive of 1915 in Eastern Europe continued until the end of September. For the following three years, the front stabilized along the Riga-Dünaburg-Baranavičy-Pinsk-Luck-Dubno line.⁴ Throughout 1915, the western Belarusian areas (Vil'nia, Hrodna, parts of Minsk provinces) were administered by the German occupation regime, while the eastern areas (parts of Minsk, Viciebsk and Mahilioŭ provinces) remained within the Russian Empire. The occupied Belarusian-Lithuanian-Polish borderlands became a part of Ober Ost, officially established by the Germans as a new administrative unit on 4 November 1915, and spreading over contemporary Lithuania, as well as parts of Latvia, Poland, and Belarus.⁵

The German Empire entered the First World War without a well-defined plan concerning possible territorial gains in Eastern Europe. In September 1914, German chancellor Bethmann Hollweg made a statement regarding the chief objectives for the army, proclaiming that the German priority was to move Russia as far as possible from German borders and to end Russian rule over all of its non-Russian subject nationalities.⁶ One of the approaches under consideration was the annexation of these lands and expansion of the German Empire into the conquered territories. Alternatively, a different plan foresaw the creation of a belt of semi-autonomous formally independent states under German control. The latter strategy was at first oriented towards the establishment of

⁴ Boris Khavkin, "Russland gegen Deutschland. Die Ostfront des Ersten Weltkrieges in den Jahren 1914 bis 1915," in *Die vergessene Front – der Osten 1914/15: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, ed. Gerhard Paul Gross (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), 82; Presseabteilung Ober Ost, *Das Land Ober Ost. Deutsche Arbeit in den Verwaltungsgebieten Kurland, Litauen und Bialystok-Grodno* ([Kowno]: Verlag der Presseabteilung Ober Ost, 1917), 7 – 8.

⁵ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 307.

⁶ Aufzeichnungen Bethmann Hollwegs über die Richtlinien der Politik beim Friedensschluss, Grosses Hauptquartier, den 9. September 1914, cited in Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 108.

monarchies to be ruled by German princes. However, from the very start, this plan appeared problematic due to tensions within the German nobility, who were concerned that the selection of monarchs for these states would disrupt the power balance within the empire.⁷

Development of a unified and clear strategy towards Eastern Europe was further slowed down by the internal contradictions within the German government, as its decision-making was under the competing influence of the military command on the one hand, and the foreign ministry officials on the other. Eventually, civilian politicians failed to develop a sustainable long-term approach towards the territories in the East, ceding power to the military, where the hard-line wing could always win the upper hand on important issues, as the growing influence of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff demonstrated.⁸ The implementation of the project of installing pro-German puppet states was delayed until the fall of 1916, since early in the war Germany was still concerned that this plan would mean interference in the Austro-Hungarian sphere of influence, as it was in the case with the Polish state. German diplomacy also feared that the immediate establishment of pro-German semi-states could negatively influence potential separate peace negotiations with Russia. This hesitant stance in international politics directly benefited the German army command in its drive for annexation. In particular, the 3rd Supreme Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff started promoting its own vision of a new order in the East, emphasizing military needs, security, and direct German control.⁹ Annexation plans for Eastern Europe were also in line with the interests of German industrial elites, who supported an economic, military, and political expansion of

⁷ Herfried Münkler, "Spiel mit dem Feuer. Die "Politik der revolutionären Infektion" im Ersten Weltkrieg," *Osteuropa* (Feb – Apr 2014), Vol. 64, Issue 2 – 4: 120 – 121.

⁸ Joachim Tauber, "German Eastern Policy, 1917 – 1918," *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 13 (January 2008), Historical Abstracts with Full Text, EBSCOhost (Accessed 9 April 2015): 71; Münkler, "Spiel mit dem Feuer," 123.

⁹ Münkler, "Spiel mit dem Feuer," 120 – 122.

power.¹⁰

In these circumstances, the predominance of military circles remained a defining feature of German policy-making in East-Central Europe. As Vejas Liulevicius argued, the war provided the German army with a possibility to engage in a unique, even utopian state-building project, relying on the instruments of total control at its disposal.¹¹ The case of Ober Ost, established with the goal of keeping the Eastern European territories in the possession of Germany and affirming the German civilizing mission, can be viewed as a typical example of this trend. The chief role in conceptualizing and creating Ober Ost in this capacity is attributed to Hindenburg's deputy, General Erich Ludendorff, who has been described as a “war god” with his own visions of grandeur,¹² while Ober Ost itself was called his “private province.”¹³

The close connection of the future of Ober Ost to the German military aims was reflected by its name, which represented a shortened version of the official title of the German Supreme Commander in the East, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg.¹⁴ All legislative, judicial, and executive power in Ober Ost belonged exclusively to the Supreme Commander, who was solely in charge of governance.¹⁵ There was no option of establishing a civilian administration, as all governing institutions in Ober Ost were part

¹⁰ Karl-Heinz Gräfe, *Vom Donnerkreuz zum Hakenkreuz: die baltischen Staaten zwischen Diktatur und Okkupation* (Berlin: Ed. Organon, 2010), 4.

¹¹ Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 77.

¹² *Ibid.*, 55.

¹³ Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 115.

¹⁴ Das Land des Oberbefehlshabers Ost – the Land of the Supreme Commander in the East; short version: Ober Ost.

¹⁵ German authorities immediately introduced a number of changes in administration and governance, including the replacement of the Julian calendar used in the Russian Empire with the European Gregorian calendar. A corresponding order was signed by Hindenburg on 25 May 1915. German money was declared the official means of payment on the occupied lands in November 1915, with an exchange rate of 1,50 mark for 1 Russian ruble. German authorities also established several monopolies as a form of economic control. In particular, production of cigarettes and fine-cut tobacco was prohibited. The rights to import these articles belonged solely to the German Supreme Command. Monetary fines for the violation of this order reached from 50 up to 50,000 marks. Production of brandy, compressed yeast, and vinegar was to be approved by the economics department of Ober Ost. The latter also had exclusive right to control the import and sales of alcohol. See Lietuvos Mokslų Akademijos Vrublevskių Biblioteka, Rankraščių Skyrius (hereafter LMAVB, RS), f. 23, b. 46/2, l. 23 r., l. 28r, l. 38, l. 55 r., l. 56.

of the army. Special departments, fulfilling the roles of ministries and subordinated to the headquarters of Ober Ost, were formed between November 1915 and May 1916. Administrative personnel were normally recruited from the German army ranks, unless there was a shortage of qualified candidates or they were needed for more urgent military tasks. Only in that case could locals be employed in the administration of Ober Ost.¹⁶

As a “mobile army formation,” Ober Ost stood in stark contrast to the civil administrations set up by the Germans in other occupied territories, such as Government General Brussels or Warsaw.¹⁷ Military and security concerns determined the organization of everyday life for the local population in Ober Ost. All political activities of the local nationalities on the occupied territories were prohibited by Hindenburg's decree, signed on 28 July 1915.¹⁸ Civilians were not allowed to leave the boundaries of their communities without permit papers.¹⁹ According to the order of Hindenburg signed on 26 December 1915, every person over ten years old had to obtain a passport from the new authorities. Failure to comply, as well as carrying false or invalid documents, was punished with internment in a workhouse for a period of up to ten years. Passports were very detailed, with a photo of the owner in full height, a fingerprint of the right forefinger, and a detailed description of special features.²⁰ Passport issuing detachments, employing over 600 men, were immediately formed in Tilsit in December 1915. Overall, German authorities planned to issue about three million passports, thus covering the entire territory of Ober Ost. By 1917, about 1,800,000 persons had been photographed,

¹⁶ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 85 – 86; Stephan Lehnstaedt, “Fluctuating between “Utilisation” and Exploitation: Occupied East Central Europe during the First World War,” in *Legacies of Violence. Eastern Europe's First World War*, eds. Jochen Böhrer, Włodzimierz Borodziej and Joachim von Puttkamer (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014), 98.

¹⁷ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 86.

¹⁸ However, enforcement of this prohibition was not consistent, especially when Germany started to use the national factor in its anti-Russian politics in the region. See Edmundas Gimžauskas, *Bielaruskі faktar pry farmavanni litoŭskaj dziaŕžavy ũ 1915 – 1923 hh.* (Bielastok: Bielaruskae historyčnae tavarystva, 2012), 52.

¹⁹ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 46/2, 51 r.

²⁰ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 46/1, l. 63, 63.

registered, and issued official identifications.²¹

According to the German chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, the aim of the war was to secure German existence, both politically and economically, in the West and in the East.²² Consequently, Ober Ost lands were treated primarily through the prism of their usefulness, while local interests and the concerns of the people who populated these lands were regarded as being of secondary importance.²³ In particular, paragraph six of the administrative regulations for Ober Ost stipulated that “the interests of the army and of the German Empire always precede the interests of the occupied land.”²⁴ The priorities of the German authorities were clearly to take advantage of the territorial gains as much as was necessary for their own military progress. This attitude, along with the intensive economic exploitation, remained the guiding principle of governance on the occupied territories.²⁵ The financial documents concerning Ober Ost reveal that the Germans were able to extract economic gains from these lands. For instance, in January 1917 alone, the expenditures of the administration were at 1,878,607 marks, while the income figure was at 2,912,236 marks. The surplus of 1,033,628 marks was appropriated by the German Empire.²⁶ During the entire period of the existence of Ober Ost German powers exported resources in the value of 338,606,000 marks, while the values of the imports were estimated to be at 77,308,000 marks.²⁷

Along with the extraction of natural resources, the military administration of Ober Ost exploited its human capital. Throughout the course of the war, the Germans

²¹ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 173, 176.

²² “Zu den Reichstagverhandlungen,” *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, Nr. 3, 14 December 1915.

²³ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 84.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁵ For instance, detailed instructions for flax cultivation foresaw that the sowing areas were to be considerably increased in 1916, as flax was to be exported to Germany for the needs of the textile industry and production of flax oil. See Lietuvos Valstybės Istorijos Archyvas (hereafter LVIA), f. 641, ap. 1, b. 883a, l. 66. Another valuable resource extracted in Ober Ost was wood. Forests were massively cut down. The local population was forced to work for the Germans and assist them in transporting the lumber by railway and on the rivers. See LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 572, l. 12 r.

²⁶ LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 697b, l. 5.

²⁷ Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 73.

gradually came to an understanding that victory had to be achieved under the condition of a maximal mobilization of society. This attitude was transferred to the occupied territories, where it manifested itself in a more ruthless manner. In the fall of 1916, Ludendorff abandoned all reservations towards respecting international law and ordered forced labour recruitment in Ober Ost. Labour duty had existed from the start of the occupation, when the population was forced to do jobs locally if there was a need for that, yet by 1916 it had become a widely employed practice, often implying long-term work throughout the occupation zone. There were two major types of organized forced labour: civilian workers' battalions (Zivilarbeiterbataillonen) and workers' columns (Arbeiterkolonnen). The latter were usually put together for short-term assignments, while the first category of workers were interned in special camps, had to wear prison-style uniforms, and did not receive appropriate payment for their labour. These people were employed in agriculture, forestry, and road and railway construction, with a working day of ten to twelve hours.²⁸ By fall 1916, about 60,000 people were forced to join civilian workers' battalions in the Military Administration of Lithuania alone, with the districts of Hrodna and Białystok leading in this process. Workers' columns were less numerous and numbered about 6,000 in the whole Ober Ost. According to Christian Westerhoff, in contrast to the Government General Warsaw, the recruitment of the labour force in Ober Ost stood out due to its intensity, ruthlessness, and violence. Here, the German occupation administration was more prone to use violent methods, aiming to obtain a labour force immediately, instead of using forced recruitment as a tactic to push workers to sign up as volunteers for work in Germany. The arbitrariness and violence of the recruitment process, as well as unsatisfactory working conditions, soon resulted in

²⁸ Christian Westerhoff, *Zwangsarbeit im Ersten Weltkrieg. Deutsche Arbeitskräftepolitik im besetzten Polen und Litauen 1914 – 1918* (Paderborn: Schöningh Paderborn, 2012), 217 – 219.

growing popular dissatisfaction.²⁹

The civilian population that was not mobilized for labour duty suffered from the army's presence on a daily basis. The privations of everyday life under the occupation are well portrayed in the reports filed by German district captains to the headquarters of Ober Ost. These documents were required for further decision-making and thus represent useful sources, unlikely to contain inaccurate or biased information. Administrative reports show that requisitions for the immediate needs of the army remained a heavy burden for the local population, while also threatening future German plans of exploiting the agricultural potential of Ober Ost.³⁰

Ober Ost was defined by a military spirit throughout the whole occupation, but eventually the army failed to sustain the great ambitions Ludendorff had of creating an exemplary state order. The inefficient administration, changing wartime circumstances, and violence shattered the illusions of the generals, transforming them into an arbitrary military regime. Occupation policy thus drifted away from implementing utopian visions and veered towards the more practical needs of controlling the land and its peoples.³¹ A German report compiled in 1917 revealed that two years of German rule had turned Vil'nia into a city plagued by hunger, disease, poverty, and growing mortality rates. The financing of local charities was neglected and funds were insufficient to cover the basic needs of the population. Exorbitantly high prices and inflation provoked open waves of discontent.³² Problems were attributed to mistakes in food rationing, resulting in a lack of

²⁹ Ibid., 222 – 223.

³⁰ German district captain Geyer, who served in Kupiški (Kupiškis) in March of 1916, compiled his report with a specific emphasis on the revival of agriculture, livestock farming, and foodstuffs. The document heavily criticized army requisition squads that apparently acted in a ruthless way, even in the eyes of a German official. Peasants had to give up to the army their last stocks of grain and potatoes, thus complicating the sowing season work. All available hay, straw, cattle, and horses were confiscated. See LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 572, l. 5 – 10.

³¹ Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 81.

³² Bielaruski Dziaržaŭny Archiŭ-Muzej Litaratury i Mastactva (hereafter BDAMLIM), f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 92.

provisions in public kitchens. Ober Ost was not even able to guarantee an adequate bread supply for its population, as allocated rations were too small, and overpriced bread was smuggled into the German occupation zone. The provisions department was accused of corruption and criticized for its inadequate levels of contact with the local civil institutions.³³

According to the data collected by the charitable societies which provided assistance to war victims and the poor, in 1916 about 44,000 people, or 28% of the population of Vil'nia received aid in the form of food, clothing, school materials, and books.³⁴ German administrative reports from the Biržy (Biržai) district from the second quarter of 1917 noted that growing numbers of people from Vil'nia and its surroundings were about to become a “menace” for the provinces. The unemployment and lack of food forced them to leave the city and roam the neighbouring districts in search of bread. The degree of desperation is evident from the fact that people disregarded strict regulations limiting the movements of the civilian population in Ober Ost, venturing on trips to the countryside without carrying proper travel permit papers.³⁵ In Hrodna, the situation was notably worse, as up until 1916 the population of the district remained dependent on German army food supplies, as the harvest had been destroyed by military actions.³⁶ To secure provisions, the German administration introduced a strict system of rationing.³⁷

Popular dissatisfaction due to the continuing arbitrary requisitions and general labour duty further complicated the security situation in Ober Ost. Many people were trying to avoid the latter by hiding in the woods where they joined the fugitive POWs and their bands. According to a document issued by the Chief of Staff Max Hoffmann, bands

³³ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 92 adv.

³⁴ *Homan*, Nr. 2, 18 February 1916, 4.

³⁵ LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 52, l. 207 r.

³⁶ Gerd Linde, *Die deutsche Politik in Litauen im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1965), 53.

³⁷ Kurt Klamrot and Ales' Smaliančuk, “Horadnia 1916 na staronkach Dzionnika rotmistra Kurta Klamrota,” *Horad Sviatoha Huberta* (2012) Vol. 6: 67.

had gotten out of control by May 1917, seriously threatening the security of the occupied lands. The military was allowed to use weapons against both enemy soldiers and civilians suspected to be armed.³⁸ In July 1917, the Military Administration of Lithuania ordered all district captains to arrest every suspicious person without a proper form of identification.³⁹ Many inhabitants of the occupation zone started to believe that German rule would soon come to an end, as they heard about the attacks of Russian troops throughout 1916. Even German soldiers were becoming openly unenthusiastic about the war, avoiding confrontation with the armed forest bands.⁴⁰ All of these circumstances are important to keep in mind in order to avoid the excessive idealization⁴¹ of the German occupation regime in Ober Ost, especially when cultural and national policies are discussed.

German Encounters with the Ober Ost Nationalities

With a total area of 108,808 km², Ober Ost was the largest among all of the territories administered by the Germans in 1915. According to the compiled data for Ober Ost, based on the statistics taken from the Russian imperial census of 1897, the overall population numbers in the region were estimated to have dropped from 4,200,000 people living in these areas at the turn of the century to around 2,910,000 people during the war. In contrast to the size of Ober Ost, the population density was low: compared to Germany with 120 inhabitants per square kilometer, there were only 27 inhabitants per square kilometer in the occupied territories. Initially, the German occupation zone consisted of six major administrative areas: Kurland, Lithuania, Suwalki, Vil'nia, Białystok, and Hrodna. Through mergers in 1916 and 1917, three larger administrative units emerged:

³⁸ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/2, l. 309.

³⁹ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/1, l. 18.

⁴⁰ Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 66 – 67.

⁴¹ See for instance Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 74.

Military Administration Kurland (with its center in Mitau/Jelgava), Military Administration Białystok-Hrodna (Białystok), and Military Administration of Lithuania (Vil'nia). Lithuania was the most ethnically diverse territory in Ober Ost, inhabited by Lithuanians, Belarusians, Poles, Germans, Jews, and Latvians. Latvian and German population dominated in Kurland, while Poles, Belarusians, and Jews were predominant in Białystok-Hrodna.⁴² Military administration structures remained in place throughout the whole occupation, transformed into civilian administrations by the decree of the German chancellor Max von Baden, signed a few days before the end of the First World War. In comparison to Kurland and Białystok-Hrodna, Military Administration of Lithuania was the largest in size, incorporating areas of the former Suwalki, Kowno, and Vil'nia provinces with two thirds of the entire Ober Ost population residing there.⁴³

The national distribution in Ober Ost was as follows: 1,550,315 Lithuanians (or 34.4% of the entire population), 936,067 Belarusians (20.8%), 468,946 Latvians (10.5%), 607,896 Jews (13.5%), and 534,102 Poles (11.8%).⁴⁴ The latter two groups comprised the majority of the urban population in this region.⁴⁵ Yet this statistical data is useful only for a general overview of the demographic situation in the region, as it reflects only the pre-war situation and does not take into account mobilized soldiers, victims of the military action, and streams of refugees, including both those who moved further east and those who came to Ober Ost fleeing the military actions.

Within Ober Ost, German authorities emphasized the restoration of order and winning of trust from the local population as one of their main tasks.⁴⁶ All nationalities had to act within the space defined by the Germans, who focused on the task of

⁴² *Das Land Ober Ost*, 89 – 91.

⁴³ Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 61 – 62; LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/2, l. 353.

⁴⁴ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 433.

⁴⁵ Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569 –1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 54 – 56.

⁴⁶ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 307.

undermining the tsarist state and fostering anti-Russian sentiments through a controlled and limited toleration of local national movements.⁴⁷ However, in the early stages of the occupation, the Germans were only starting to make sense of the multicultural borderlands of the tsar's empire. The German army discovered that the conquered lands were inhabited by a multitude of ethnicities, each with their own language and culture.⁴⁸ The population was not easy to classify, as identities were often fluid or overlapping. This variety was confusing for German soldiers, who compared their experiences in Ober Ost to that of the German Empire. Convinced of their own civilizing mission in the East, they often dismissively treated locals as underdeveloped peoples.⁴⁹

In an attempt to educate the soldiers, army newspapers started providing information on the different nationalities in Ober Ost. Lithuanians, Belarusians, Poles, and Jews were identified as major groups in the Vil'nia region. Cities were described as predominantly Polish and Jewish, while Lithuanians and Belarusians were presented as typical inhabitants of the countryside. The military newspaper *Zeitung der 10. Armee* informed German soldiers that both of the latter groups had weak feelings of national belonging, being under strong pressure to accept Polish culture. Nevertheless, it was noted that in the twenty years before the war these nationalities had started to follow common trends for East-Central Europe and were on the path of “regaining” their national consciousness.⁵⁰

On the occupied territories German soldiers also made the “discovery” of Eastern Jews (Ostjuden), who were different from the educated, prosperous, and

⁴⁷ Mark von Hagen, *War in a European Borderland: Occupations and Occupation Plans in Galicia and Ukraine, 1914 – 1918* (Seattle: Herbert J. Ellison Center for Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies, University of Washington, 2007), 55.

⁴⁸ See for example Hermann Struck and Herbert Eulenberg, *Skizzen aus Litauen, Weissrussland und Kurland* (Berlin: George Stilke, 1916).

⁴⁹ Barthel, “Contesting the Russian Borderlands,” 36 – 37; Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 111; Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 30.

⁵⁰ “Die Völker Litauens,” *Liebesgabe zur Zeitung der 10. Armee*, Nr. 23, 27 January 1916.

assimilated Jews of the German Empire. For the Germans, this circumstance often evoked anti-Semitic images of smugglers, benefiting at the cost of others, preferring trade to physical work, and attempting to bribe officials. Stereotypes of Jewish filthiness, dishonesty, and haggling permeated among the German soldiers.⁵¹ On the other hand, due to the linguistic closeness of Yiddish to German and their dissatisfaction with Russian rule, Jews were also considered to be potential partners for the German authorities in the task of establishing a system of governance in the occupied lands.⁵² Moreover, the German administration made use of Jewish trade networks to extract food resources and raw materials, as indicated by the experiences of the Department of Military Resources in Hrodna in April 1916.⁵³ One concern here, however, was local anti-Semitism, as it was noted that Lithuanians often mistrusted Jews and that there was a danger that this mistrust might transfer further onto Germans too.⁵⁴

In general, the occupying regime aimed to maintain balance in its relations with the Jews during the First World War. Jewish religious sentiments were to be respected. For instance, market days could not fall on Saturdays, while instruction at Jewish schools was left without any changes and interference.⁵⁵ Jews and Christians were not placed in the same units for labour duty, allowing Jews to follow their dietary rules and observe religious rites. However, the reason behind the latter decision was purely practical – Germans were primarily interested in achieving maximum labour efficiency from the exploited workers.⁵⁶ Despite these regulations, lower-level officials usually had anti-Semitic views and did not hesitate to demonstrate them in their reports, referring to

⁵¹ Ismar Freund, “Ostjuden im Spiegel ihrer Religionsquellen,” *Liebesgabe zur Zeitung der 10. Armee*, Nr. 23, 27 January 1916.

⁵² Barthel, “Contesting the Russian Borderlands,” 115.

⁵³ Klamrot, “Horadnia 1916,” 66.

⁵⁴ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/2, l. 250.

⁵⁵ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/1, l. 89.

⁵⁶ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/1, l. 173, 173 r.

Jews as a “cancer of the land,” and as being engaged in suspicious speculation activities.⁵⁷

Russia was consistently blamed for keeping its western provinces backward. It was presented as a barbaric power which “built an invisible wall,” separating the non-Russian nationalities from the rest of Europe, where they rightfully belonged.⁵⁸ The emphasis was placed on the history of the suppression of spiritual, religious, cultural, and economic development throughout the 19th century. Tensions between nationalities, in particular, Poles and Lithuanians, as well as between Poles and Jews, were attributed to the detrimental long-term effects of Russian rule, which was deemed responsible for cultural stagnation, forceful conversion of churches and monasteries into Orthodox ones, and for “countless victims” who perished in prisons and who were tortured to death, while the years after 1863 were described as a time of “gruelling persecution.”⁵⁹

Yet German anti-Russian propaganda appears to have been more credible and successful when it turned to the more recent ruthless actions of the Russian authorities during the evacuation in 1915, rather than evoking images of past suffering. It made wide use of the fresh memories of officials departing in a hurry, taking all that was possible to move, while the army destroyed the harvest, burnt down buildings, and forcefully uprooted the population. In January and February of 1916, *Zeitung der 10. Armee* published a series of articles about Vil'nia during the Russian retreat, showing that the corrupt bureaucracy and Russian government were responsible for moods of panic in the city, especially when all banks, businesses, enterprises, church bells, and state alcohol storage facilities, along with necessary military establishments and munitions, were moved east. More prosperous citizens rushed to leave the city, while workers and the poorer population with no means of securing overpriced train tickets were left behind.

⁵⁷ LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 52, l. 5, l. 15.

⁵⁸ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 11.

⁵⁹ “Wilna und die Russen,” *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, Nr. 16, 11 January 1916.

The Russian government was further accused of fostering “fears of German brutality” among the population during the evacuation.⁶⁰ Such a portrayal of an enemy power is not surprising, but it should not be necessarily dismissed as a biased one. The Russian army indeed pursued a “scorched earth” policy, moving all that was considered to be of importance and driving people away from their homes. The arbitrary behaviour of the Russian generals, whose actions were often not coordinated with the Russian central government, contributed to the chaos and disorganization during the retreat.⁶¹

Anti-Russian rhetoric was soon complemented by the growing concerns over Polish nationalism in Ober Ost. By early 1916, German newspapers had already started to criticize the opening of Polish schools in Vil'nia, which were apparently financed not only by private organizations but also by municipal funds, thus depriving other nationalities, in particular, Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Jews, of their fair share of support. With regard to schools in the provinces, it was noted that Vil'nia region did not have a significant Polish population, yet the majority of functioning schools were Polish,⁶² despite the fact that German local authorities did not welcome them and even created obstacles to their establishment.⁶³ Growing German concerns over the strong Polish positions in the region prompted them to opt for a stronger Lithuanian component in Ober Ost. To a certain degree, this approach also benefited the Belarusian national movement, as the Germans could use it along with its Lithuanian counterpart as a tool to weaken the Poles.⁶⁴ As the title of this chapter suggests, the occupation authorities employed *divide et impera* methods in their interaction with the local nationalities. In what follows, I will address the questions of how this tactic resulted in growing national competition in Ober Ost and of

⁶⁰ “Wilna im Kriege,” *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, Nr. 35, 24 February 1916.

⁶¹ Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1999), 16, 33.

⁶² 9. *Liebesgabe zur Zeitung der 10. Armee*, Nr. 28, 8. February 1916.

⁶³ LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 52, l. 35.

⁶⁴ Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 116; Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 73.

the place that Belarusians occupied in the German discourse.⁶⁵

From “Weissrussland” to “Weissruthenien”: Development of German Perceptions of Belarusians

Belarusian-populated areas of Ober Ost were located predominantly in former Vil'nia, Hrodna, and Białystok provinces, where, according to the German compilation of the data from the 1897 Russian imperial census, 936,067 Belarusians lived, comprising 20.8% of the entire population.⁶⁶ According to these statistics, Belarusians in Vil'nia province made up 42.0%, while their percentage among the urban population was at 4.2%. Districts under German occupation where the Belarusian population represented an overwhelming majority included Lida (73.2%), Vaŭkavysk (82.5%), Pružany (75.5%), Slonim (80.6%), and Sakolka (83.9%).⁶⁷

One of the leading Belarusian national activists in Vil'nia during the First World War, Anton Luckievič, made an attempt to take the aspect of wartime population movements into account when he compiled an introductory summary report to the German authorities in late December 1915. He admitted that the actual numbers of Belarusians in German-administered lands were difficult to evaluate, due to the war circumstances and the significant demographic changes caused by military actions and population displacement. His estimate for Belarusians in the provinces of Ober Ost suggested a figure of 1.5 million ethnic Belarusians still inhabiting this region during the First World War, a majority of whom (800,000) were native to the Hrodna province, while 300,000 to 400,000 Belarusians resided in the Vil'nia province. Further, Luckievič argued that the figure of 4.2% of the Belarusian population in the city of Vil'nia, recorded in the

⁶⁵ See Chapter 6 for the detailed discussion of the Belarusian, Lithuanian, and Polish perspectives on the national politics in Ober Ost.

⁶⁶ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 433.

⁶⁷ *Völker-Verteilung in West-Russland* ([Kowno]: Verlag der Kownoer Zeitung, 1916), 8.

Russian census of 1897, was not correct. In his opinion, in contrast to the Russian population that had left the city *en masse*, Belarusians could not afford to move and had thus stayed. Moreover, people from the countryside came to the city in search of employment, allegedly increasing the ethnic Belarusian population in Vil'nia to up to 10%.⁶⁸ Even if this optimistic assessment is taken into consideration, it should be noted that most of these people still did not possess a firm sense of national self-identification as Belarusians. The German census in Vil'nia, conducted in early spring of 1916,⁶⁹ showed that the city population comprised 140,840 people, the majority of whom identified as Poles and Jews (70,629 persons (50.15%) and 61,265 (43.5%) respectively). Lithuanians with 3,699 persons (2.6%) and Belarusians with 1,917 persons (1.36%) were in the obvious minority.⁷⁰

With all necessary caution both towards the quality of the data used by the German officials and Luckievič's optimistic estimates, both attest to the presence of Belarusians in Ober Ost and in particular in the Vil'nia region, if not in Vil'nia itself. The frequently cited passage from Ludendorff's memoirs states that initially Belarusians "did not come into consideration" for the high-ranking German authorities, who tended to see them as a "widespread, but extremely polonized tribe."⁷¹ Despite the numerical predominance of Belarusians in the Vil'nia region, they rarely received proper attention from the authorities, indicating that early in the war the occupation regime did not regard this group to be an important influence factor. Belarusians were often perceived as "too

⁶⁸ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 131, ark. 19, ark. 31.

⁶⁹ Its results were extensively criticized by the Belarusian national activists, as apparently Poles conducted an extensive and aggressive national agitation, in order to raise the numbers of the Polish population. Moreover, German military officials, who conducted the census, claimed that they did not see any difference between Belarusian and Russian and usually addressed the people either in German or in Polish, thus involuntarily assisting the Poles in obtaining better statistics. See BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 134, ark. 16 adv.

⁷⁰ Michał Brensztein, *Spisy ludności m. Wilna za okupacji niemieckiej od d. 1 listopada 1915* (Warszawa: n. p., 1919), 21.

⁷¹ Erich Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen, 1914 – 1918, mit zahlreichen Skizzen und Plänen* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1919), 145.

Russian.”⁷² Most likely, this concerned all Orthodox populations. Alternatively, the Germans classified Belarusians as Poles.⁷³ Such an approach prevailed even in cases when people consciously made a choice of adopting a Belarusian identity, as happened in an incident involving a student of the Belarusian teachers' courses, Jazep Salavej. According to a complaint submitted by the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims⁷⁴ to the head of the German military administration in January 1916, Salavej was trying to obtain his identification papers and was asked by a policeman about his nationality. After he told the officer that he was a Belarusian, he heard in reply that “we do not recognize Belarusians and Russians, it is possible to identify only as a Pole, a Lithuanian or a Jew.” Salavej protested and refused to be identified as a representative of any of the above-named nationalities, insisting that he was a Belarusian. The officer threatened him with arrest and inscribed Salavej's nationality in his papers as Polish. The Belarusian Committee saw in this incident a violation of the rights of Belarusians and an attempt to manipulate demographic statistics in Vil'nia.⁷⁵

The actions of the German official appear to be in accordance with Hindenburg's decree on the introduction of obligatory passports for the Ober Ost population, signed in December 1915. The decree stipulated that identification documents were to be issued in two languages. One of them had to be German, the second language was to be the corresponding nationality's language. Among the latter, only Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Yiddish were listed as acceptable choices.⁷⁶ Reluctance to treat

⁷² Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 112.

⁷³ The reason was that many Belarusians who chose not to become refugees and stayed behind were mostly Roman Catholics, usually under pressure from the Catholic priests to adopt Polish identity, which often happened. See *Homan*, Nr. 74, 14 September 1917, 2.

⁷⁴ The Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims (henceforth Belarusian Committee) united most of the Belarusian national elites in Ober Ost. As all political activities were prohibited by the German military authorities, national charities expanded their activities beyond the humanitarian sphere and acted as national representations.

⁷⁵ Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas (hereafter LCVA), f. 361, ap. 5, b. 14, l. 1.

⁷⁶ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 46/1, l. 64.

Belarusians as a separate nationality, especially by the lower-level officials, persisted up until 1918. Similarly to Salavej, the case of Jazep Lickievič was documented two years later. He complained that the authorities in Vil'nia ignored the order of the Supreme Commander stipulating that every citizen could obtain a passport in his mother tongue. Apparently, passports in Vil'nia were issued exclusively in Polish. Lickievič complained that the official at the passport office refused to record him as Belarusian and recorded “Polish nationality” in the documents.⁷⁷

Another point of contention between the Belarusian Committee in Vil'nia and the German occupation authorities was the public use of the Belarusian language. The Committee petitioned the Supreme Commander with a demand to introduce Belarusian on labels and in public spaces, justifying this request by the fact that all other languages of ethnic minorities, including Lithuanian, Latvian, and Polish, were widely used alongside German. The absence of Belarusian was interpreted as a refusal to recognize the full rights of the second-largest minority of Ober Ost. Further, concerning the forthcoming issue of Ober Ost currency, so-called Ostrubles (*Darlehnskassenscheine*), the Committee asked for the inclusion of text and inscriptions in Belarusian on the new currency bills in order to ensure the equal treatment of all nationalities. Delegates of the Committee negotiated this issue with the German High Command, which appeared sympathetic. However, no visible results were achieved,⁷⁸ as none of the later official detailed descriptions of the Ober Ost currency contained information about the usage of text in the Belarusian language.⁷⁹

Other examples of ignoring Belarusian are to be found in the public addresses to the local population in the Military Administration of Lithuania, where German

⁷⁷ LCVA, f. 361, ap. 5, b. 14, l. 57.

⁷⁸ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 132, ark. 12, 12 adv.

⁷⁹ See “Beschreibung der Darlehnskassenscheine der Darlehnskasse Ober Ost,” *Anlage zum Befehls- und Verordnungsblatt*, Nr. 119, 3 November 1918, LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 46/2, l. 171.

authorities mentioned Lithuanians, Poles, Belarusians, and Jews, yet posted these announcements only in the German, Lithuanian, Polish, and Yiddish languages.⁸⁰ The official newspaper *Verordnungsblatt der Deutschen Verwaltung für Litauen* contained all regulations both in German and Lithuanian, but not in Belarusian.⁸¹ Supplements to the local *Białystoker Zeitung* and *Grodnoer Zeitung* appeared only in Polish and Yiddish.⁸² In a detailed report addressed to the German authorities in late 1915 Anton Luckievič pointed out that the refusal of the German authorities to translate into Belarusian important announcements and orders, the ban on Belarusian radio messages, and the non-recognition of the Belarusian language in the Hrodna region contributed to growing resentment among the local population.⁸³ Popular reactions are difficult to evaluate here, but one thing is clear – this attitude of the German occupation authorities complicated the national mobilization work of the Belarusian activists.

Nevertheless, German treatment of Belarusian national demands was slightly modified over time. By 1917, Belarusians were reluctantly recognized by the German authorities as the second-largest ethnic group – for instance, this fact was stated in the book published by the Ober Ost press department, which described all aspects of the newly conquered territories and provided ample information on Ober Ost nationalities.⁸⁴ Two main factors determined this turn in German policy. Firstly, the Germans made an effort to develop a better distinction for Belarusians by separating them from Russians in order to maintain their positive image as protectors of all groups previously oppressed by the tsarist state. This trend was already evident in early 1916, when *Kownoer Zeitung* started to educate its readership about the peculiarities of Belarusian history. In particular,

⁸⁰ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/1, l. 48.

⁸¹ LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 883a, l. 134.

⁸² *Das Land Ober Ost*, 137.

⁸³ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 131, ark. 23.

⁸⁴ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 20.

references were made to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, described as a multinational state shared by Belarusians and Lithuanians. It was also noted that the first Slavic translation of the Bible had appeared in the Belarusian language.⁸⁵ The German military newspaper *Zeitung der 10. Armee* regularly published articles on Belarusian history and ethnography.⁸⁶ One of the activists of the Belarusian Committee, Juliana Menke, was employed by this newspaper as a translator, and also contributed to the increased number of materials connected to the public awareness of the Belarusian question in Ober Ost. She cooperated with another staff member of the newspaper, German writer Walter Jäger, who later published a book about Belarus,⁸⁷ based on the materials that he and Menke provided for *Zeitung der 10. Armee*.⁸⁸

The task of distinguishing Belarusians as a separate group was complicated by the linguistic closeness between the Slavic languages. While the use of Russian, as well as the Cyrillic script, was banned altogether in Ober Ost in January 1916,⁸⁹ signs of a more differentiated approach to Belarusian appeared later in the same year, when the use of Cyrillic characters was allowed along with the Latin script for the publication of the Belarusian newspaper *Homan*, in effect from 1 September 1916. However, all German district captains were specifically instructed to keep an eye on the distribution of this newspaper.⁹⁰ Cyrillic script for *Homan* remained the only exception, which did not concern other spheres of public life, as for instance postcards were allowed to be written in Belarusian only with the use of Latin characters.⁹¹ Security reasons were the determinant in this case, but this policy also indirectly benefited the development of the

⁸⁵ Barthel, "Contesting the Russian Borderlands," 158 – 159.

⁸⁶ See for instance "Die Völker Litauens," *Liebesgabe zur Zeitung der 10. Armee*, Nr. 23, 27 January 1916; "Aus Sitte und Aberglauben der Weißrussen," *Liebesgabe zur Armee-Zeitung*, Nr. 182, 17 July 1916.

⁸⁷ Walter Jäger, *Weissruthenien: Land, Bewohner, Geschichte, Volkswirtschaft, Kultur, Dichtung* (Berlin: K. Curtius, 1919).

⁸⁸ Juliana Vitan-Dubejkauskaja, *Mae ŭspaminy* (Vil'nia: Niezaležnae vydavectva Technalohija, 1994), 53.

⁸⁹ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 24/2, l. 37.

⁹⁰ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/1, l. 151.

⁹¹ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 46/1, l. 325 r., 326.

Belarusian Latin script, which had been widely used in Ober Ost, in contrast to the eastern Belarusian provinces.

Second, and by far the most important factor resulting in the change in German attitudes towards Belarusians in Ober Ost, was connected to the reformatting of the German *Ostpolitik* in 1917. In the first two years of the war, German chancellor Bethmann Hollweg still believed in the possibility of a separate peace with Russia, which explained the cautious approach and lack of action of the German civilian authorities towards Ober Ost, especially in contrast to the ruthless plans of the military. However, as the possibility of peace negotiations waned, the positions of the German civilian and military authorities seemed to converge on the issue of the conquered territories.⁹² Moreover, the proclamation of the Polish state in the Act of 5 November 1916, resulted in growing German frustrations due to the failure of this project to reinforce the Central Powers in the war. German military authorities adopted an anti-Polish stance, arguing for the economic exploitation of the territories in the East and curtailment of Polish ambitions.⁹³

However, an outright annexation of the territories in the East was not an acceptable option, as it could have harmed the German image as a protector of oppressed nationalities, especially in light of the growing popularity of the concept of self-determination, which entered international politics after the February Revolution in Russia.⁹⁴ Another concern was the threat to the internal stability of the German Empire, already suffering from the war effort on two fronts. Consequently, the German leadership resorted to the approach of so-called “limited autonomy,” which dated back to the early

⁹² Herfried Münkler, “Spiel mit dem Feuer,” 122; Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar*, 62 – 63.

⁹³ Piotr Stefan Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795 – 1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974), 354; Piotr Mikietyński, *Niemiecka droga ku Mitteleuropie. Polityka II Rzeszy wobec Królestwa Polskiego (1914 – 1916)* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze “Historia Iagellonica,” 2009), 195 – 196, 244.

⁹⁴ Borislav Chernev, “The Brest-Litovsk Moment: Self-Determination Discourse in Eastern Europe before Wilsonianism,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* (September 2011), Vol. 22, Nr. 3: 371 – 372.

spring of 1917.⁹⁵ It marked the abandonment of the equal treatment of the Ober Ost nationalities by the Germans.

Aiming to keep strong Polish influences in Ober Ost under control, German authorities started with the targeted support of other national groups, favouring Lithuanians and to a lesser degree Belarusians. This qualitative turn in German policy emerged in early 1917, when German policy-makers started making statements about respecting the historical ties of Belarusians and Lithuanians.⁹⁶ In order to avoid misleading connotations which resulted in a “politically undesirable” image of Belarusians as a branch of a Russian nationality, the order of the Chief of the Military Administration of Lithuania signed on 29 May 1917, prohibited German authorities from using the names “Weissrussen” and “Weissrussland” to describe Belarusians and Belarus. New terms, “Weissruthenen” and “Weissruthenien,” were introduced to emphasize the status of a separate nationality, different from Russians, and to promote the growth of national consciousness among the population.⁹⁷ Remarkably, Belarusian activists always used the latter combination in their official correspondence with the German authorities.⁹⁸

In order to counterbalance the perceived and real dangers of Polish nationalism, German orders specifically emphasized the mother tongue criteria in determining nationality. For instance, this approach was implemented in Hindenburg's decree on the introduction of obligatory passports for the whole Ober Ost population. These documents contained information on the native language of the owner which was defined as the first language learned, “spoken by the parents of the passport owner during the time of his birth and childhood.” It was specifically noted that in some cases people

⁹⁵ A. Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg: der Fall Ober Ost 1915 – 1917* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993), 171 – 173.

⁹⁶ Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 262.

⁹⁷ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/1, l. 307.

⁹⁸ See for example BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 119, ark. 5.

might speak Polish without belonging to this nation.⁹⁹ Germans identified the nationality of these peoples as Lithuanians and Belarusians, who “felt themselves Polish.”¹⁰⁰

Yet it appears that Germans had more confidence in the Lithuanian movement and expected that Polonized Lithuanians would return to their roots without any doubts. On the other hand, with regard to the Belarusian movement, it was unclear for Germans whether at this stage it had the potential of overcoming the consequences of the Russification policies.¹⁰¹ Eventually, the preference for using Lithuanians in the anti-Polish tactics determined all future relations of the German administration in Ober Ost towards the Belarusian national movement: the latter was tolerated as long as it suited the political interests of the occupation authorities, but it did not receive any significant support either in cultural or in political matters. It is evident that Belarusian national aspirations were taken into account only inasmuch as they were suitable for the German practical needs of controlling the occupied lands. Newspaper publications provided necessary background information, but hardly changed the common German perception of Belarusians. Outwardly friendly attitudes of high officials with assurances of support were of a superficial and inconsistent nature. They were often ignored at the lower levels of administration, as in the cases with nationality data in Ober Ost passports, and the issue with the use of Belarusian in public spaces and on Ober Ost currency bills both clearly demonstrated.

Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims in Vil'nia

How did Belarusians deal with the new opportunities for nation-building available from the new occupation powers? Were they able to advocate for the needs of their community and effectively advance national mobilization? During the First World

⁹⁹ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 46/1, l. 62.

¹⁰⁰ “Die Völker Litauens,” *Liebesgabe zur Zeitung der 10. Armee*, Nr. 23, 27 January 1916.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*; Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar*, 55 – 56.

War, Vil'nia remained the center of Belarusian life in Ober Ost, although the numbers of Belarusian activists who managed to stay in the city were low. Many fell victims to forced evacuations of reservists during the Great Retreat of the Russian army in 1915. According to Juliana Menke, who was closely affiliated with the Belarusian national movement and worked as a teacher and translator for Belarusian organizations, Polish nationalists sarcastically remarked that all Belarusian activists in Vil'nia would fit onto one couch.¹⁰² Initially, the majority of national activists were working for the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims (henceforth Belarusian Committee). Established in April 1915, the Belarusian Committee was able to revive its activities under the German administration in Ober Ost. Existing regulations limited its capabilities, as initially it was designed to provide assistance to all inhabitants of the Vil'nia, Hrodna, Minsk, Viciebsk, and Mahilioŭ provinces who suffered from the war. The main directions of work in Ober Ost centered around setting up dining halls and residences for the refugees, supplying them with warm clothes and firewood, organizing medical care in areas which suffered from the military conflict, and paying lump-sum allowances for foodstuffs and seeds.¹⁰³

In December 1915, German authorities limited the activities of national charitable organizations. After receiving a number of applications for the creation of charitable organizations, occupation authorities proceeded with the issue of guidelines to regulate their activities. Most likely due to reasons of security, it was prohibited to open committees that spread their work simultaneously over several localities. The number of existing local national committees for the aid of war victims was controlled by the German High Command. It supervised all charities, making sure that their activities covered all those in need, Jews and Christians in equal manner. The latter regulation was connected to the fact that in the eyes of the German occupation powers Jews applied for

¹⁰² Vitan-Dubejkaŭskaja, *Mae ŭspaminy*, 37.

¹⁰³ LCVA, f. 361, ap. 5, b. 4, l. 2, l. 8.

too many charities.¹⁰⁴

The Belarusian Committee was financed through membership fees, donations, and profits from charitable concerts, lectures, and theatrical performances.¹⁰⁵ Along with private donations, the Belarusian Committee was financially supported through funds received from international charities and the German authorities. For instance, in the period from 1 June to 1 September 1916, it received 300 marks from the municipality of Vil'nia, another 300 marks came through donations, and 4,000 marks were transferred from the General Relief Committee for the Victims of the War in Poland, located in Vevey, Switzerland.¹⁰⁶ Almost all of these funds were directed to the needs of schools and towards the payment of allowances for the poor, since even the modest estimates for school needs required about 1,000 marks monthly. During the summer, schooling expenses were not too high due to the lack of heating bills and no need to provide lunches for children, as they were spending their summer vacations in the countryside.¹⁰⁷

It is evident that the Belarusian Committee was short of money and could not expand its work to reach every person in need. Its members worked for free in order to decrease the operational expenses.¹⁰⁸ International assistance was not a reliable source of income, as it is clear from the tensions arising from the actions of the Polish Committee in Vil'nia, which originally was in charge of funds distribution. Apparently, the Polish Committee refused applications for assistance received from Belarusian speakers, despite having at its disposal considerable donations from the Polish General Relief Committee in Switzerland for the needs of the entire population of the occupied areas, including Poles,

¹⁰⁴ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 1/1, l. 89.

¹⁰⁵ LCVA, f. 361, ap. 5, b. 4, l. 3 r.

¹⁰⁶ For more on its activities see Danuta Płygawko, *Sienkiewicz w Szwajcarii. Z dziejów akcji ratunkowej dla Polski w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 1986).

¹⁰⁷ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 117, 117 adv.

¹⁰⁸ "Try hady pracy Bielaruskaha Kamitetu," *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 34, 3 May 1918, 1.

Lithuanians, and Belarusians.¹⁰⁹ When, in December 1915, the Polish Committee decided on the distribution of the first part of the total of 300,000 marks received in donations from the General Relief Committee in Vevey, it agreed to transfer only the sum of 1,400 marks to the Belarusian Committee, while in the following year the amount was increased to about 3,000 marks, representing only a fraction of the donations.¹¹⁰ Apparently, Vil'nia diocese administrator K. N. Michalkiewicz, who was put in charge of the funds distribution, directed the money primarily for the establishment and maintenance of Polish schools in the region as well as towards other initiatives in support of Polish nation-building, thereby neglecting the original humanitarian mission.¹¹¹

According to the report of the General Relief Committee, published on 2 December 1917 in the Polish newspaper *Dziennik Polski*, the Polish Committee in Vil'nia received a total of over 800,000 francs between 9 January 1915 and 31 March 1917, which roughly equalled the same amount of money in marks. Out of this sum, only about 8,000 marks were assigned to the Belarusian Committee.¹¹² In 1916, *Homan* informed its readers that following complaints about the actions of the Polish Committee, the German High Command decided to take over the management over the funds from Switzerland. It attempted to oversee the distribution of money among all national charitable organizations in Ober Ost. In this way, the Belarusian Committee was at least able to continue its support for workshops and schools and provide financial aid for resettled refugees.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ LCVA, f. 361, ap. 5, b. 7, l. 18. According to Belarusian historian Uladzimir Liachoŭski, these funds were partly donated by the famous Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, who died in 1916 and donated to the General Relief Committee for the Victims of the War in Poland a significant part of his Nobel Prize to be spent for the needs of the inhabitants of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. See Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 117.

¹¹⁰ *Homan*, Nr. 41, 4 July 1916, 3.

¹¹¹ Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 73. See Chapter 6 for more detailed discussion of Polish nationalism in Ober Ost and relations between Poles and Belarusians.

¹¹² "U Wilni i wakolicach," *Homan*, Nr. 98, 7 December 1917, 2.

¹¹³ *Homan*, Nr. 41, 4 July 1916, 3.

Charities in the occupied areas were also supported by immigrant organizations abroad, as was the case with the Lithuanians. Their extensive migration to the United States in the thirty years preceding the First World War resulted in a developed network of emigre organizations. They maintained links with their homeland and were proud of their national identity. Over twenty periodicals were published by the Lithuanian diaspora in the United States. During the war, the latter also assisted Lithuanians in Europe financially, participated in all types of cultural activities, and drew international attention to the Lithuanian question.¹¹⁴ It is likely that the number of ethnic Belarusians who migrated overseas was also significant, but due to their weak national consciousness they did not manage to create a similar support network.¹¹⁵

The arrival of the Germans in September 1915 cut off all contacts with the eastern Belarusian areas, thus impacting communication between the Vil'nia and Minsk sections of the Committee, which continued to operate as two separate centers of charitable activities. The Minsk section struggled for its existence: by 1916, due to insufficient funding, it was forced to limit its activities to the operation of a single dining hall.¹¹⁶ By contrast, the Vil'nia section of the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims still had more freedom in coordinating charitable projects, despite financial difficulties and the limitations imposed by the occupation powers. It supported and coordinated the work of primary schools, orphanages, public kitchens, canteens, and dining halls. It also supervised the work of three workshops where woodworking, carving,

¹¹⁴ Alfonsas Eidintas, Vytautas Žalys, and Edvardas Tuskenis, *Lithuania in European Politics. The Years of the First Republic, 1918 – 1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 27.

¹¹⁵ *Homan*, Nr. 6, 3 March 1916, 4. Weak national self-consciousness, overlapping identities, and the preference for connecting identity to religious affiliation prevented Belarusian migrants from establishing a viable diaspora structure in the early 20th century. These factors also complicate the task of evaluating the actual numbers of Belarusian migrants overseas. See Vadim Kukushkin, *From Peasants to Labourers. Ukrainian and Belarusian Immigration From the Russian Empire to Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 45.

¹¹⁶ S. F. Lapanovič, *Dzejnasc' dzjaržaŭnych i hramadskich arhanizacyj pa akazanni dapamohi bežancam u Bielarusi ŭ hady Pieršaj susvietnaj vajny (1914 – kastryčnik 1917 h.)* (Minsk: Akademija MUS, 2010), 105.

sewing, and embroidery were taught.¹¹⁷ The Committee also provided financial assistance to the refugees outside of Vil'nia. In summer 1916, resettled Belarusian peasants from Ašmiany and Sviančiany districts, residing in Daūgi (Daugai) south of Vil'nia, received 500 marks from the Committee. This sum was immediately spent on food and clothing.¹¹⁸ In urgent circumstances, people could also apply for a one-time payment of special allowances. This was especially important for displaced persons, who fled from the war and settled in the city, such as the peasant Jul'jan Blažovič, originally from the village of Suraž (Lipniški district). During the Russian retreat, his farm was burnt down and all cattle confiscated. Blažovič, his wife, and seven children ended up in Vil'nia with no means of survival. The Belarusian Committee helped the family to obtain a temporary accommodation and provided them with some basic foodstuffs.¹¹⁹

Along with the humanitarian work, the Belarusian Committee acted in the capacity of a coordination center for national work in Vil'nia. By October 1915 its representatives, including Vincent Sviatapolk-Mirski, Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, and the brothers Ivan and Anton Luckievič, requested to be received by the Vil'nia governor Generalleutnant Wegener in an attempt to clarify “some issues regarding the origins of the Belarusian nation.”¹²⁰ In May 1916, the Committee obtained permission from the German authorities for the organization of the Belarusian Club in Vil'nia. The main declared goal of the Club was the “promotion of cultural and national unity of Belarusians” through the hosting of various talks, serving as a center for social gatherings, and providing entertainment and leisure activities. The Belarusian Club also proclaimed its intention to support Belarusian schools and the press, as well as to assist its members with childcare

¹¹⁷ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 124, ark. 102.

¹¹⁸ “Z usiaho kraju,” *Homan*, Nr. 57, 29 August 1916, 3.

¹¹⁹ LCVA, f. 361, ap. 1, b. 7, l. 7.

¹²⁰ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 119, ark. 5.

and parenting.¹²¹ It housed and supported a library and a reading room. Finally, the Club became the base for the Belarusian Musical-Dramatic Group, organized by the Belarusian playwright Francišak Aliachnovič.¹²² By December 1916, it organized concerts with the performances of a string quartet, a choir, and a children's choir. Its theatrical comedy shows gathered over 200 spectators.¹²³ Belarusians also made appearances at various social events throughout the city: Sunday evenings in the Vil'nia Workers' Club were known for Polish, Lithuanian, and Belarusian performances, while one of the graduates of the Polish pedagogical courses recited Belarusian poems during the convocation ceremony.¹²⁴

Other notable Belarusian organizations in Ober Ost were the Belarusian Society for Childcare “Zolak” led by Vincent Sviatapolk-Mirski, and the Cooperative Society “Rajnica” headed by Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski. Together with the Belarusian Society for the Aid of War Victims, the Belarusian Club, and the Musical-Dramatic Group, they became the founding members of the Belarusian Central Union of National Organizations, which aimed to coordinate, support, and develop Belarusian national work.¹²⁵ Designed to act as an umbrella organization, it did not manage to replace the Belarusian Committee as the most active one.

The Periodical Press in Ober Ost and the Belarusian Newspaper *Homan*

Ober Ost could boast a variety of periodicals in various languages. Initially, German front newspapers took care of delivering news to the army and raising the fighting spirit of the soldiers. The first military newspaper of the Eastern front, *Wacht im*

¹²¹ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 135, ark. 4.

¹²² BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 135, ark. 11 – 12 adv.

¹²³ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 15, ark. 1.

¹²⁴ “U Wilni i wakolicach,” *Homan*, Nr. 68, 6 October 1916, 3.

¹²⁵ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 138, ark. 4.

Osten, was soon followed by eight different titles, covering the needs of the entire front. Furthermore, German authorities established local press organs, oriented towards the population of the occupied areas. Designed to maintain order and security in the occupied areas, one of their chief tasks was to spread and strengthen popular respect for the new regime. Local newspapers appeared in the major cities of Ober Ost, including Libau, Mitau, Vil'nia, Hrodna, Suwalki, and Białystok, carrying the name of the respective city in their titles. Initially, these newspapers were published in German, yet in order to make them accessible and easy to read for the local population, it was decided to print them in the Latin font instead of the more commonly used Gothic letters. The average circulation of these newspapers was between 3,000 and 4,000 copies.¹²⁶

The military administration produced such a flood of regulations and orders that even the lower-level district authorities complained about the amount of paperwork. As the local population generally had a poor command of German, people often learned about new laws only when they were punished for violating them.¹²⁷ Jews were in a slightly better situation as they could understand German, but had trouble reading it well, since they were used to the Hebrew script. This problem was solved by the introduction of special supplements in Polish and Yiddish (however, not Belarusian) for newspapers appearing in Hrodna, Suwalki, and Białystok. With this step, the Germans hoped to reach substantial sections of the population which spoke these languages.¹²⁸ The newspapers informed their readers about economic, social, and administrative measures, providing censored information on the political and military situation. Finally, the local nationalities of Ober Ost, among them Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Jews, and Belarusians, received permission to publish their own newspapers: *Dzimtenes Ziņas*, *Dabartis*, *Dziennik*

¹²⁶ Bundesarchiv (hereafter BArch), PH 30-III/5, 23.

¹²⁷ LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 572, l. 28.

¹²⁸ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 137.

*Wileński, Letzte Nais, and Homan, respectively.*¹²⁹

At first sight it appears that this step was in full accordance with the proclaimed German policy of equal treatment of the local nationalities. Yet, as in the previously described cases, security and military reasoning remained the guiding principles of German policy. All local newspapers were subjected to thorough military and political censorship, run by the press department of Ober Ost. They could not criticize German policies, while positive mentions of Russia were not tolerated. Moreover, all printed items, books, and maps were also censored, and their distribution was closely monitored. The importing of newspapers and journals, as well as their subsequent distribution, was allowed only for the German newspaper distribution units and official book sellers at the railway stations. Soldiers enjoyed preferential treatment, as they were allowed to subscribe to any periodicals through the military postal service.¹³⁰

The occupying power diligently cultivated its image as the protector of nationalities' rights, consistently presenting the previous Russian administration as the main source of tensions in the region. According to the regulations for both German and local newspapers issued by the head of the press office in Vil'nia, the chief task for the periodical press in Ober Ost was to ensure that the public was aware that the "liberation from Russian rule serves their own [Ober Ost nationalities'] interests."¹³¹ At the same time, German authorities preferred to have total control over the press designated for the local Ober Ost population; thus, for instance, they specifically prohibited the distribution of Lithuanian newspapers published in Germany.¹³²

Considered to represent the biggest ethnic group, Lithuanians received their own newspaper almost immediately after the Germans entered East-Central Europe. The

¹²⁹ Ibid., 135 – 138.

¹³⁰ LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 883a, l. 75 r., l. 214.

¹³¹ LCVA, f. 368, ap. 1, b. 17, l. 15.

¹³² LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 36, l. 42.

first issue of *Dabartis* (The Present) was already in print by 1 September 1915. The monthly journal *Ateitis* (The Future), which provided moralizing tales for youth, was published in Kaunas starting from 1 June 1916.¹³³ The head of the Military Administration of Lithuania, Prince Franz Joseph zu Isenburg-Birstein, encouraged cooperation between the German and Lithuanian authors of *Dabartis*, urging German officers to assist the newspaper with materials, including sketches on local issues, personal observations, and pieces on agriculture.¹³⁴ More concessions followed after German policy evolved, in late 1916 and early 1917, towards supporting the national aspirations of Lithuanians as a counterweight to Polish nationalism. The second Lithuanian newspaper, *Lietuvos Aidas* (Lithuanian Echo), was established in September 1917.¹³⁵ The district administration was obliged to subscribe to the Lithuanian newspapers, as according to the report from the district of Padbrodzie (in the vicinity of Svianciany),¹³⁶ individual subscriptions were rare, as only a fraction of the district population was able to understand Lithuanian.¹³⁷

Belarusians were allowed to publish only one newspaper in Ober Ost. The first issue of *Homan* (The Clamour), appeared on 15 February 1916, although there had been several previous attempts to obtain permission for Belarusian periodical press projects. One of the early applications, submitted presumably in October 1915, was made by Uladzislaŭ Znamiaroŭski, requesting that the German High Command approve the publication of a daily *Naviny* and weekly newspaper *Naša Chata*.¹³⁸ Yet this attempt failed, as there is no evidence of a positive response to this application. Eventually *Homan*, in spirit the successor to *Naša Niva*, became the only Belarusian newspaper in

¹³³ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 452 – 453.

¹³⁴ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 36, l. 41.

¹³⁵ *Das Land Ober Ost*, 138.

¹³⁶ Currently Švenčionys in Lithuania.

¹³⁷ BArch, PH 30-III/3, 19.

¹³⁸ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 119, ark. 4.

Ober Ost, appearing twice weekly. The circulation of *Homan* was about 3,000 copies.¹³⁹ All editorial work was done by the Belarusian Committee, while the German authorities provided paper and access to printing facilities. Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski served as the editor and brothers Ivan and Anton Luckievič were among the chief contributors to *Homan*.¹⁴⁰

The Belarusian newspaper provided its readers with military and international news, usually supplied by the German press department. More importantly, it served as a good source for information on local life in Vil'nia, containing excerpts from other newspapers, tales and legends for entertainment purposes, correspondence from readers, advertisements, current prices, announcements of new initiatives of the Belarusian Committee, and social events for Belarusians. In this manner, the newspaper attempted to convince those still in doubt of their identity that the choice of being Belarusian was not connected to images of the backward peasant and that Belarusians in the city enjoyed equal rights with other nationalities. As a means of creating an “imagined community” of readers, it was similar to *Vol'naja Bielarus'* published in Minsk in 1917, yet it faced more limitations in terms of censorship and an enforced pro-German position.

The title of the newspaper reflected continuity with the origins of modern Belarusian identity, as it was named after the illegal periodical published in Minsk in 1884, which signalled the start of an organized national movement.¹⁴¹ The new *Homan* in 1916 set the goal of uniting the forces of Belarusians and promoting national culture, thus laying the foundations for the growth of a nation.¹⁴² Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski's editorial in the first issue of *Homan* stressed the importance of a newspaper in the mother tongue, designed “to know what is going on around us, to receive news from all over the world [...], to be

¹³⁹ Wiktor Sukiennicki and Maciej Siekierski, *East Central Europe During World War I: From Foreign Domination to National Independence*. V. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 156 – 157.

¹⁴⁰ Vitan-Dubejkaŭskaja, *Mae ŭspaminy*, 56.

¹⁴¹ F. Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie. Oчерk istorii natsionalnogo i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia belorussov* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1921), 15.

¹⁴² “Pieramieny,” *Homan*, Nr. 2, 18 February 1916, 3.

able to tell others what we need, what we are longing for. The newspaper [...] connects a human being with his nation, his homeland, and the whole world. It turns weak single voices of our homeland (Kraj) into a strong and powerful voice of a community.”¹⁴³ Readers were reminded that only reliance on their own initiative could result in positive developments for the Belarusian nation. People were encouraged to rebuild schools and introduce Belarusian as the language of instruction instead of Russian, as well as to demand the introduction of their native language in church services, both Catholic and Orthodox.¹⁴⁴

The overall rhetoric and mood of *Homan* was similar to other Ober Ost national newspapers. For instance, the new Polish newspaper, *Dziennik Wileński* also called for the unified efforts of all Poles in rebuilding their national life. At the same time, it sounded more down-to-earth and less optimistic, noting the roadblocks of the difficult war circumstances, devastation, and extreme poverty. It urged readers to devote their energy to everyday work, primarily in the matter of popular education, with anticipated long-term benefits for nation-building.¹⁴⁵ Remarkably, Poles, who were also allowed only one newspaper in Ober Ost, did not welcome the publication of *Homan*, presenting it as an allegedly German-orchestrated project, initiated “with the goal of popularizing so-called Belarusian movement”¹⁴⁶ and being a deliberate “action, directed against the Poles.”¹⁴⁷

Revival of the School System

Since the German occupation powers allowed all ethnicities in Ober Ost to

¹⁴³ “Da čytačoŭ,” *Homan*, Nr. 1, 15 February 1916, 1 – 2.

¹⁴⁴ “Pieramieny,” *Homan*, Nr. 2, 18 February 1916, 3.

¹⁴⁵ “Od redakcyi,” *Dziennik Wileński*, Nr. 1, 2 February 1916, 1 – 2.

¹⁴⁶ *Litwa za rządów ks. Isenburga* (Kraków: Nakł. Krakowskiego Oddziału Zjednoczenia Narodowego, 1919), 94.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

establish their own schools, provided they could support them financially, it is interesting to see what was achieved in this sphere, and how the legal opportunity to receive education in the mother tongue influenced the processes of national mobilization in the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borderlands. Along with the German policy of eliminating Russian influence in the region by satisfying some of the cultural demands of the nationalities, the establishment of schools also served the goal of maintaining order and control. As noted in the report of the German district captain in Retava (Rietavas), all Russian teachers left the area with at the start of the war. Children worked only on their parents' farms, growing up without proper attention and control from the authorities. This resulted in “a colossal lack of education and neglect of the youth.”¹⁴⁸ Reports of German district captains indicated that during the winter of 1915, children of school age residing in the countryside often went to small privately organized schools, or they were taught by local women who did not have specialized pedagogical training. German authorities did not have confidence in these solutions,¹⁴⁹ since schools were viewed as basic institutions designed “to foster religious convictions, to accustom the youth to law obedience, respect for the German authority, its armed might as well as discipline and order.”¹⁵⁰

According to the *Fundamental Guidelines for the Revival of the School System* issued in January 1916, all educational initiatives in Ober Ost were placed under full German control. The opening and closing of schools and pedagogical courses, as well as the offering of private education and tutoring, first had to be approved by the head of the corresponding local administration. The Ober Ost department of education acted as the highest authority in school matters. It appointed school inspectors responsible for internal school affairs, approved curricula, and supervised the professional activities of all

¹⁴⁸ LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 360, l. 98.

¹⁴⁹ LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 572, l. 33, l. 13.

¹⁵⁰ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 23/1, l. 94.

teachers. With an emphasis on security, schools were not allowed to host any meetings or gatherings which could contradict the policies of the German military administration. All teaching materials and textbooks were subject to official approval prior to their usage. While schools were emerging gradually, education at first remained a matter of choice for families, however, once a school was established, parents had to sign a paper, confirming the regular attendance of their children.¹⁵¹

The German powers did not subsidize local schools. Rather, they were to be financed by the school tax collected by districts and municipalities. The accounting data for the entire Ober Ost for January 1917 indicates that the school system received subsidies only in the sum of 4,965 marks, while at the same time the subsidies for newspapers, including local national press organs, made up 63,946 marks.¹⁵² Schools were also supported by voluntary donations and students' families. Later, public and national organizations stepped in, most prominent among them in the matter of school support were the Lithuanian Society *Rytas*, the Association for Education *Saule*, and the Polish Society for School Tuition.¹⁵³

A brief analysis of all existing schools in Vil'nia reveals that according to official statistics, the following institutions were registered in the city in February 1916: seven high schools, with 151 teachers and 1,150 students; eight pedagogical seminaries with 78 teachers and 770 students; 91 people's schools with 430 teachers and around 7,300 students; 14 specialized schools with 55 teachers and 620 students; 78 cheders and twelve Jewish religious schools with 1,500 students. Overall, more than 10,000 students were receiving education in schools by early 1916.¹⁵⁴ The number of active students at

¹⁵¹ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 46/1, l. 52, 52 r.

¹⁵² LVIA, f. 641, ap. 1, b. 697b, l. 5.

¹⁵³ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 37, l. 12 r.; LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 11a, l. 69, l. 75.

¹⁵⁴ According to the 1916 German-administered census, 140,840 people resided in Vil'nia. See Brensztein, *Spisy ludności m. Wilna*, 21.

this time was evaluated to have been equal to the pre-war period. It was also considered to be an improvement, since substantial numbers of Russian students accounted for in the prewar statistics had left the city during the 1915 evacuation, and had been replaced by new students who came to the city during the war, resulting in overall higher numbers of those who received education.¹⁵⁵ Teachers as well as students at the teachers' courses and seminaries had to be registered with the authorities for "military control," but they were freed from general labour duty and obligations to the German army.¹⁵⁶

The German authorities stipulated that public schools were to accept students without discriminating against them by religion. Education was to be provided in the mother tongue of the students. The mother tongue in this case was defined as the language spoken by the parents in everyday life. The Russian language was banned as a language of instruction for all schools. The same applied to all Russian books and teaching materials. By contrast, the number of German lessons had to be increased, with the goal of providing students with a good working command of the language after three compulsory years of schooling. German was also established as the main language of communication between teachers and school inspectors and was used in all school documentation.¹⁵⁷ German Interior Minister Wallraf was especially proud that the military administration of Ober Ost introduced German as only one of the subjects at schools, and not as the principal language of instruction, noting that under Russian rule only Russian was used in this capacity.¹⁵⁸

Every nationality in Ober Ost proceeded with the establishment of schools where instruction was provided in the mother tongue of the students: German, Polish,

¹⁵⁵ "Šzkoly ũ Wilni," *Homan*, Nr. 7, 7 March 1916, 4.

¹⁵⁶ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 18 adv.

¹⁵⁷ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 46/1, l. 53.

¹⁵⁸ "Reichstagsprotokolle, 13. Legislaturperiode, 181. Sitzung, 26 Juni 1918, 5687," http://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt_k13_bsb00003417_00288.html (Accessed 9 September 2015).

Lithuanian, Latvian, Belarusian, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Polish educational activities stand out as a convincing case of how an already developed national movement could make use of new regulations, even without support or encouragement from the German authorities. Without waiting for official approval, Polish schools, often organized by enthusiasts, started to open as early as September 1915, immediately following the German takeover of the Russian borderlands. Poles had more qualified teachers and fully developed teaching methods in comparison to Belarusians and Lithuanians, offering better quality of instruction and a wider choice of options in the educational sphere. A separate Polish Education Committee was established and put in charge of managing and overseeing educational activities. Designed to bridge political differences, it was to act in the general interests of the whole Polish nation. As of 1 January 1916, there were already four Polish schools in Vil'nia with 815 students, eight municipal schools with 1,060 students, and thirty primary schools with 4,300 students. The overall number of those who received education in Polish exceeded 6,000 students. In addition, there were four vocational schools, several professional courses for adults and illiterate people as well as a public university named after Adam Mickiewicz.¹⁵⁹ However, the latter was a short-lived initiative, promptly closed by the Germans in February 1916. The occupation authorities were not eager to support higher education initiatives, as these would have interfered with the plans to Germanize local populations in the future.¹⁶⁰

Following the incident with the Mickiewicz University, the German authorities issued a separate order, clarifying the *Fundamental Guidelines*. Due to the war circumstances, the opening of educational institutions and courses containing the word “university” in their title was prohibited. All existing academic courses and continuing lecture series held outside of permitted schools were declared illegal. Special permits for

¹⁵⁹ “Komitet Edukacyjny,” *Dziennik Wileński*, Nr. 1, 2 February 1916, 3 – 4.

¹⁶⁰ Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 81 – 82.

single talks or lectures could be obtained only by direct application to the head of the German administration. Exceptions were made only for agricultural and purely technical courses, oriented toward skills acquisition.¹⁶¹ Polish activities in the sphere of education did not wane, as the clergy sought more control over the schooling process. The Catholic church actively applied for the establishment of its own schools in districts of Ober Ost along with those approved by the German administration.¹⁶² According to a letter, forwarded to *Homan* and *Dziennik Wileński*, in the winter of 1915 the Poles were very active in opening schools in the Vil'nia district. The local population, almost entirely comprised of Belarusians, was not happy with these schools, as their children were mostly Belarusian speakers in everyday life and had trouble with Polish as the language of instruction at school. Teachers were sent from Vil'nia and some of them had a good command of Belarusian, but they were prohibited from using Belarusian on any occasion. However, this ban was not strictly enforced, since peasants submitted a complaint against one of the overzealous teachers to the authorities.¹⁶³ Evidently, Polish nationalism often opted for a more decisive and even confrontational approach and the occupation powers actively engaged in its suppression.

By 1917, the Germans turned to providing more active support for the Lithuanians, who had also devoted special attention to the development of education, along with charity work and the establishment of self-help organizations.¹⁶⁴ A letter written by the teacher Anton Giruliok, who worked in a Belarusian school for refugee children in Vil'nia, indicates this attitude of the German authorities. With an emphasis on the unequal educational opportunities available to Lithuanians and Belarusians, Giruliok

¹⁶¹ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 23/1, l. 78r.

¹⁶² Hans Zemke, *Der Oberbefehlshaber Ost und die Schule im Verwaltungsbereich Litauen während des Weltkrieges* (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1936), 93.

¹⁶³ "U wiaskowych szkołach," *Homan*, Nr. 59, 5 September 1916, 2.

¹⁶⁴ "Z litoŭskaho žyccia," *Homan*, Nr. 1, 15 February 1916, 4.

described the situation of the refugee families who were living in former military barracks in Pahulianka street. Overall, the barracks housed about 4,000 people. Two schools, one Belarusian and one Lithuanian, operated there by 1918. Although the Lithuanian school enrolled all refugee children of school age, only 100 out of 300 Belarusian children had the opportunity to receive an education in the Belarusian school. The latter was obviously under-financed, neglected, and urgently required expansion and the hiring of a second teacher.¹⁶⁵

German preference for Lithuanian schooling is also evident from the following case: on 20 August 1917, a group of Belarusian teachers who had taught in the winter of 1916/1917 in the Polish schools submitted an application to the head of the Military Administration of Lithuania Isenburg-Birstein, requesting the opening of schools with Belarusian as the principal language of instruction. Teachers referred to their recent experiences, noting that students often misinterpreted Polish and had trouble speaking the language. *Homan* intended to publish this collective request for further dissemination of this information, but the whole article was rejected by the German censor and did not appear in print. Apparently, Isenburg-Birstein received a protest from Lithuanians who wanted the schools in the Vil'nia region to have instruction in Lithuanian.¹⁶⁶

Belarusian Schools in Ober Ost: Accommodation, Toleration or Instrumentalization?

Relevant for the discussion of Belarusian national development in Ober Ost is the fact that the implementation of regulations for the *Fundamental Guidelines for the Revival of the School System*, signed by Hindenburg on 16 January 1916, prohibited any use of Russian, yet specifically pointed out that “the Belarusian language which is not

¹⁶⁵ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 140, ark. 133.

¹⁶⁶ LCVA, f. 368, ap. 1, b. 14, l. 7.

identical with Russian, is allowed without any restrictions.”¹⁶⁷ By that time the first Belarusian primary school in Ober Ost was already in operation: it opened on 13 November 1915 in the Vil'nia city district of Lukiški. The school was located in the building on 44 Georgenstrasse.¹⁶⁸ Alaiza Paškievič¹⁶⁹ was one of the most active members of the Belarusian Committee who engaged in the matter of the establishment of the first school, finding the space to rent, and providing the new school with all necessary teaching materials. Practical tasks also involved the active promotion of the new Belarusian initiative among the ethnic Belarusians in the city: going door-to-door, talking to people, and encouraging them to enrol their children in the new school.¹⁷⁰ Initially, thirty-six students signed up, while later the number grew to fifty.¹⁷¹ The first teacher at this school was the former editor of the Christian-Democratic newspaper *Bielarus*, Baliaslaŭ Pačobka. In the first months of its existence, the school provided only instruction, although later, students in need started receiving free lunches, textbooks, stationery, and clothing.¹⁷²

By February 1916, five Belarusian primary schools were operating in Vil'nia, with the goal “of teaching Belarusian children in their mother tongue.”¹⁷³ In April 1916, teacher Aliaksandr Hrykoŭski and his colleagues Stanislaŭ Kačynski and Vera Kraŭcevič managed to obtain permission for the opening of a Belarusian school in Hrodna.¹⁷⁴ Schools in Krynki¹⁷⁵ and several other localities in the Lida district soon followed. Despite the limited number of schools and their uneven territorial spread, Anton

¹⁶⁷ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 46/1, l. 53.

¹⁶⁸ Currently Gediminas prospektas, one of the major streets in Vilnius.

¹⁶⁹ Belarusian poet and political activist, also known under the pseudonym Ciotka. She was married to the Lithuanian socialist Steponas Kairys.

¹⁷⁰ Vitan-Dubejkaŭskaja, *Mae ŭspaminy*, 37 – 38.

¹⁷¹ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 118.

¹⁷² “U Wilni i wakolicach,” *Homan*, Nr. 81, 21 November 1916, 2.

¹⁷³ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 124, ark. 10 adv.

¹⁷⁴ Andrej Čarniakievič, *Naradženne bielaruskaj Harodni. Z historyi nacyjanal'naha ruchu 1909 – 1939 hadoŭ* (Minsk: Vydavec A. M. Januškievič, 2015), 18 – 19.

Luckievič hoped that these initiatives would lead to the establishment of a solid network of Belarusian primary schools in the region.¹⁷⁶

Instruction was organized in Belarusian, with additional German and Polish lessons. The number of students who signed up was more than existing schools could accommodate. The Belarusian Committee planned to open another ten schools, yet municipal funding did not suffice for the implementation of this project, and the Committee itself was short on funds. As tuition was not charged, Belarusian activists struggled with finding funding for existing schools. Most likely, families also signed up their children for schools in order to alleviate difficult financial conditions, since most students were from poorer families who could not afford to feed them properly at home, whereas schools provided their students with lunches and often also operated as orphanages. Before the Belarusian Committee could organize free meals for students, children from the school on Antokal'skaja street were known to have been frequent guests at the neighbouring German barracks, where the soldiers shared their rations with them.¹⁷⁷ In November 1916, the Belarusian Committee took care of about 200 children in need, holding cultural events with charity lotteries to raise funds for their support.¹⁷⁸

One of the chief problems at this stage was a lack of Belarusian textbooks. Despite the bans on Belarusian school education in the Russian empire, several textbooks, including a Belarusian primer both in the Latin and Cyrillic scripts, already existed in the pre-war period,¹⁷⁹ but the limited number of titles was insufficient for the needs of schools. Anton Luckievič called on every Belarusian to contribute to this cause, “to put

¹⁷⁵ It is likely that the early establishment of the school in Krynki had a long-term effect on the future of Belarusian national mobilization efforts in that area. According to the report of the Belarusian National Committee of the Hrodna region, by 1921 the youth organization in Krynki enjoyed widespread support and was known for its extensive cultural activities. See *Nacyjanal'ny Archiŭ Respubliki Bielarus'* (hereafter NARB), f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 173, ark. 31.

¹⁷⁶ *Homan*, Nr. 56, 25 August 1916, 2.

¹⁷⁷ *Homan*, Nr. 1, 15 February 1916, 4.

¹⁷⁸ “U Wilni i wakolicach,” *Homan*, Nr. 81, 21 November 1916, 2.

his or her own brick in this common construction project.”¹⁸⁰ Gradually new textbooks appeared through the *Homan* publishing house. By mid-1917, German authorities issued an official permit for twelve Belarusian books to be used for teaching in schools,¹⁸¹ among them were Belarusian grammar, readers, religion, and mathematics books. This number was almost on par with other nationalities, as by that time eighteen Lithuanian, fifteen Jewish, and twenty-five Polish textbooks had been approved as well.¹⁸²

Yet another issue was more pressing – first and foremost the establishment of schools required qualified professionals able to run them and teach. According to the official German statistics, only fifteen persons were officially listed and recognized as Belarusian teachers in Ober Ost in 1915.¹⁸³ The Belarusian Committee tackled this issue by organizing teachers’ courses, which began in Vil’nia on 15 December 1915. They were supposed to last for three months, however, the German authorities ordered an extension of the study period for the certificates to be recognized.¹⁸⁴ The classes ran in the evenings, six days per week. Students were taught pedagogy, German, Belarusian, Polish, mathematics, physics, history, geography, as well as accounting and beekeeping.¹⁸⁵ The

¹⁷⁹ For instance, Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, *Karotkaja historyja Bielarusi: z 40 rysunkami* (Wilnia: Drukarnia Marcina Kuchty, 1910); Ciotka, *Pieršaje čytannie dla dzietak-bielarusau* (Pieciarburh: n. p., 1906). The first Belarusian primer *Bielaruski lementar abo pieršaja nawuka čytannia* was published in 1906 in St. Petersburg. It appeared both in Latin and Cyrillic script; the first version was developed by Vaclaŭ Ivanoŭski, the second – by Kazimir Kastravicki (literary pseudonym – Karus' Kahaniec). The decision to publish the primer in two versions simultaneously was most likely caused by the need to overcome the religious differences of the Belarusians and appeal in equal manner both to the Orthodox and Catholic populations, showing to both groups that they used the same language. For the detailed history of the first Belarusian primer see Jury Turonak, *Madernaja historyja Bielarusi* (Vil’nia: Instytut bielarusistyki, 2008), 34 – 38.

¹⁸⁰ *Homan*, Nr. 56, 25 August 1916, 2.

¹⁸¹ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 36, l. 27 r.

¹⁸² LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 36, l. 26 – 27. For instance, among new Belarusian textbooks published in Ober Ost were Anton Luckievič, *Jak pravil’na pisac pa-bielarusku* (Vil’nia: Homan, 1917); Šuster, *Karotkaja historyja sviataja* (Vil’nia: n. p., 1917), Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, *Rodnyja ziarniaty. Kniška dla škol’naga čytannia* (Vil’nia: Homan, 1916); G. Jurevič, *Zadačnik dla pačatkovych škol* (Vil’nia: Homan, 1916).

¹⁸³ See Verzeichnis der Lehrer und Lehrerinnen, BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 124, ark. 14, 14 adv.

¹⁸⁴ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 119.

¹⁸⁵ Beekeeping was very popular among Belarusians in the early 20th century. In the interwar period, a Belarusian cooperative association of beekeepers “Pčala” (The Bee) and a specialized journal *Bielaruskaja borce* were established in Vil’nia. See Zos’ka Vieras, *Ja pomniu ūsio: uspaminy, listy* (Harodnia – Wrocław: Haradzienskaja biblijateka, 2013), 76 – 85.

courses were taught by the members of the Belarusian Committee: Ivan and Anton Luckievič, Alaiza Paškievič, Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, Baliaslaŭ Pačobka.¹⁸⁶ Initially, twenty-three persons enrolled. The majority of the students were aged between 15 and 25 and were Roman Catholics, with the exception of two Orthodox and one Lutheran.¹⁸⁷ Sylwester Ascik, Oskar Kajrenius, Stanislava Kaminskaja, Andrej Korsak, Vincuk Lemeš, Stefanija Misiuro, Zuzanna Rusakievič, Anna Savickaja, Adam Strelčunas, Aliaksandr Trot, and Andrej Trot successfully graduated in September of 1916 with the right to teach in the primary schools.¹⁸⁸

Unfortunately, after the second set of students enrolled, the German authorities intervened and cancelled the courses. Another request of the Belarusian Committee for a Belarusian teachers' seminary in Vil'nia was refused without any additional explanations. It was hardly possible to expand the network of Belarusian schools in the provinces, given the insufficient number of teachers able to run them and the lack of a Belarusian pedagogical institution educating new staff.¹⁸⁹ By contrast, one Lithuanian and two Polish teachers' seminaries, with 92 and 69 students respectively, were approved to operate in Vil'nia.¹⁹⁰

In October 1916, a new Belarusian teachers' seminary opened in Svislač (Vaŭkavysk district), located in the Military Administration Białystok-Hrodna. In contrast to the Belarusian teachers' courses in Vil'nia, it was an entirely German-orchestrated undertaking. In particular, the head of the Military Administration Białystok-Hrodna, Theodor von Heppe, was known for his support of a clear anti-Polish policy, since he was convinced that the Poles demonstrated overzealous political activities and apparently used

¹⁸⁶ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 124, ark. 14, 14 adv.

¹⁸⁷ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 124, ark. 59.

¹⁸⁸ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 124, ark. 7, ark. 60; BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 118.

¹⁸⁹ Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 124.

¹⁹⁰ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 11a, l. 69 – 73.

schools as a nationalist “weapon.”¹⁹¹ Therefore, the approval for the Belarusian teachers' seminary in Svislač was issued by the German authorities, most likely with the aim of creating a counterweight to the extensive Polish national agitation in the region, which resulted in the now undesirable growth of Polish schools. Headed by the pro-German Pole Bendziecha, the seminary in Svislač operated until November of 1918. It was financed through the Ober Ost authorities and remained the only pedagogical institution within the German occupation zone which was authorized to prepare teachers for Belarusian schools. Studies at the seminary were open to both male and female students, and lasted for six months. German authorities encouraged the provincial district captains to cooperate with local school inspectors in order to secure higher enrolment numbers.¹⁹²

Overall, 144 teachers graduated from the Svislač seminary during the two years of its operation. However, the quality of education was notably low due to the short terms of study and the inadequate qualifications of instructors employed at this institution. The Schooling Commission of the Belarusian Committee had no power in the matters related to the Svislač seminary. In order to enrol, prospective students had to contact the corresponding German district administration, instead of the Belarusian Committee. Moreover, the latter was not allowed to recommend students for tuition relief, had no control over the distribution of the graduates throughout the schools in the countryside, and did not even have detailed information regarding the operation of these schools. Thus, the German authorities appropriated Belarusian schooling outside of the Vil'nia region for their own practical purposes of weakening Polish nationalism. This step allowed them to ignore the Belarusian national activists, effectively preventing the latter from playing any active role in the sphere of education.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Linde, *Die deutsche Politik*, 49 – 50.

¹⁹² LMAVB, RS, f.23, b. 15, l. 34 r.

¹⁹³ Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 130 – 132; “U Wilni i wakolicach,” *Homan*, Nr. 2, 5 January 1917, 2.

In August 1917, the Schooling Commission of the Belarusian Committee made an attempt to regain its influence by establishing a central union of Belarusian teachers, designed to maintain contacts between all Belarusians employed as teaching staff in the Ober Ost area. Again, the German authorities refused the application, citing military reasons and restrictions on movement still in force.¹⁹⁴ Another factor, not mentioned in the official refusal letter, might have been reservations about giving too much leeway to the Belarusian movement, which could compromise close German-Lithuanian cooperation, which was in full swing by the summer of 1917.

A small network of Belarusian primary schools developed in the Hrodna region, including several schools in the Vil'nia region along with five primary schools in the city of Vil'nia and one in the Suvalki region. Between October 1916 and April 1918 they provided instruction in Belarusian to over 3,000 students.¹⁹⁵ In comparison to other Ober Ost nationalities, this number appears low: according to the official German statistics, the total number of primary school students in Ober Ost was recorded as 73,248 persons; of these 27,903 were Lithuanians, 17,503 Poles, 21,387 Jews, 2,698 Germans, and 3,266 Belarusians.¹⁹⁶ As of 1918, Belarusian high schools existed neither in Vil'nia nor elsewhere in Ober Ost, while among the ten high schools in Vil'nia, five were Polish with about 1,300 students, four were Jewish with 822 students, and one was Lithuanian with 276 students.¹⁹⁷ The first Belarusian high school (*himnazija*) had opened in Vil'nia only by January 1919. In the interwar period, it made a significant contribution in the matter of educating future Belarusian national elites.¹⁹⁸

The exact number of all Belarusian primary schools operating in the entire

¹⁹⁴ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 86.

¹⁹⁵ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 121.

¹⁹⁶ Zemke, *Der Oberbefehlshaber Ost und die Schule*, 102.

¹⁹⁷ LMAVB, RS, f. 23, b. 11a, l. 42, l. 42 r. – 49, l. 51 – 67.

¹⁹⁸ Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 127.

Ober Ost remains disputed. According to the Belarusian researcher Uladzimir Liachoŭski, the most plausible number lies somewhere between 89 and 153. The first figure was suggested by Hans Zemke's study on the school system in the Military Administration of Lithuania, based on German statistical documents,¹⁹⁹ while the latter was the rather plausible estimate of Anton Luckievič,²⁰⁰ most likely based on the numbers of graduates of the Svislač teachers' seminary and available data on already existing schools. Belarusian Christian Democrat Adam Stankievič later stated that there were over 200 schools, while the Polish historian Marian Siemakowicz suggested the number as being 400.²⁰¹ Yet these figures appear debatable, as for instance Jury Turonak and Uladzimir Liachoŭski dismiss claims of the existence of higher numbers of Belarusian schools in the area. Both researchers point out that such statements are not substantiated by any additional information on these schools, their locations and the time period of their operation. Supposedly, higher estimates were also based on unreliable sources, such as correspondence of the Belarusian national organizations with the European governments and international organizations, aimed at justifying Belarusian national demands instead of prioritizing the presentation of verifiable facts.²⁰² Therefore, to maintain that “German administrators established Belarusian schools on a massive scale”²⁰³ in this case would be a misleading conclusion, both in terms of quality and quantity.

Nevertheless, having been completely banned under Russian rule, the emergence of primary schools with Belarusian as the principal language of instruction represented a positive development for the promotion and strengthening of Belarusian national identification among the wider population, especially compared to the regions of

¹⁹⁹ Zemke, *Der Oberbefehlshaber Ost und die Schule*, 101.

²⁰⁰ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 121.

²⁰¹ See Adam Stankievič, *Bielaruski hryscijanski ruch* (Vil'nia: n. p., 1939), 87; Marian Siemakowicz, “Polityka władz rosyjskich, niemieckich i polskich wobec szkolnictwa białoruskiego w latach 1903 – 1922,” *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (1997), Nr. 7: 28.

²⁰² Turonak, *Madernaja historyja Bielarusi*, 522; Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 132 – 133.

²⁰³ See Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 74.

eastern Belarus, where such schools had only started appearing by 1918. Belarusian teachers who shared their experiences with the Committee in Vil'nia were enthusiastic and hopeful. A postcard from Stanislaŭ Lachovič, a teacher from Augustow, sent to Anton Luckievič in December 1917 pointed out that children enjoyed going to the newly opened Belarusian school. In light of these successes, he was optimistically anticipating that Belarusians would be able to voice their national aspirations in the same manner as Poles and Lithuanians, showing the world that they were not a “stillborn” nation.²⁰⁴

Catholic Priests as Agents of Polonization

The process of establishing and running Belarusian primary schools in the provinces was not smooth and easy. The idealism of young Belarusian teachers could not match the intensity of the counteractions of Polish nationalists.²⁰⁵ Polish initiatives in the provinces could count on the solid support of major land-owners and the local Catholic clergy. The majority of provincial Catholic priests, in particular those from the Hrodna region, were known as ardent supporters of Polish culture. After the Revolution of 1905,²⁰⁶ when it was possible to open elementary schools with Polish as the language of instruction, for the first time since 1863 (Belarusian schools were still out of the question), they actively engaged in the establishment of these Polish schools, often using their authority and power over their congregations to force this process.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 133, ark. 11.

²⁰⁵ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 120, 121.

²⁰⁶ On the liberalization after the Revolution of 1905 and its implications for Polish culture in the Belarusian lands see Andrzej Romanowski, “The Year 1905 and the Revival of Polish Culture between the Neman and the Dnepr,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* (1999) 41, Nr. 1: 45 – 67.

²⁰⁷ The first notable exception in this intense Polonization trend was the Vil'nia Bishop Eduard von der Ropp, who was the first within the higher Roman Catholic circles to officially recognize the rights of the Belarusian language. In 1905 he stated that the Catholic church did not harbour intentions to polonize the Belarusian people and that religious instruction ought to use the native language that Belarusian children used at home, i.e. Belarusian. This attitude was confirmed by an official circular issued by von der Ropp in 1905 that allowed prayers, catechism, and religious history to be taught in the native languages of the population, including Polish, Lithuanian, and Belarusian. See Ales' Smaliančuk, *Pamiž krajevasciu i nacyjanal'naj idejaj. Polski ruch na bielaruskich i litoŭskich zemliach 1864 – liuty 1917* (Sankt-Peciarburh: Neŭski prasciah, 2004), 209 – 210.

With the start of the First World War, the Catholic church in the lands of Ober Ost could solidify its positions, since its priests did not abandon their congregations in the same manner as almost all of the Orthodox priests did, when they closed their churches and left the western provinces during the 1915 evacuation. About 500 Catholic priests continued to serve in the Vil'nia diocese, which encompassed the two provinces of Vil'nia and Hrodna.²⁰⁸ They remained strongly dedicated to Polish culture and language. This local Polish nationalism made extensive use of the substitution of national identifications with confessional belonging. In particular, in a letter addressed to the head of the Military Administration of Lithuania, the Belarusian Committee pointed out the regrettable fact that Belarusian Catholics were automatically considered to be Polish.²⁰⁹

The establishment and spread of Polish schools in Belarusian settlements was one of the examples of successful Polish national agitation which did not subside during the German occupation.²¹⁰ German administrative reports, compiled for the period of late 1917 and early 1918 documented strong Polish influences over the ethnically Belarusian population. They specifically warned about the Catholic clergy's dedication to the cause of promoting Polish schools in rural areas, where the ethnically Polish population was in the minority.²¹¹ For instance, while the population of Ašmiany identified as Belarusian, Catholic priests there exclusively promoted and supported the opening of Polish schools.²¹² In 1917, *Homan* described Belarusian Catholics from Hrodna region as taken “on lease” by the Poles.²¹³ Anton Luckievič noted that similar aggressive Polish nationalist trends were already present at the start of the German occupation, pointing out that Poles, who dominated the municipal government in Vil'nia, boycotted everything

²⁰⁸ Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 116.

²⁰⁹ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 133, ark. 18 – 19.

²¹⁰ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 134, ark. 16, 17.

²¹¹ BArch, PH 30-III/3, 19, 19 r.

²¹² BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 131, ark. 23.

²¹³ “Chto vinavat,” *Homan*, Nr. 74, 14 September 1917, 2.

connected to manifestations of Belarusianness in the city and started a massive campaign for Polish schools, encouraging the propaganda of a Polish identity among the Catholic population.²¹⁴

The activities of pro-Polish Catholic priests represented one of the largest problems for Belarusian national activists, who were usually sent to the provinces in the capacity of teachers for the newly opened schools. For instance, the teacher Kačynski complained to Anton Luckievič in late 1917 that he was having a lot of trouble persuading people of the usefulness of his school, since the local Catholic priest from Navahrudak, who obviously had more leverage on the local people, denigrated his efforts and reportedly adopted militant anti-Belarusian positions. Initially, Kačynski was supposed to teach in Danilavičy (Dziatlava district), but he was not able to establish a school there. After waiting for one month in Dziatlava, he managed to open a school in the village of Chadaŭliany in October 1917.²¹⁵ Most likely, he received assistance from the occupation authorities, who were interested in weakening the Poles.

Teacher Anton Giruliok, who worked among Belarusian refugees from Vil'nia, mentioned the activities of a Catholic priest from a neighboring village. Apparently, his activities were not limited to only the spiritual sphere, as he actively engaged in promoting the establishment of a Polish school, collecting signatures and submitting petitions to the German authorities. Despite being an ethnic Lithuanian, the priest conducted aggressive Polish agitation among Catholic Belarusian refugees.²¹⁶ The Belarusian primary school in Vasiliški (Lida district) had already been opened in November 1915, but its teacher Alena Ivanoŭskaja was not able to start teaching classes due to the obstacles created by a group of Polish chauvinists, organized around the local

²¹⁴ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 131, ark. 23.

²¹⁵ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 133, ark. 5 adv.

²¹⁶ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 140, ark. 133 adv.

Citizens' Committee.²¹⁷

Letters from Belarusian teachers who were sent to work in the provinces also indicated that the population was rather suspicious of the idea of Belarusian schools. The majority preferred the familiar option of Polish schools, especially as the local clergy actively campaigned for them.²¹⁸ A report submitted by one of the teachers in the Vil'nia area to the Belarusian Committee, most likely in 1918, indicated that Catholic priests were responsible for a school strike in the villages of Turgele, Biely Dvor, Slabada, and Rukojnie, located in the vicinity of Vil'nia. Attendance at all of the above-named schools dropped suddenly, while during 1917 the Belarusian school in Turgele had eighty-eight students, in Biely Dvor – fifty-nine students, in Slabada – thirty-two students, and in Rukojnie – sixty students. The local Catholic clergy, in particular Dean Szepecki from Turgele, the priest Hanuszewski from Rukojnie, and chaplain Sopotzko from Taburyčki were identified as the primary instigators of the school strike. They were known for their negative attitudes toward the newly established schools with Belarusian as the primary language of instruction. Fearing their loss of authority and influence over the population, they conducted active agitation among the population to ignore Belarusian schools.²¹⁹

Even the Svislač Belarusian teachers' seminary was criticized for the presence of a pro-Polish orientation in its curriculum. For instance, one of the instructors of the religion course at the seminary, Catholic priest Baliaslaŭ Pačobka, was accused of having a bias in favour of Catholicism. A complaint submitted to Anton Luckievič and Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski from the Hrodna region inquired about the practicality of Pačobka's religion class at the seminary, pointing out that future teachers would be working among the Orthodox population of the Hrodna region, yet were instructed in the basics of the

²¹⁷ Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 127.

²¹⁸ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 133, ark. 5 adv.

²¹⁹ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 126, ark. 105.

Catholic faith only.²²⁰

There were in fact some Catholic priests, who sympathized with the Belarusian movement, among them Francišak Ramejka from Šerašava (Pružany district), Tamaš Siliuk from Kramianica (Vaŭkavysk district), Anton Šyško from Svislač (Vaŭkavysk district), and Henryk Beta and Janka Liaŭkovič from Janava (Sakolka district). But none of them initiated the opening of Belarusian schools due to concerns that Vil'nia diocese authorities might not welcome such steps.²²¹ By contrast, Lithuanian Catholic priests were known as active promoters of a Lithuanian national identity. The church of St. Mikalaj in Vil'nia had already introduced the use of the Lithuanian language for sermons and additional prayers by Christmas of 1901. The church operated a Lithuanian primary school and served as a meeting place, used by both Lithuanian and Belarusian activists.²²² The first Belarusian Catholic school appeared in Vil'nia only during the German occupation. Five others were registered in the whole of Ober Ost. Belarusian Catholics from elsewhere usually had to send their children to Polish schools, often under pressure from their Catholic priests who resisted the establishment of Belarusian Catholic schools. The clergy threatened to refuse communion to children if religion classes at Belarusian schools were not held in Polish, arguing that Belarusian was not previously used as an ecclesiastical language.²²³ This trend changed only in 1918, when bishop Jury Matulevič, known for his friendly attitude towards Belarusians, was put in charge of the Vil'nia diocese. After his appointment, new Belarusian schools for the Catholic population started to appear in the provinces, followed by efforts to introduce the Belarusian language into additional church services, extending beyond the liturgies.²²⁴

²²⁰ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 133, ark. 18, 18 adv.

²²¹ Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 129.

²²² "Pamiatny dzień," *Homan*, Nr. 91, 25 December 1916, 2.

²²³ Zemke, *Der Oberbefehlshaber Ost und die Schule*, 58.

²²⁴ Liachoŭski, *Škol'naja adukacyja*, 129.

Conclusion

The First World War on the Eastern front and German territorial gains in East-Central Europe resulted in the establishment of Ober Ost as an exemplary military-dominated state. Yet Hindenburg's and Ludendorff's illusions of total control waned as a series of *ad hoc* decisions benefitting only the interests of the German Empire turned Ober Ost into an arbitrarily ruled and poor occupation zone, devastated by the war, and exploited economically by the conquerors. The new administrative structures were set up exclusively with the single goal of maintaining security in the army rear and extracting resources.

At the same time, plans for an eventual German annexation of these territories were skillfully disguised with the attractive and popular slogans of supporting the struggle for freedom of the oppressed nationalities. With its relatively liberal treatment of non-Russian cultures, Ober Ost and its eclectic mix of ethnicities became a unique field for experimentation with the growing forces of nationalism. As the German Empire envisioned weakening Russia as its chief war aim, it was likely to find allies among the local national movements, as the latter harbored resentments towards the Russian Empire, which stifled rising nationalist movements in its western borderlands in the late 19th – early 20th centuries through the use of Russification. In this context, even the limited concessions to the local national cultures within a larger framework of German international political interests can be regarded as being an improvement to the nationalities policy of the tsarist authorities.

As Polish nationalism was the most developed, in comparison to the Lithuanian and Belarusian movements, it was able to achieve significant successes, especially in the sphere of education, the promotion of national values among the Ober Ost population, and the presence of dedicated activists, while Belarusians were still in the

process of recruiting their national elites. This trend was soon noted by the German authorities, who attempted to create a counterbalance to the strong positions of the Poles by lending more support to the Lithuanians and partly to the Belarusians. However, the Germans were not convinced that a Belarusian national movement could become a reliable partner. Despite their numerical predominance in the Vil'nia region, early in the war the occupation regime did not regard Belarusians as an important factor of influence. Initially, Belarusians were perceived either as Poles or Russians. The number of activists in the underfinanced Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims was low, schooling initiatives developed slowly and unevenly, and all the while the rural population was under pressure from the Catholic clergy to identify as Poles.

The demands of the few Belarusian nationalists were not taken seriously by the German authorities, as demonstrated by the fate of the requests to introduce the Belarusian language in the public sphere, in official identification papers or on Ober Ost currency. Instead, Belarusian nationalism was instrumentalized by the occupying power in order to benefit German interests both in the region and in international politics. In particular, it was used in efforts to weaken Polish influence, as is clear from the example of the German-sponsored project of a Belarusian teachers' seminary in Svislač. The occupation power was able to appropriate to a certain degree the initiative of national mobilization, while the Belarusian Committee for the Aid of War Victims in Vil'nia did not possess the leverage to reverse this process.

It is also evident that Belarusian national activists in Ober Ost did not fare well in the national competition against the Poles and Lithuanians. The former were able to secure considerable popular support due to the developed nature and popular base of their national movement, while the latter were recipients of extensive German assistance. The Belarusian national movement in Ober Ost was merely tolerated and received half-

hearted support only when its goals benefited German interests in the region. Nevertheless, its achievements represented a remarkable contrast to the state of affairs in the eastern Belarusian provinces, which remained under Russian rule in 1915 – 1917. Even in the shadow of Poles and Lithuanians, Belarusian activists in Ober Ost were able to achieve more in terms of nation-building than their counterparts on the eastern side of the front line. Despite financial difficulties, they legally opened schools with Belarusian as the primary language of instruction, published school textbooks, and educated teachers who went to the countryside to promote the Belarusian national project. None of these actions were possible in the eastern provinces, which remained under Russian military rule. Yet due to German restrictions on political activities, by 1917 the Belarusian national elites in Vil'nia lost the initiative to Minsk, which became the center of Belarusian politics after the February Revolution, hosting the All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917.

Chapter 6

“Common” Homeland of the Grand Duchy: National Politics in Ober Ost

The All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917 was one of the key events of Belarusian national politics, yet its organizers and delegates (soldiers and refugees) represented only the eastern Belarusian provinces, while Belarusians from the German-occupied Ober Ost did not have an opportunity to participate and contribute. Wartime restrictions prevented them from crossing the front line and travelling to Minsk. Nevertheless, throughout the war Belarusian national activists in Ober Ost¹ developed their own visions of the future organization of power in Belarus, which, to a certain degree, echoed the resolutions of the All-Belarusian Congress. This chapter will address the evolution of their political thinking in the wider context of German national politics in East Central Europe between 1916 and 1918. Similarly to the Minsk-based national organizations, headed by the Great Belarusian Rada, that united around the idea of autonomy within a future democratic Russia in 1917, Ober Ost Belarusians also focused on federal solutions, although their understanding of federalism departed from Russia-oriented thinking and was rooted in a specific form of a regional collective identity known as *krajovasc*². Appealing to the common historical memory, it was built around the idea of close cooperation between the

¹ Incidentally, Ober Ost included a significant part of the core region where Belarusian national mobilization was concentrated in the early 20th century. Most of the national activists and intelligentsia were natives to the Vil'nia, Ašmiany, Vilejka, Minsk, and Sluck districts, where the highest numbers of correspondents of *Naša Niva* resided. The contemporary literary Belarusian language is also based on the dialects common to this region. See P. V. Tereshkovich, *Etnicheskaia istoriia Belarusi XIX – nachala XX v. v kontekste Tsentralno-Vostochnoi Evropy* (Minsk: BGU, 2004), 178.

² In Polish this term is known as *krajowość*.

nations of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL).³

The central question that I ask here deals with the interplay of regional and national interests in the Belarusian-Lithuanian-Polish borderlands immediately before the start of the First World War, and again during the German occupation, reflecting the failures and victories of the concepts of civic and ethnic nationalism, respectively. My aim is to analyze the ways in which these competing concepts influenced the development of political thought within the Belarusian national milieu. Therefore, particular attention will be dedicated here to the attractiveness of *krajovasc'* for Belarusians, and to the degree of acceptance of this ideology in the political programs of other national movements in the lands of the former Grand Duchy. Why did federalism, rather than a nation-state concept, enjoy popularity among the Belarusian activists, both in Ober Ost and on the eastern side of the front? What practical steps did the Vil'nia Belarusians undertake to secure their vision of post-war state organization, and what were the results?

I will start with an overview of the *krajovasc'* concept in the pre-war years, following its transformation during the German occupation through several examples of attempts at political cooperation among the Ober Ost nationalities, including the plan to revive the Grand Duchy as a multinational state, built on principles of civic nationalism. The following discussion will be placed within the larger context of international politics and rivalries in East-Central Europe in the last two years of the First World War, when the German Empire moved on from a *divide et impera* approach in its national politics in the

³ Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruś, and Samogitia – a multiethnic state, often described as a joint Belarusian-Lithuanian polity. It included contemporary territories of Belarus and Lithuania from the 1230s up to the late 18th century, since 1569 – in a federation with Poland, known as the Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita). At the time of its maximal territorial expansion in the mid-15th century, this state stretched over territories 12 times larger than the ethnic Lithuanian lands. With the rise of the modern nationalist movements in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, the legacy of the Grand Duchy became an issue of contention, with no consensus reached by the historians from Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine up until the present time. See Vital' Silitski and Jan Zaprudnik, *Historical Dictionary of Belarus* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 137 – 139.

East to more resolute actions directed towards utilizing national aspirations in the region, backed up by the rhetoric of national-self-determination, *en vogue* since the February Revolution in 1917. At this time, Lithuanian national activists did not hesitate to take advantage of the new German *Ostpolitik*, seizing the opportunity to construct their own nation-state.

Caught between German imperialism and Lithuanian nationalism, Belarusian national activists in Vil'nia attempted to secure the post-war settlement that would best suit the needs of Belarusian nation-building and benefit the interests of the Belarusian people. Initially, they hoped to achieve these goals by supporting federative state-building strategies within the framework of the revived Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which they envisioned as a democratic multinational state, guaranteeing equal national rights for each nationality. In what follows, I focus on the fate of these initiatives and their eventual reconciliation with the need to establish a separate Belarusian statehood and unite all ethnically Belarusian territories divided by the front line. The issue of securing territorial integrity for the Belarusian territories became even more pressing with the commencement of the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers in late 1917. A summary of the peace talks will conclude this chapter, with particular attention to the question of how the concept of national self-determination was (mis)used both by the Central Powers and Soviet Russia to ensure dominance in East-Central Europe, where military power was instrumental in establishing a new order in the early months of 1918.

Regional and National Identities on the Eve of the First World War

The phenomenon of *krajovasc'* refers to a specific regional identity which emerged in the early 20th century among the Lithuanian and Belarusian Poles, or, in other

words, the descendants of Belarusians and Lithuanians, native to the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Over the centuries that had passed since the decline of the GDL in the late 17th century, they accepted Polish culture in order to improve their social standing in society.⁴ By the turn of the century, they were represented by the gentry, landowners, and intellectuals, playing major social, economic, and cultural roles, despite being a minority of the population of the Belarusian-Lithuanian region. After the revolution of 1905, concerns of being isolated due to growing levels of local nationalism, in particular that of the Lithuanians, forced Poles in historic Lithuania as well as in the Vil'nia intelligentsia circles to develop a new political approach to ensure Polish predominance in the region under conditions of growing local nationalisms. Based on the perceptions of common political, social, cultural, and economic interests among the nations of the former Grand Duchy, encompassing contemporary Belarusian and Lithuanian territories, they developed a separate identity from the Poles native to the Kingdom of Poland.⁵ Instead of focusing on ethnic and religious differences, its emphasis shifted to the territorial, cultural, and historical unity of historic Lithuania, or the *Kraj* (Homeland), as these territories were usually called. *Krajowasc'* approach was based on the principle of equality between the Lithuanian and Belarusian people, the need for peaceful coexistence, and mutual efforts to secure the well-being of the common homeland. An essential feature was the primacy of the interests of the whole *Kraj* over the interests of its separate nationalities.⁶

⁴ Leon Wasilewski, *Litwa i Białoruś; przeszłość, terażniejszość, tendencje rozwojowe* (Kraków: Książka, 1912), 65 – 70.

⁵ Rimantas Miknys and Darius Staliūnas, “The “Old” and “New” Lithuanians: Collective Identity Types in Lithuania at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Forgotten Pages in Baltic History. Diversity and Inclusion*, eds. Martyn Housden and David J. Smitt (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011), 38.

⁶ Jan Savicki, “Michał Römer wobec problemów narodowościowych ziem Litewsko-białoruskich na początku XX wieku,” in *Krajowość – tradycje zgody narodów w dobie nacjonalizmu: materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej w Instytucie Historii UAM w Poznaniu (11 – 12 maja 1998)*, ed. Jan Jurkiewicz (Poznań: Instytut Historii UAM, 1999), 75; Juliusz Bardach, *O dawnej i niedawnej Litwie* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 1988), 262, 265.

In this chapter I will be using the broad definition of *krajovasc'*, suggested by the Belarusian historian Aliaksandr Smaliančuk, who treats this phenomenon as a concept referring to the idea, movement, or ideology of promoting the legacy of the peoples of historic Lithuania. Described as a “reconciliation of particular local or national interests to common interests,” it represented a form of local supra-national patriotism.⁷ In the capacity of a democratic equivalent of nationalism, *krajovasc'* essentially dismissed any forms of chauvinism and imperialism along with the notions of political, cultural, or military hegemony.⁸ Originating from the reaction of the old political and cultural elites to modernization and the development of national movements, *krajovasc'* offered a vision of a historical compromise, based on a democratic polity, equality, and the levelling of national conflicts. It was designed to prevent any further politicization of the Lithuanian movement and to overcome the threats of aggressive nationalism.⁹ *Krajovasc'* was centered around the idea of a civic nation, to be built around patriotic feelings of belonging to the former Grand Duchy.¹⁰

The broad interpretation of the *krajovasc'* concept caused a lack of consensus on the question of what groups in fact had belonged to the *Kraj*. Initially, only Lithuanian Poles, Belarusians, and Lithuanians were recognized as its main constituent nations. Others, Russians and Jews in particular, were treated as “foreign.” Kanstancyja

⁷ Aliaksandr Smaliančuk, “Krajovaść vis-à-vis Belarusian and Lithuanian National Movements in the Early 20th Century,” in *Belarus and Its Neighbors: Historical Perceptions and Political Constructs. International Conference Papers*, eds. Ales' Lahvinec and Taciana Čulickaja (Warsaw: Uczelnia Łazarskiego, 2013), 71.

⁸ Rimantas Miknys, “Michał Römer, krajowcy a idea zjednoczenia Europy w pierwszej połowie XX wieku,” in *O nowy kształt Europy. XX-wieczne koncepcje federalistyczne w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej i ich implikacje dla dyskusji o przyszłości Europy*, eds. Jerzy Kłoczowski and Sławomir Łukasiewicz (Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 2003), 96.

⁹ Maria Zadencka, “Krajowość a strategie elit wobec emancypacji narodowej ludu w końcu XIX i początku XX wieku: Litwa i Białorus, prowincje Bałtyckie, Finlandia,” in Jurkiewicz, *Krajowość – tradycje zgody narodów*, 51.

¹⁰ Ales' Smaliančuk, *Pamięć krajevasciu i nacyjonalnej idejaj. Polski ruch na bielaruskich i litoŭskich zemliach 1864 – liuty 1917* (Sankt-Peciarburh: Neŭski prasciah, 2004), 125.

Skirmunt,¹¹ known as one of the important contributors to the ideology of *krajovasc'*, denied the Russians the right of belonging to the community of the *Kraj* citizens, seeing in them representatives of a repressive civilization that contradicted the very notion of unhindered national coexistence.¹² However, with time, *krajovasc'* evolved towards acceptance and inclusion of the groups with apparently weaker ties to the *Kraj*. Another prominent *krajovec*, Michał Römer, advocated the extension of *krajovasc'* towards Jews. Römer pointed out that Jews formed an isolated and closed community in Belarusian-Lithuanian lands, determined to keep their cultural and religious distance. They were not assimilated by either of the groups, despite the fact that the Jewish intelligentsia widely used the Russian language. The trend towards isolation was typical for the lands of historic Lithuania, being even more pronounced than in Poland. This, combined with the insufficient contacts to other *Kraj* nationalities, accelerated the formation of a Jewish national identity. The lack of assimilation processes among the Jewish community thus caused the Jews to lose feelings of connection to the *Kraj*, resulting in the insufficient interest from their side in questions regarding potential statehood organization. Nevertheless, Römer was hoping that eventually Jews would join the *Kraj* (ukrajowic się) without giving up their own national differences.¹³

In addition to the flexible interpretations of belonging, *krajovasc'* did not possess a unified discourse, as it was represented by an array of different political currents and groups, ranging from conservatives to liberal-democrats. Each offered their own approach to the solution of the national question. Liberal-democrats with Michał Römer strived for mutual understanding and cooperation between Belarusians and Lithuanians,

¹¹ On her political thinking see Dariusz Szpoper, *Gente Lithuana, Nazione Lithuana. Myśl polityczna i działalność Konstancji Skirmuntt (1851 – 1934)* (Gdańsk: Arche, 2009).

¹² Smaliančuk, *Pamiž krajevasciu i nacyjanalnaj idejaj*, 242.

¹³ Jan Savicki, “Michał Römer wobec problemów narodowościowych ziem Litewsko-białoruskich na początku XX wieku,” in Jurkiewicz, *Krajowość – tradycje zgody narodow*, 79 – 80.

which was partly achieved through the economic and cultural organizations of various nationalities in Vil'nia, common publishing projects (*Kurjer Krajowy*), and existence of masonic lodges. Another liberal-democratic group led by Ludwik Abramowicz adopted a more pragmatic approach, moving towards treating *krajowasc'* as a means to secure the interests of the Lithuanian Poles in the region, who were primarily viewed as members of the Polish nation. In contrast to Römer, Abramowicz and his supporters saw in the Belarusian national movement a government-sponsored anti-Polish intrigue. Finally, the conservative-liberal wing of *krajowasc'* with I. Korwin-Milewski at its helm was gradually gravitating towards the positions of the Polish National Democrats. They were cautious of the radical socialist component, a characteristic of both the Belarusian and Lithuanian movements, convinced that it represented a threat to Polish national interests. Yet political positions within this current varied greatly, ranging from the resolute dismissal of national movements to cooperation with them. For instance, landowner Raman Skirmunt sympathized with the Belarusian movement. In 1917, he became the head of the newly created Belarusian National Committee in Minsk. Another prominent *krajowasc'* supporter, Kanstancyja Skirmunt, was known for her consistent opposition to escalation of the Polish-Lithuanian conflict, while duchess Magdalena Radzivil provided financial assistance to the Belarusian and Lithuanian initiatives.¹⁴

In what follows, I will argue that the framework of *krajowasc'* represented a convenient strategy, which was particularly suitable for the needs of Belarusian national activists. Their weaker national movement, lagging behind in its phase of active agitation, readily accepted the main tenets of this ideology, treating it as a transitory stage, in the hope of gaining time to develop unhindered by the competing neighbouring national movements. In this regard, the activities of the brothers Ivan and Anton Luckievič, known

¹⁴ Smaliančuk, *Pamiž krajevasciu i nacyjanalnaj idejaj*, 341, 359 – 360.

as the most outspoken proponents of *krajovasc'* ideals within the Belarusian national milieu in the early 20th century, are of particular interest.

Luckievičs' political thinking was typical for the liberal-democratic wing of *krajoŭcy*, supporting universal humanitarian values and the ideals of freedom, equality, and peaceful coexistence. Anton Luckievič viewed *krajovasc'* as the exact opposite of the limited worldview offered by nationalism, which he described as a “sick aberration” which took hold among the Poles, Jews, and Lithuanians, with Belarusians being next in line. Aggressive nationalism was criticized for blinding people to the confines of their own nation and forcing them to ignore the plight of their neighbours. Luckievič contrasted it to *krajovasc'*, which he recognized as a different and better option of uniting all democratic elements within local nations in order to create a viable and successful political force.¹⁵ At the same time, Luckievič made a distinction between destructive aggressive nationalism and the constructive forces of national revival, supporting the latter as one of the preconditions for *krajovasc'* to succeed. In his opinion, the fate of the *Kraj* was to be decided not by single individuals, but by its constituent nations, among which he counted nationally conscious Belarusians and Lithuanians.¹⁶

On the eve of the First World War the brothers Luckievič initiated the establishment of the newspapers *Kurjer Krajowy* and *Vecherniaia Gazeta*. Both periodicals were published in Vil'nia starting in 1912. *Kurjer Krajowy* appeared until the middle of 1914 with a circulation of between 3,000 and 4,000 copies, while *Vecherniaia Gazeta* appeared with 10,000 copies and was published until the end of June 1915. Luckievičs' initiative followed the *krajovasc'* tradition, established in the periodic press by *Gazeta Wileńska* in 1906. Oriented towards a broader Russian- and Polish-speaking

¹⁵ Anton Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu: vybranyja tvory*, ed. Anatol' Sidarevič (Minsk: “Bielaruski knihazbor,” 2003), 64 – 66.

¹⁶ “Paznajmo svajo imia,” *Homan*, Nr. 23, 2 May 1916, 2.

public as well as “denationalized Belarusians,” both newspapers promoted universal democratic values, state decentralization, the “rebirth” of the Belarusian people, and cooperation between the nations.¹⁷ The brothers Luckievič deliberately concealed their involvement with both *Kurjer Krajowy* and *Vecherniaia Gazeta*, never signing articles with their real names and avoiding acting as official editors. As a Russian-language democratic press organ, *Vecherniaia Gazeta* was designed to weaken the influence of the Russian far right-wing, who were particularly active in the Belarusian provinces during the election campaign of the Fourth Duma in 1912. According to Ales' Smaliančuk, *Vecherniaia Gazeta* should also be given credit for the creation of “Russian democracy with a clear *krajovasc'* orientation” in Vil'nia.¹⁸

Kurjer Krajowy was designed as a democratic newspaper for the Polish *krajovasc'*-friendly circles. As the Luckievič brothers preferred to stay in the background, Juliusz Sumorok was appointed as its official editor, while their friend Józef Mańkowski took over the actual editing position. While *Vecherniaia Gazeta* attacked the Russian far-right and the Black Hundred hordes, *Kurjer Krajowy* surprisingly caused discord among the Vil'nia democratic establishment, as it encountered competition from *Przegląd Wileński*, established in 1911 and headed by Ludwik Abramowicz. Since both newspapers had an identical orientation, Ivan and Anton Luckievič offered to the publishers of the *Przegląd Wileński* to unite their efforts in a common project, yet the latter hesitated and reacted in a reserved manner. According to Michał Römer, who was among the few supporters of the joint editorship, cooperation failed due to a lack of confidence on the side of the *Przegląd* publishers, who did not trust Belarusians and wanted to see the

¹⁷ Bielaruski Džiaržaŭny Archiŭ-Muzej Litaratury i Mastactva (hereafter BDAMLIM), f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 131, ark. 22 adv.; See also “Pamiaci Ivana Luckieviča ŭ pieršyja uhodki s'mierci Jaho (20.VIII. 1919 – 20.VIII.1920),” in *Pra Ivana Luckieviča: Uspaminy, sviedčanni*, ed. Anatol' Sidarevič (Minsk: “Knihazbor,” 2007), 19.

¹⁸ Smaliančuk, *Pamiž krajevasciu i nacyjanalnaj idejaj*, 264, 268.

democratic press organ only in Polish hands.¹⁹ This incident foreshadowed the inability of *krajowasc'* to counteract the growing national sentiments, which would result in its crisis and eventual decline during the First World War.

Attempts of Political Cooperation among the Ober Ost Nationalities

The early period of the First World War saw a number of *krajowasc'*-inspired political initiatives, emerging in the German-administered Ober Ost between 1915 and 1916. References to the legacy of the Grand Duchy remained particularly attractive within the Belarusian and Lithuanian national milieus.²⁰ Local Poles initially participated in common political projects too, but their support was not wholehearted and waned as the vision of an independent Poland forced them to abandon the notion of equal rights for the three nations of the planned independent Grand Duchy, and they re-oriented towards the primacy of the Polish nation-state. As stated in a joint declaration of the Polish representatives, addressed to the head of the Military Administration of Lithuania Isenburg-Birstein in May 1917, Lithuanian Poles at that time had already positioned themselves as an “inseparable part of the great Polish nation.”²¹

Generally, during the First World War, Poles of all political associations started to treat Belarusians and Lithuanians from positions of Polish cultural supremacy. For instance, Józef Piłsudski, incidentally a native to the Vil'nia region, did not recognize in Belarusians the potential to become a full-fledged sovereign nation. He assigned them either to Polish or Russian spheres of influence, and did not view the Belarusian question as a strong factor in the region. By contrast, Poles were considered to be the driving force

¹⁹ Zbigniew Solak, *Między Polską a Litwą. Życie i działalność Michała Römera, 1880 – 1920* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, 2004), 194 – 195.

²⁰ For instance, in 1916, Vil'nia Belarusians and Lithuanians demonstrated their fascination with the legacies of the GDL by the wearing in public the badges with the GDL coat of arms, depicting a white knight on a horse (*Pahonia* in Belarusian, *Vytis* in Lithuanian). See *Homan*, Nr. 51, 8 August 1916, 2.

²¹ Bardach, *O dawnej i niedawnej Litwie*, 236.

in the dismantling of the Russian Empire. In line with this logic, Polish socialists supported Belarusian, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian national movements only inasmuch as all of them could be used as instruments of the anti-Russian struggle.²² The Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, PPS) had already expressed such leadership ambitions in the Belarusian-Lithuanian lands earlier in the 20th century. From 1902 – 1903, the PPS facilitated the publication of socialist brochures in the Belarusian language. However, the sole aim was to dominate the socialist initiatives of various nationalities. The same pragmatic reasoning determined the failed attempts to create a unified territorial socialist party of Lithuania to be subordinated to the PPS.²³

Józef Piłsudski and Polish socialists from the PPS were also known for their concept of federalism, originating from the *krajovasc'* tradition. As already mentioned, the Vil'nia democratic circles were never able to reach an organizational unity. During 1915 – 1917, they were gradually divided into two different currents. The first remained faithful to *krajovasc'*, supporting the notion of independent historical Lithuania and recognizing a distinct identity of Lithuanian Poles. More importantly, it continued to emphasize the equal rights of Lithuanian Poles, Belarusians, and Lithuanians to decide on the future of their common homeland. The second current was composed of Polish federalists, who assigned a special role in the future state-building process to the Polish nation. In contrast to the incorporation approach of the Polish National Democrats, Piłsudski and Polish socialists²⁴ still supported close ties for the former Grand Duchy with

²² Krystyna Gomółka, *Między Polską a Rosją. Białoruś w koncepcjach polskich ugrupowań politycznych 1918 – 1922* (Warszawa: Gryf, 1994), 17 – 18; Eugeniusz Mironowicz, *Białorusini i Ukraińcy w polityce obozu piłsudczykowskiego* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersyteckie Trans Humana, 2007), 10.

²³ Smaliančuk, *Pamiż krajevasciu i nacyjanalnaj idejaj*, 190 – 191, 194. Another representative of the socialist bloc was the SDKPiL (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania), yet this party was Marxist in character and did not belong to the Polish movement. Subordinated to RSDRP (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party), it did not support a national agenda, turning instead to class struggle. See Smaliančuk, *Pamiż krajevasciu i nacyjanalnaj idejaj*, 188 – 189.

²⁴ See more on Polish socialist federalism in Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569 – 1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 58.

the revived Polish state, yet clearly shifted their emphasis towards the leading role of the Polish element, instead of supporting the notion of the equal rights of various nationalities. Polish federalists saw the future of historical Lithuania in terms of a Swiss-inspired federation, to be composed of the three main units, or cantons as they were called. A Lithuanian canton was to be established with the center in Kaunas, Polish with a capital in Vil'nia, and Belarusian with a center in Minsk. Federalism remained on the Polish agenda up until 1921, ardently supported by Piłsudski, despite his famous address on 22 April 1919 in Vil'nia, promising the inhabitants of the former Grand Duchy the right to decide their future for themselves, without Polish interference or pressure. Yet in practice, Polish authorities followed the federation approach, which inspired Piłsudski's project of "Middle Lithuania" and the military affair of Lucjan Żeligowski in the fall of 1920.²⁵

On the other side of the political spectrum stood the Polish National Democrats, reflecting the growing appeal of modern nationalism. They had abandoned the old Commonwealth-inspired slogan of fighting "for our freedom and yours," drawing a clear distinction between Poles and non-Poles, including among the latter all non-Polish successors of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.²⁶ The positions of the National Democrats were defined by "national egoism,"²⁷ refusing to regard the non-Polish nations as equal partners. Their leaders, Roman Dmowski and Jan Ludwik Popławski, were even less likely than the socialists to recognize the notion of political rights for Belarusians, dismissively treating them as a passive by-product of the Polish-Russian existential struggle. In terms of the territorial organization of the future Polish state, Dmowski did not exclude the possibility of the eventual incorporation of some eastern territories settled

²⁵ Bardach, *O dawnej i niedawnej Litwie*, 235 – 237, 272.

²⁶ Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth Century Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 213.

²⁷ Bardach, *O dawnej i niedawnej Litwie*, 263.

by Poles, yet he resolutely departed from the idea of restoring the pre-1772 borders of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The positions of the Vil'nia National Democrats towards the Belarusian question were identical: one of their representatives, Jan Bułhak, considered the Belarusian language to be a “coarse dialect,” and suggested that Belarusians should not waste time in establishing their own culture when they had the option of taking advantage of the old and fully developed cultures, be those Polish or Russian.²⁸

The Polish National Democrats thus responded to the danger of Poles becoming a national minority in the lands of the former Grand Duchy, whereas the Belarusian and Lithuanian national movements started to appeal to the principle of self-determination. Poles reacted with a concept of the division of historic Lithuania and the incorporation of Vil'nia and the region around it within the Polish state. Accompanied by the trend towards assimilating non-Polish nationalities, this approach became dominant in 1918, overshadowing the solution of a possible union.²⁹

The confrontational stance of the National Democrats towards the Belarusian and Lithuanian movements was already noticeable by 1915. This can be attributed not only to the expanded independent national activities, but also to the relatively higher degree of cultural freedoms allowed by the German occupation regime, enabling these national movements to increase their public visibility. Later, the German Empire also instrumentalized local nationalisms as a tool of its anti-Polish policies. The result was that almost all political orientations within the Polish milieu became hostile to the Belarusian and Lithuanian movements. Poles started assuming that historical Lithuania would be able to exist only under the protection of the Polish nation-state.³⁰

²⁸ Gomółka, *Między Polską a Rosją*, 15 – 16.

²⁹ Bardach, *O dawnej i niedawnej Litwie*, 263.

³⁰ Smaliančuk, *Pamiż krajevasciu i nacyjanalnaj idejaj*, 360.

One of the attempts at cooperation between the nationalities of the former GDL early in the war reveals this sudden crisis of *krajovasc'* attitudes. It preceded the German occupation of Vil'nia and revolved around the revitalization of the local City Council. After the departure of Russian officials, the Council barely existed, as half of its members had left the city during the evacuation process, thus making it highly unlikely for the remaining half, consisting exclusively of Poles, to be recognized by the Germans as a legitimate institution to represent the interests of the population. In an attempt to reorganize the municipal self-government of Vil'nia, local democratic circles formed an initiative group that proposed to introduce into the City Council Belarusian, Lithuanian, and Jewish elements. Giving representation to different nationalities should have democratized the City Council, preparing a legitimate platform for future interactions of the multinational region with the new authorities. Initially, Ivan Luckievič and Vincent Sviatapolk-Mirski were listed as candidates to represent Belarusians in the renewed version of the City Council. Yet local Poles were unwilling to share power and deliberately slowed down decision-making on the issue, hoping to secure and maintain dominant Polish positions in the city.³¹ This strategy failed, as well as the entire new City Council concept, since the German Supreme Command was meticulously solidifying the occupation administration in 1915, and did not hesitate to dismiss all local institutions, transferring all powers in Vil'nia into the hands of the German mayor. The City Council was reduced to a "municipal advisory body," while its former members were only allowed to assist in the implementation of German orders.³²

The Vil'nia-Koūna Citizens' Committee was another initiative in the spirit of *krajovasc'*, designed to represent the interests of all local nationalities with the German authorities. According to the memoirs of Anton Luckievič, Polish leadership ambitions

³¹ Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchy*, 96.

³² "U Wilni i wakolicach," *Homan*, Nr. 3, 22 February 1916, 3.

stood in the way here too, as local Poles agreed to include other nationalities into this body on unfair conditions, keeping about half of the positions for themselves.³³ Twelve Poles, representing various political currents, from right to left, joined the Citizens' Committee. Lithuanian conservatives did not want to join an institution where they did not have a majority, but the left-wing politicians delegated S. Kairys, J. Kimontas, V. Stašinskas, J. Šaulys, and J. Vileišis. They were joined by Belarusians Anton and Ivan Luckievič, Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, and A. Zaštaūt, as well as four Jewish members. The Citizens' Committee was chaired by the Pole Stanisław Kognowicki, while the Lithuanian Jonas Vileišis served as his deputy. German authorities tolerated the existence of the Committee during the first months of the occupation, using it for the practical goals of establishing a functioning administration and maintaining contacts with the local population. Yet its dissolution was inevitable, especially after its Polish members became involved in an incident with unfair distribution of donations received from the Swiss-based General Relief Committee for the Victims of the War in Poland.³⁴ Former member and deputy chair Vileišis pointed out in his open letter to Kognowicki and the second deputy chair Boguszewski that these funds were sent to the Citizens' Committee for the needs of all Ober Ost nationalities, yet were promptly readdressed, implying that the money was used to assist only the Polish population.³⁵

It is likely that in the case of the Vil'nia-Koŭna Citizens' Committee, Poles hoped to create an image of the most loyal nationality, anticipating that the German authorities would give them more powers,³⁶ and acting as if they already had them. Yet this behavior only prevented the Citizens' Committee from becoming a truly functional institution. Eventually Polish calculations failed, as the Germans conducted their

³³ Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 96.

³⁴ Wiktor Sukiennicki and Maciej Siekierski, *East Central Europe During World War I: From Foreign Domination to National Independence*. V. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 128 – 130.

³⁵ *Homan*, Nr. 19, 18 April 1916, 3. See also Chapter 5.

occupation policy in a pragmatic manner, preferring to play one nationality against the other, instead of stating clear preferences.³⁷ By March 1916, the Citizens' Committee had not been holding any meetings for a few months and gradually fell apart, as both its Belarusian and Lithuanian members resigned.³⁸ They were followed by the Jews and the representatives of workers and Polish democrats.³⁹ In May 1916, the only example of effective cooperation between all nations of Ober Ost was to be found in the humanitarian sphere, where the Association of Medical and Food Aid still kept Belarusians, Lithuanians, Poles, and Jews working together in the charitable projects providing relief to children.⁴⁰

Towards the New Grand Duchy? Federalism as a State-Building Strategy

Despite the fact that Ober Ost in 1915 covered only a part of the territories of the former Grand Duchy, references to this state were abundant in the contemporary Ober Ost press. The Belarusian newspaper *Homan* evoked an image of separate ancient lands, known among its population as the *Kraj*, a common home to Lithuanians and Belarusians who lived there side by side, united in their experiences of suffering under Russian rule, which deliberately kept these territories economically and culturally backward.⁴¹ This image lies at the foundation of another political project, designed after *krajovasc'*-inspired

³⁶ At the start of the occupation Poles, along with Russians, were the most known nationality for Germans in this part of East-Central Europe. In September 1915, the notoriously famous address of Graf Joachim von Pfeil to the residents of Vil'nia referred to the city as "the pearl of the Polish kingdom." See Edmundas Gimžauskas, ed., *Lietuva vokiečių okupacijoje Pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais, 1915 – 1918. Lietuvos nepriklausomos valstybės genezė. Dokumentų rinkinys* (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos instituto leidykla, 2006), 62.

³⁷ "Pamiaci Ivana Luckieviča ū pieršyja uhodki s'mierci Jaho (20.VIII. 1919 – 20.VIII.1920)," in *Pra Ivana Luckieviča: Uspaminy, sviedčanni*, ed. Anatol' Sidarevič (Minsk: "Knihazbor," 2007), 21 – 22.

³⁸ "U Wilni i wakolicach," *Homan*, Nr. 11, 21 March 1916, 3.

³⁹ "U Wilni i wakolicach," *Homan*, Nr. 17, 11 April 1916, 3.

⁴⁰ *Homan*, Nr. 25, 9 May 1916, 3. The Association of Medical and Food Aid stood out in comparison to the Citizens' Committee by its principled approach in the issue of distributing donations. In 1916, it received substantial funds from the Jewish organizations in Germany. However, the Association decided to extend its assistance (in particular, this concerned the provision of milk and medical services) to all babies and sick children of Vil'nia, irrespective of their nationality and religion. See *Homan*, Nr. 14, 31 March 1916, 3.

⁴¹ "Zabrany Kraj," *Homan*, Nr. 3, 22 February 1916, 2.

patterns – the Confederation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This initiative is attributed to an anonymous group of Belarusian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Jewish representatives from the liberal-democratic circles, who proclaimed their intentions in the *Universal Act of the GDL Confederation*, issued on 10 December 1915. The document called for a common state of Lithuania and Belarus on the lands under German occupation. All other nations and organizations were invited to join in the Confederation, being assured of guarantees for minority rights.⁴² Among the Belarusians, Ivan and Anton Luckievič were known as the most ardent supporters of the Confederation project, with the authorship of the *Universal* attributed to Ivan Luckievič.⁴³

The proclamation of the Temporary Council of the GDL Confederation followed in February 1916. Commonly known under the title “Citizens!”, it was the second and the last commonly coordinated document relating to the re-creation of the GDL. The brothers Luckievič, Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, and Daminik Siamaška signed the proclamation on behalf of Belarusians, while Jurgis Šaulys and Jonas Vileišis represented the Lithuanians. Local Poles had already abandoned the GDL Confederation by this point. The document reiterated the idea of an indivisible and independent GDL, focusing on the wish of its constituent nations to part from Russia.⁴⁴ The project of the new state was limited to the lands of ethnographic Lithuania and western Belarus; however, a possible shift of its borders to the east was not excluded, as the proclamation contained provisions for the future state to include “at least those lands currently occupied by the German

⁴² “Universal Konfederacii Vialikaho Kniaz'stva Litoŭskaho,” in Aliaksandr Smaliančuk, *Vol'nyja muliary ŭ bielaruskaj historyi: kaniec XVIII – pačatak XX st.* (Vil'nja: Gudas, 2005), 184.

⁴³ Juliana Vitan-Dubejkaŭskaja, *Mae ŭspaminy* (Vil'nia: Niezaležnae vydavectva Technalohija, 1994), 45. According to Anton Luckievič, his brother Ivan was the author of the text of the *Universal Act*, while the Lithuanian Jurgis Šaulys wrote the second proclamation, issued in February 1916. See “Sobstvennoručnye pokazaniia A. I. Lutskevicha,” in Anton Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 191.

⁴⁴ Edmundas Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar pry farmavanni litoŭskaj dziaržavy ŭ 1915 – 1923 hh.* (Bielastok: Bielaruskae histaryčnae tavarystva, 2012), 55; Zenowiusz Ponarski, “Konfederacja Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego 1915 – 1916,” *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (1998), Nr. 10: 59.

army.”⁴⁵ Anton Luckievič noted that this wording was ambiguous and left territorial issues open to interpretation, reflecting the differing political intentions of both Belarusians and Lithuanians, who since 1905 had been debating whether to rebuild the GDL as a common state, or to create something new. Lithuanians tended to favour the concept of “ethnographic” Lithuania, which in their opinion, had to include the Belarusian-populated former Vil'nia and Hrodna provinces.⁴⁶ Thus, re-creation of the GDL within the German occupation zone suited the Lithuanian vision of eventual construction of a nation-state, while Belarusians interpreted the proclamation in broad terms of striving for greater historical Lithuania with the eventual inclusion of eastern Belarusian areas.⁴⁷

On the eve of the Third Conference of Nationalities in Lausanne in June 1916, Belarusian positions remained faithful to the principles of *krajovasc'*, declaring solidarity with those Lithuanians, Poles, and Jews who identified as citizens of a common Homeland and were supporting “the true masters of these lands – Belarusian and Lithuanian people” in the task of securing “the highest degree of cultural and economic development.” The local nations were called upon to secure such a system of governance in the *Kraj*, which would protect it from the “appetites” of their neighbours.⁴⁸ Yet the project of the re-creation of the Grand Duchy posed the problem of divided lands for the Ober Ost Belarusians, who had not yet developed a coherent approach for how to advocate for unified Belarusian interests on both sides of the front. As argued by Anton Luckievič, the general starting point was the idea of “free existence” for the whole of the Belarusian lands. From this premise, he envisioned a closer regional cooperation of nations, including Lithuanians, Latvians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians in the space

⁴⁵ Anton Luckievič, “Palityčnyja liozungi Bielaruskaha ruchu,” in Anton Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 80.

⁴⁶ In this instance Lithuanian nationalists conveniently substituted historical Lithuania with ethnic Lithuania.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁸ “Na zjezd u Losanni,” *Homan*, Nr. 36, 16 June 1916, 2.

between the Baltic and the Black seas.⁴⁹

The last officially known common project of the GDL Confederation dates back to mid-December 1916, when members of the Lithuanian Circle of Political Leadership, Antanas Smetona, Jurgis Šaulys, and Steponas Kairys on the one hand, and members of the Belarusian Committee, the brothers Luckievič and Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski on the other, prepared a draft of a political program, forwarded to the Berlin contact person of the Lithuanians, Friedrich von der Ropp. The document advocated for the independence of the lands of the GDL, with a new addition of Kurland, detachment from Russia, and self-government for the Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Latvian constituent parts of the new state. Yet this plan failed, as by 1917, encouraged by German support, the Lithuanians were no longer eager to support federation solutions.⁵⁰

The ambitious idea of reviving the Grand Duchy as a democratic multinational state demonstrated the limits of *krajovasc'*, as well as its susceptibility to the growing nationalisms in the region. Lithuanians were sympathetic to the GDL Confederation only in the beginning, yet soon switched towards support for an exclusively Lithuanian nation-state due to the gradual Lithuanian gravitation towards Germany, while Jews did not at all display firm beliefs in connecting their future with the peoples of the former GDL. Local Poles were even less receptive towards the idea of reviving the GDL than Lithuanians, feeling more confident about the re-establishment of the Polish state with its center in Warsaw.⁵¹ The progressive ideals of civic nationalism, embodied in *krajovasc'*, were ahead of their time, succumbing to the divisive forces of nationalism.

The prospect of the creation of a Polish state during the First World War in fact had a two-fold effect, not only contributing to the decline of *krajovasc'*, but also leading

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar*, 64 – 65.

⁵¹ Aliaksandr Smaliančuk, *Vol'nyja muliary ŭ bielaruskaj historyi: kaniec XVIII – pačatak XX st.* (Vil'nja: Gudas, 2005), 174; Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar*, 54.

to the rapprochement of various political divisions within Polish politics. The prominent representative of the democratic current of *krajowasc'*, Michał Römer, had already observed this trend early on in the war, during his service in Piłsudski's legions. Römer noted with regret that both ordinary legionnaires and Polish national elites lacked any interest in the revival of the joint Polish-Lithuanian polity as a union of equals, including Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus. Both groups did not understand the notion of historic Lithuania, displaying interest in this region only because of their concerns to secure the rights of Poles who resided there. A clear aim towards the establishment of an independent Poland was the mutual ground for understanding among all Poles.⁵²

In this respect, the persistent adherence of the Belarusians to *krajowasc'* ideals can partly be explained by the belated development of modern Belarusian nationalism, which was the last national movement in the region to abandon the idea of re-creating the multinational Grand Duchy of Lithuania and move on towards the establishment of a nation-state. Yet this explanation needs to be examined in a broader context, because it is likely that Belarusian activists were well aware of their chief weaknesses, in particular, the unsatisfactory state of national mobilization in the provinces, which was aggravated by the division of the Belarusian territories by the front line. This division effectively terminated all personal and political contacts, both horizontal, within the national elites, and vertical, between the elites and the population. The numbers of Belarusian national activists in Ober Ost were limited, while most of their organizations and initiatives were based in Vil'nia, lacking equally developed national organizations and support outside the city, which complicated cultural and educational activities,⁵³ not to mention the challenges that it created for political advocacy and the practical tasks of state-building. Therefore, by securing its equal status within a federation, the Belarusian national movement hoped

⁵² Solak, *Między Polską a Litwą*, 291.

⁵³ See Chapter 5.

to buy itself time to catch up with the promotion of the national idea among the broader population and in expanding the activists' ranks, which would have allowed them to complete the stage of national agitation. Last but not least, Belarusian elites realized the negative implications of losing Vil'nia to the Lithuanians, as apart from being a large economic and cultural center of the region, the city also served as a base of Belarusian national activism, full of ideological and cultural connotations of historical Lithuania, which could be successfully used to nurture Belarusian national identity.⁵⁴

As pointed out by Anatol' Sidarevič, a federative state solution was also a rational and realistic tactic, based on the potential economic advantages of a common Belarusian-Lithuanian state.⁵⁵ Statements made by the Belarusian activists as late as September 1917 confirm this thesis, as it is evident that they address Belarusian-Lithuanian areas not only as a cornerstone for the restoration of the former Grand Duchy, but also as a common legal and economic construct. A form of statehood uniting Lithuanian and Belarusian territories with eventual access to the Baltic Sea was regarded as a guarantee of a free, stable, and balanced development.⁵⁶ *Homan* correctly pointed out that the Belarusian people would have to face a very difficult situation after the eventual end of the war. An essential feature of a successful post-war economic recovery would have been access to the sea and Baltic ports. Consequently, the newspaper stated that the wishes of all nationally conscious Belarusians were to see the eastern and western parts of their homeland united and tied through a federation to Lithuania and Kurland, identified as the most suitable possible partners due to their similar economic interests.⁵⁷ Anton

⁵⁴ Zachar Šybeka, "Z historyi bielaruskich maraŭ pra Vil'niu. Peryjad niameckaj akupacyi, 1915 – 1918 hh.," in *Harady Bielarusi ŭ kanteksce palityki, ekanomiki, kul'tury: zbornik navukovych artykulaŭ*, eds. I. P. Kren' and I. V. Sorkina (Hrodna: HrDU, 2007), 176; Darius Staliūnas, "Making a National Capital out of a Multiethnic City: Lithuanians and Vilnius in Late Imperial Russia," *Ab Imperio* (2014), Nr. 1: 166.

⁵⁵ Anatol' Sidarevič, "Anton Luckievič: ad kraevasci da niezaležnietva (1916 – 1918)," *ARCHE* (2006), Nr. 1 – 2: 86.

⁵⁶ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 131, ark. 38, 39.

⁵⁷ *Homan*, 28 September 1917, 1.

Luckievič noted that all political currents within the Belarusian movement had to aim for the establishment of “a free Belarus, in a federation with the two free neighbouring nations, forming so-called “united states” from the Baltic to the Black Sea.”⁵⁸

The preference for a federative state-building strategy by the Belarusians in Ober Ost echoed the political reasoning of the Belarusian activists in eastern Belarus. Throughout 1917, leading Belarusian national forces on the other side of the front line were known for their support of Belarusian autonomy, albeit in this case, within the future Russian democratic state which was envisioned as a voluntary federal union of separate nations. A common government was to be formed by the consent of the constituent republics, and its tasks were to be limited to guaranteeing state security, serving as an intermediary in judicial matters, and securing minority rights.⁵⁹ For instance, such an approach was characteristic for the leading Belarusian political party, the Belarusian Socialist Hramada (BSH). Its representatives regarded federative governance as an essential feature for the strength and stability of the state.⁶⁰ The Belarusian People's Party of Socialists, more moderate in comparison to the BSH, also supported the idea of Belarusian territorial and national autonomy within the future federative Russian state, emphasizing the need of having separate Belarusian legislative and executive organs.⁶¹ Only the violent dispersion of the All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917 and the ruthless actions of the Bolshevik authorities signaled the turn towards abandoning exclusively federative concepts of state organization.⁶²

⁵⁸ Lietuvos Mokslų Akademijos Vrublevskių Biblioteka, Rankraščių Skyrius (hereafter LMAVB, RS), f. 21, b. 276, l. 6 r.

⁵⁹ “Na što nam federacyja,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 31, 23 November 1917, 2.

⁶⁰ “Rezalučyja rabočych-bielarusau Narvskaha rajena ū Pietragradzi,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 4, 24 June 1917, 4.

⁶¹ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2213, l. 2, 3.

⁶² See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of this aspect.

Debut of Belarusian Diplomacy

In order to legitimize its rule over East Central Europe in the early stages of the war, the German imperial government oriented its policies towards the exploitation of various national movements among the former Russian subject nationalities. Internationally this approach was promoted by the German-sponsored *Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands* (The League of Non-Russian Nationalities), an organization presenting the German Empire as the defender of the rights of small nations.⁶³ The League focused on spreading anti-Russian propaganda and uniting all of the already extant émigré organizations of non-Russian peoples in Europe. Officially established in the spring of 1916, it was headed by the Baltic German Friedrich von der Ropp, and financed by the German foreign ministry. In June 1916, the League acted as the organizer of the Third Conference of Nationalities in Lausanne. Supposedly politically neutral, the Conference nevertheless aimed to demonstrate that the Entente powers disregarded the aspirations of the stateless nationalities, contrasting this attitude to the positively evaluated German involvement in the matter of securing nationalities' rights.⁶⁴

Belarusian representatives took part in the Lausanne Conference, for the first time bringing the issue of the political and cultural rights of Belarusians to an international level.⁶⁵ Ivan Luckievič and Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski attended the Conference and spoke on behalf of the Belarusian people.⁶⁶ Apparently, the German authorities issued travel permits, anticipating from the Belarusians demonstrations of loyalty, as Ivan Luckievič was even offered financial support for his trip (which he declined).⁶⁷ According

⁶³ Seppo Zetterberg, *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands, 1916 – 1918: ein Beitrag zu Deutschlands antirussischem Propagandakrieg unter den Fremdvölkern Russlands im ersten Weltkrieg* (Helsinki: Finnische Historische Gesellschaft, 1978), 15.

⁶⁴ Zetterberg, *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands*, 106 – 107.

⁶⁵ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 193, ark. 59 – 60.

⁶⁶ “Sobstvennoruchnye pokazaniia A. I. Lutskevicha,” in Anton Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 192.

⁶⁷ Vitan-Dubejkaŭskaja, *Mae ŭspaminy*, 58.

to his brother, Luckievič's Belarusian-Lithuanian "independent stance" at the Conference interfered with German plans to stage the creation of Lithuania on the narrow basis of the already existing Military Administration of Lithuania, which meant that that the future state was to be composed of mostly Lithuanian ethnic territories, inclusive of the Belarusian-populated Vil'nia and Hrodna regions.⁶⁸

To ensure the articulation of their positions and national interests, Belarusian delegates went to Lausanne with an extensive report regarding the so-called "triple union," which advocated the creation of a vast federation from the Black to the Baltic seas, to be comprised of Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine, with the eventual inclusion of Latvia. In their opinion, such a union was justified by reasons both economic (variety of resources) and strategic (geographical location). Obviously, this did not suit German interests in the region, as it could potentially pose a threat to German domination in Eastern Europe. This concern eventually decided the fate of the report. It never reached the Conference, as it was confiscated at the old German-Russian border and forwarded to the Ober Ost authorities, who chose not to return it.⁶⁹ This incident also prompted the German authorities to keep a closer eye on Belarusian activities in Vil'nia. After his return from Lausanne Ivan Luckievič discovered that a German censor, Edmund Susemihl, had moved into the *Homan* editorial office to oversee the newspaper publication process.⁷⁰

The memorandum of the Belarusian delegation presented at the Lausanne Conference represented a summary of the confiscated report, with an emphasis on the federation plans in the region. It was composed from a Belarusian-centered point of view, offering a synopsis of Belarusian history, from the 9th century onwards, followed by the

⁶⁸ "Pamiaci Ivana Luckieviča," 23.

⁶⁹ I. M., "Uvaskrosšy prajekt," *Sialianskaja Praŭda*, Nr. 10, 22 October 1924, 1.

⁷⁰ Vitan-Dubejkaŭskaja, *Mae ŭspaminy*, 61; "Pamiaci Ivana Luckieviča," 23. For more on the personality of Susemihl see Ales' Paškievič and Andrej Čarniakievič, "Stary niamecki ahent" ci "Bac'ka radzimickaha narodu?" *ARCHE* (2005), Nr. 4: 147 – 165.

presentation of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a strong state formation⁷¹ and a common polity of Belarusians and Lithuanians, with an emphasis on the leading roles of Belarusians. It specifically pointed out that old Belarusian served as the only official language in the Grand Duchy, used in governance, administration, and the courts. The following historical overview featured an extensive account of repressive Russian policies in the 19th century, citing as examples the forced conversions of the Uniates into Orthodoxy, bans on Belarusian publishing, and Russian colonization measures. Finally, a discussion of the national revival of Belarusians in the decade between the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the start of the German occupation in 1915, summarized the achievements of the Belarusian movement, with references to the national literature, publishing initiatives, libraries, and cooperative societies. The memorandum expressed the hope that after the war, the cultural and political (listed in that particular order) rights of the Belarusian people would be guaranteed by the international community. It is evident that the Belarusian delegation referred to the period of the Grand Duchy as the “golden age” and as an ideal type of state organization, attempting to claim its legacy.⁷² Yet despite appealing to the international community for the support of Belarusians in the post-war settlements,⁷³ the memorandum focused primarily on historical facts, be those preferred forms of governance or the accounts of national oppression. It failed to point out any practical characteristics of the Belarusian question relevant for the political situation of 1916, which could have benefited its international image and increased the interest of major powers in the region. Moreover, while emphasis on cultural development and national revival appeared logical from the viewpoint of the Belarusian national activists, it rendered their demands less credible in the international arena, as no

⁷¹ “Relacja ab zjezdzi u Losannie,” *Homan*, Nr. 52, 11 August 1916, 2.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2 – 3; *Homan*, Nr. 53, 15 August 1916, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

realistic political plan was elaborated upon.

By contrast, the Lithuanian and Ukrainian national activists possessed more experience by this time, since they had already been actively engaged in émigré national politics. Even though the Ukrainian question had not become prominently featured in the German *Ostpolitik* until later in the war, the authorities in Berlin were kept informed about Ukrainian national ambitions and their readiness to cooperate with the Central Powers to achieve separation from Russia. Ukrainian political immigrants in Germany and Austria-Hungary acted through the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine (Soiuz vyzvolennia Ukraïny, or SVU). Established with the outbreak of the war in 1914, it was known for conducting national agitation work among the Ukrainian POWs.⁷⁴ The Ukrainian theme was even more prominently featured in the German public sphere, where the Ukrainian Press Bureau, run by Dmytro Dontsov,⁷⁵ contributed to raising awareness of the Ukrainian question, which was often used to the benefit of anti-Russian war-time rhetoric. For instance, Paul Rohrbach, a Baltic German by origin, regularly published analytical pieces on Ukraine, with specific attention to its economic potential, presenting it as a tool to achieve the war goals of weakening Russia and even exercising pressure on Poland.⁷⁶

Within the Lithuanian political immigrant circles, Juozas Gabrys represented a good example of a national activist with a developed set of political advocacy skills. In 1911, Gabrys established the Lithuanian Information Bureau in Paris. With the extensive promotion of public knowledge about Lithuania, he became a rather famous figure within

⁷⁴ Frank Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung unter deutscher Besatzungsherrschaft 1918 und 1941/42* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 86.

⁷⁵ Dontsov was one of the chief ideologists of Ukrainian nationalism. He served as the main source of inspiration for the Bandera faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in the 1930s. See Zenon E. Kohut, Bohdan Y. Nebesio, and Myroslav Yurkevich, *Historical Dictionary of Ukraine* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 137; Serhii Kvit, *Dmytro Dontsov: ideolohichniy portret* (L'viv: Halyts'ka vydavnycha spilka, 2013), 26 – 31.

⁷⁶ Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung*, 88 – 89.

European political circles, expanding contacts and cooperating with other oppressed nationalities, who were struggling for their rights (Balkan Slavs, Latvians, Irish, Armenians, etc.). These activities resulted in the creation of the *Union des Nationalités*, which held the First Nationalities Congress in June 1912.⁷⁷ Its press organ was a monthly journal, *Annales des Nationalités*, initially focusing on the Balkans and the Baltics. By 1914, it switched to fomenting active anti-Polish propaganda, criticizing Polonization measures directed against Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians, and also Belarusians.⁷⁸

During the war, Gabrys was approached by the German diplomats, who skillfully used him to conceal the anti-Russian character of the Third Nationalities Conference in Lausanne, as the Entente powers were not entirely sure of his ties to Germany. The German connections of Gabrys are not disputed in the research literature; however, it is also stressed that he was a “Lithuanophile” in the full sense of this word, prioritizing the interests of his nation first and foremost.⁷⁹ Gabrys and his activities illustrate that knowledge of the international situation and the use of *Realpolitik* for disseminating knowledge about national demands were essential skills for national activists, which allowed them to promote their cause in an international setting and gain valuable diplomatic experience. At this point in time, Belarusian national elites possessed neither any patriotic émigré structures nor sufficient resources to act in a similar manner and coherently present their demands. Belarusians gradually started to establish their visibility on the European political scene only after the appearance at the Third Nationalities Conference in Lausanne.

Following the Lausanne Conference in June 1916, another congress of the non-Russian subject nationalities was planned for February 1917 in Stockholm. The

⁷⁷ Demm, *Ostpolitik und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 148.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 169; Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe*, 224.

delegation from Vil'nia was composed of the Lithuanians Šaulys, Smetona, Kairys, and only one Belarusian representative – Anton Luckievič. The news about the cancellation of the congress due to the revolutionary events in Russia reached the entire delegation when it was en route to Sweden in Berlin. With the assistance of Baron von der Ropp, who headed the League of Non-Russian Nationalities, the Lithuanians managed to meet and negotiate with the German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann. The latter seemed sympathetic to their argumentation in support of the Lithuanian national idea. The Lithuanian memorandum stated that the German occupation zone was inhabited solely by Lithuanians, who merely happened to speak different languages, among them Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Polish. At the same time, the very existence of Belarusian Catholics in Ober Ost was denied.⁸⁰

Upon learning the news of the February Revolution, Belarusian representative Anton Luckievič decided to leave for Vil'nia immediately, while the Lithuanian members of the delegation remained in Berlin for a few days. They managed to arrange a meeting with the German chancellor Bethman Hollweg, presenting him a detailed plan for the Lithuanian state, to be based on the ethnic principle. Before his departure, Luckievič attempted to counterbalance Lithuanian actions and compiled a separate memorandum to be forwarded to the German chancellor, where he requested equal rights for Belarusians in the future Lithuanian state. However, it remains unknown whether this document ever reached its addressee.⁸¹ It is highly unlikely that Luckievič's presence in Vil'nia at this time was more important than the missed opportunity to present and argue the case for Belarusian interests to the highest German authorities in person. In this particular instance, Luckievič failed to demonstrate to the German authorities that Belarusian

⁸⁰ Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar*, 62.

⁸¹ "Sobstvennoruchnye pokazaniia A. I. Lutskevicha," in Anton Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 192 – 193.

demands also had to be taken into consideration as another factor in Ober Ost. The lack of political advocacy diminished their value, especially in contrast to the persuasiveness of the Lithuanian delegation, which already had specific and well-developed plans, conveniently coinciding with the German interests in the region.

Lithuanian Turn of the German *Ostpolitik*

Ambitious federation plans, which ideally would have united Ober Ost nationalities, finally fell victim not only to the growing forces of local nationalisms, but also, to a greater degree, to the changes of the German Eastern policy. Until the early spring of 1917, one of the tenets of the German occupation in Ober Ost had been a more or less equal approach to all local nationalities, with an enforced ban on all political activities. German chancellor Bethmann Hollweg still cherished hopes for a separate peace with Russia and preferred to keep these territories ready for trade. As Russia remained unresponsive, annexation of the conquered territories became a more attractive option for Germany by the late fall of 1916.⁸² Moreover, after the February Revolution in Russia, the slogans of national self-determination found their way into the sphere of international politics and diplomacy. The Central Powers soon recognized their potential for the achievement of their war aims of weakening Russia and ruling over its former western territories. According to the Foreign Minister of Austria-Hungary, Ottokar Czernin, the implementation of this approach required the encouragement of the non-Russian nationalities in this region to voice their desires to separate from Russia, while at the same time requesting political and economic protection from the Central Powers.⁸³

The turn from annexationist plans to the instrumentalization of national self-

⁸² See Herfried Münkler, "Spiel mit dem Feuer. Die "Politik der revolutionären Infektion" im Ersten Weltkrieg," *Osteuropa* (Feb. – Apr. 2014), Vol. 64, Issue 2 – 4: 122; Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar*, 62 – 63.

⁸³ Borislav Chernev, "The Brest-Litovsk Moment: Self-Determination Discourse in Eastern Europe before Wilsonianism," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* (September 2011), Vol. 22, Nr. 3: 371 – 372.

determination processes in East Central Europe was also connected to the need to secure the internal stability of the German Empire, which was threatened by a prolonged war on two fronts, growing war-weariness among the German soldiers, and the privations of the population, which caused strikes in a number of German cities. A continuation of the war with Russia only for the sake of keeping conquered territories in the East was not feasible, as it was associated with the aggravation of social and political tensions within German society. Thus, in addition to the shifted emphasis in international politics, fears of internal problems prompted the German leadership to develop the concept of so-called “limited autonomy,”⁸⁴ which became the basis for German policies in Ober Ost from early 1917 onwards. In May 1917, Bethmann Hollweg explained this approach as “imitating independent states which would have internal self-rule but in a military, political, and economic sense would be subordinate to us.”⁸⁵

The option of orchestrating an “independent” Lithuania had been present in German foreign policy since the late stages of 1916, especially when faced with the consequences of the Two Emperors' Manifesto and Act of 5 November 1916, proclaiming the establishment of a Polish state. While German civilian authorities connected the decision of establishing a Polish state to potential post-war benefits within the *Mitteleuropa*⁸⁶ concept, in particular, envisioning economic exploitation and security for the eastern borders of the German Empire, the German military command viewed it primarily in terms of immediate army needs, as a source of recruitment for the weakened German army after its high losses in the battle of Verdun. The German High Command was especially disappointed and adopted a clear anti-Polish stance, as the failure of the

⁸⁴ A. Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg: der Fall Ober Ost 1915 – 1917* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993), 171 – 173.

⁸⁵ Cited in Joachim Tauber, “German Eastern Policy, 1917 – 1918,” *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 13 (January 2008): 72.

⁸⁶ The *Mitteleuropa* concept was developed by Friedrich Naumann in 1915, arguing for the creation of an extensive union under German leadership on the territories located between the Baltic Sea and the Alps. See Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1916), 3 – 4.

strategy to reinforce the Central Powers at the cost of Poland soon became apparent. Ludendorff in particular proposed the increased economic exploitation of Poland and significant territorial cuts.⁸⁷

The process of so-called “self-determination” of Lithuania, covering up its actual dependence on Germany, dates back to the meeting of the German General Headquarters in Bingen on 31 July 1917, which decided to create a so-called Lithuanian Council of Trust (Vertrauensrat), consisting of twenty persons to be appointed by the German authorities. German officials also contemplated the eventual inclusion of some Belarusians into this Council. However, it was not established in its proposed original form, as all prominent Lithuanian national activists declared their lack of confidence in the occupation powers and refused to play any role in the new institution. This step had a certain symbolic meaning, benefiting the political image of the Lithuanian movement in the international arena. Yet it did not change the nature of the alternative solution to the Council of Trust – the Lithuanian Council (Lietuvos Taryba), which was hardly an independent project. Officially established at the Lithuanian Conference in September 1917, Taryba was conceptualized as a representative organ, in contrast to being appointed by the German authorities. However, the supposedly new façade could not change the underlying principle on which Taryba was allowed to exist: its members were only those trusted and approved by the occupation powers.⁸⁸

Moreover, German officials treated Taryba from positions of superiority and power. For instance, statements made by the chief of the Military Administration of Lithuania, Theodor von Heppe, reveal that the authorities did not regard it as an equal

⁸⁷ Piotr Stefan Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795 – 1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974), 354; Piotr Mikietyński, *Niemiecka droga ku Mitteleuropie. Polityka II Rzeszy wobec Królestwa Polskiego (1914 – 1916)* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze “Historia Iagellonica,” 2009), 195 – 196, 244.

⁸⁸ Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 176 – 177, 180 – 181.

partner even by 1918, privately referring to the Taryba members as “coffeehouse politicians and adventurers,” who were not able to contribute anything in the sphere of practical governance. Another German official, responsible for maintaining communication with Taryba, often called it a “circus.”⁸⁹ The Chief of Staff Hoffmann was known for his opinion of the Lithuanian state as a utopian undertaking.⁹⁰

The German dominance of Lithuanian politics is also evident from the events surrounding the proclamation of Lithuanian independence. On 1 December 1917, the Taryba delegation negotiated with the new German chancellor, Georg von Hertling, over the question of establishing a sovereign Lithuanian state. As expected, its official recognition was connected to the condition of maintaining close union-like ties to the German Empire. A corresponding agreement was ratified by Taryba in Vil'nia on 11 December 1917. However, two months later, on 16 February 1918, Taryba unilaterally proclaimed Lithuanian independence without reference to the previous arrangements with the German Empire. This was rejected by the German chancellor, who insisted on the subordinated position of Lithuania and its ties to the German Empire. The December agreement with the Lithuanians was used as another tool against Soviet territorial claims in the peace talks, underway in Brest-Litovsk between December 1917 and March 1918, while in Lithuania itself its publication and dissemination was not allowed.⁹¹ After the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty, where Lithuanians were not even invited to negotiate, they were effectively deprived of their freedom of action and had to accept recognition on German terms on 23 March 1918, thus succumbing to the initial German

⁸⁹ Joachim Tauber, “The View from the Top: German Soldiers and Lithuania in the Two World Wars,” in *Forgotten Pages in Baltic History. Diversity and Inclusion*, eds. Martyn Housden and David J. Smith (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011), 225 – 226.

⁹⁰ Gerd Linde, *Die deutsche Politik in Litauen im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1965), 84.

⁹¹ Eberhard Demm, *Ostpolitik und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2002), 322.

plan of ruling over Lithuania as a semi-vassal state.⁹²

Taryba proceeded to invite the Duke of Württemberg, Wilhelm von Urach, to become the king of Lithuania. In July 1918, it started referring to itself as the State Council, and in August von Urach was officially pronounced Lithuanian king under the name of Mindaugas II. German military authorities opposed these actions of Taryba and placed its president, Antanas Smetona, under pressure to reverse these decisions. Eventually Smetona abandoned the State Council title for Taryba, yet refused to make concessions in the case of von Urach. Tensions continued throughout 1918, and only when the German collapse became evident in October 1918 did the Lithuanian delegation in Berlin manage to receive assurances of Lithuanian independence from the German chancellor Max von Baden. Yet the German defeat also meant that Lithuanians found themselves in a precarious situation by the end of the First World War, having lost the only protection they had against both Poles and the Bolsheviks.⁹³

Parting of Ways: Belarusian vs. Lithuanian Demands in 1917

German interest and involvement in Lithuanian politics along with the regime change in Russia after the February Revolution, raised the hopes of Ober Ost Belarusians of reuniting Belarusian territories on both sides of the front line, and contributed to the growing discord among the Belarusian and Lithuanian activists throughout the summer of 1917. Political statements of the brothers Luckievič became more radical, designating the city of Vil'nia the role of the future capital. The sensitive question over contested Vil'nia prompted the Lithuanians to respond with claims of being the sole heir of the historical legacy of the Grand Duchy. Their memorandum to the German powers, submitted in July 1917, contained claims on ethnically Belarusian territories and presented the Belarusian

⁹² Ibid., 136.

⁹³ Alfred Erich Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 37 – 41.

language as “Polish-Russian jargon.”⁹⁴ One of the members of the Organization Committee for the calling of the Lithuanian Conference, Petras Klimas, reported on relations with the Belarusians on 1 August 1917, pointing out that all contacts were stopped, as soon as the Lithuanians stated their intentions to build a nation-state within the Lithuanian ethnographic borders, inclusive of the disputed Vil'nia province.⁹⁵ Belarusian territories to the east of the front line were considered an undesirable addition, since in that case the Belarusian population would have represented a liability by outnumbering the ethnic Lithuanians in the future state.⁹⁶

This ambition towards claiming the historical legacy of the Grand Duchy already distinguished the Lithuanian activists after the January 1863 Uprising. The obvious result of this trend was the eventual appropriation of Vil'nia, which was to become Vilnius, by the Lithuanians in the 20th century. Their vision of Vil'nia as the future capital dates back to 1905. Despite being in a distinct minority, both in the city and in the surrounding region, the Lithuanian national movement sought an independent state with Vil'nia at its center.⁹⁷ Apart from being an economic and cultural center of the region, the city was a valuable asset for the Lithuanian national movement, since it served as the main link between the historical legacy of the Grand Duchy and modern Lithuania, proving that Lithuanians were a historic people.⁹⁸ With the advantage of being several decades ahead of its Belarusian counterpart, the Lithuanian national movement could develop well-articulated interpretations of the ancient Lithuanian character of the Grand Duchy, while Belarusian activists in this period were still far from the claims of modern nationalism, focusing instead on the multinational and democratic traditions of the Grand

⁹⁴ Šybekas, “Z historyi bielaruskich maraŭ pra Vil'niu,” 173.

⁹⁵ Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar*, 64.

⁹⁶ Ponarski, “Konfederacja Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego,” 58.

⁹⁷ Darius Staliūnas, “Making a National Capital out of a Multiethnic City: Lithuanians and Vilnius in Late Imperial Russia,” *Ab Imperio* (2014), Nr. 1: 158.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

Duchy.⁹⁹

The meeting of the Belarusian Club on 8 September 1917 demonstrated this way of thinking, as it suggested another solution, based on a common state of Belarus and Lithuania, where both nations were promised clearly delineated autonomies with equal national rights. National belonging was to be defined using the criterion of the native language of the population.¹⁰⁰ It is evident, that in this case Lithuanians would not have obtained the Vil'nia region, which was predominantly settled by a Belarusian-speaking population. Moreover, by 1917 Belarusian activists had also started to stress the indivisibility of the Belarusian territories, referring to the broad notion of historical Lithuania and envisioning the eventual inclusion in the future state of all of the ethnically Belarusian territories of Vil'nia, Koūna, Suvalki, Hrodna, Viciebsk, Mahilioū, and Minsk provinces. The emergence of this “national conception,” as opposed to earlier federative projects, is attributed to the Union for the Independence and Indivisibility of Belarus (Suviaz' Niezaležnasci i Niepadzel'nasci Bielarusi), championed by Vaclaū Lastoūski, Vincent Sviatapolk-Mirski, and Kazimir Šafnagel'. It was the first organization that moved away from the idea of a joint Belarusian-Lithuanian state in favour of an independent Belarusian state with its capital in Vil'nia.¹⁰¹

Highly patriotic leaflets issued in the name of the Union for the Independence and Indivisibility of Belarus reveal that this organization was founded on 2 June 1917 in order to counteract the possible loss of Belarusian territories by their inclusion into foreign states, as well as to prevent the merger of temporarily divided western Belarusian territories with Lithuania. Resolutions of the Union called for the unification of all

⁹⁹ Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, 45.

¹⁰⁰ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 140, ark. 87.

¹⁰¹ Šybeka, “Z historyi bielaruskich maraŭ pra Vil'niu,” 174; Dorota Michaluk and Per Anders Rudling, “From the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Belarusian Democratic Republic: the Idea of Belarusian Statehood during the German Occupation of Belarusian Lands, 1915 – 1919,” *Journal Of Belarusian Studies* (2014) Vol. 7, Nr. 2: 12.

ethnically Belarusian territories, in order to create a basis for an independent nation-state, to be organized as a republic, with guarantees of all national rights and needs of Belarusians as well as those of the national minorities. At the same time, the Union also admitted that independent Belarus could secure its existence through federative ties to its closest neighbours. However, possible federation partners remained unnamed and were to be determined later by the democratically elected Belarusian Constituent Assembly.¹⁰²

The vague definition of future federation plans presented by the Union for Independence might have suited the interests of the German powers, since they benefited most from the existence of several political currents within the Belarusian community, each offering different visions of state organization. The continued efforts for creating a joint Belarusian-Lithuanian state, supported by the brothers Luckievič, were not attractive for German policy in the region, as they evoked the image of a former historical entity and could potentially result in Polish ambitions to recreate the Commonwealth. Finally, in April 1917, the German High Command was delegated the authority to determine the eastern borders of the formal pro-German states that were planned in East-Central Europe, and needed more options to be able either to foster internal discord within the national movements in Ober Ost, or to play them more effectively against each other. In this regard, the existence of various political interest groups was perceived as instrumental to German interest in the region.¹⁰³

Polish historian Dorota Michaluk suggests that Lastoŭski had already founded the Union for Independence and Indivisibility in April 1916, as apparently he had sent out correspondence in its name, but at that time the independence-oriented program was not yet fully supported by other Belarusian organizations in Ober Ost, which were dominated

¹⁰² LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 871, l. 1

¹⁰³ Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar*, 66.

by the brothers Luckievič and their federalist concepts.¹⁰⁴ However, it appears more likely that Lastoŭski's own leadership ambitions within the Belarusian movement and his competition with the Luckievičs prompted the emergence of his more radical program, which eventually took shape in the summer of 1917, facilitated by the growing rift between Belarusians and Lithuanians. According to Anton Luckievič, the German authorities might have used Lastoŭski to divide Belarusian national forces from within.¹⁰⁵ Neither a socialist nor a revolutionary, Lastoŭski made attempts to advance his political career by creating his own political movement in the form of a clerical-conservative party, as a counterweight to the socialist-oriented initiatives led by the brothers Luckievič.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Lastoŭski's initiative within the Union for Independence and Indivisibility for the first time brought forth the idea of the unification of all ethnically Belarusian lands in an independent nation-state.

Belarusian Conference and Creation of the Great Belarusian Rada in Vil'nia

The Lithuanian Taryba excluded the possibility of Belarusian membership on an equal basis and was ready to negotiate Belarusian participation only as a representation of a national minority. The cooptation of the minority members was regulated, and was fixed not to exceed one quarter of the entire membership of Taryba, in order to secure a Lithuanian majority in the decision-making. Among all Ober Ost nationalities, Belarusians remained the only available option for national minority representation in Taryba, as by 1917 Poles completely ignored Lithuanian affairs, while the Jewish population increasingly connected their future with Russia. In October 1917, the first

¹⁰⁴ Dorota Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa, 1918 – 1920: u podstaw białoruskiej państwowości* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2010), 147.

¹⁰⁵ See for instance Document Nr. 0283 "List Antona Luckieviča (Vil'nia) Jazepu Varonku i Ramanu Skirmuntu (Miensk) za 24.04.1918," in Siarhej Šupa, ed., *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki* (Vil'nia: Bielaruski instytut navuki i mastactva, 1998), 123.

¹⁰⁶ Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 164; "Pamiaci Ivana Luckieviča," 24; Vitan-Dubejkaŭskaja, *Mae ŭspaminy*, 94 – 95.

contacts of Lithuanians and Belarusians were limited to meetings with the group around Lastoŭski, since Lithuanians hoped that it would be more likely to cooperate than the Luckievičs-led majority of the Belarusian National Committee. However, these negotiations were soon stalled due to Lastoŭski's intentions to include ethnic Belarusian areas in the east in the future state, as he had articulated in the Union for the Independence and Indivisibility of Belarus.¹⁰⁷

The Belarusian community in Vil'nia interpreted the plans for their inclusion as minority representatives in Taryba as an outright offence, issuing a protest resolution at a rally held in the Vil'nia Workers' Club by a number of socialist and democratic Belarusian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Jewish organizations on 16 September 1917.¹⁰⁸ Belarusian delegates who gave speeches at the rally also condemned Lithuanian cooperation with the Germans.¹⁰⁹ Following the official creation of Taryba on 23 September, a general meeting was held in the Belarusian Club on 30 September 1917. This initiative was not welcomed by the German authorities. Despite issuing a permit for the meeting, the dissemination of information on its decisions was suppressed, as the German political censor did not allow the resolutions prepared for publication in *Homan* to reach the public.¹¹⁰

The meeting was unanimous that the appointment of Taryba was violating the principles of popular representation in Ober Ost, infringing on the historical rights of the Belarusian people to their lands. All those present at the meeting (according to *Homan*, about 200 people) demanded guarantees for Belarusian interests on the following basis: all Belarusian lands under German occupation had to be united in a single administrative

¹⁰⁷ Tomasz Błaszczak, "Baltarusiai Lietuvos Valstybės Taryboje 1918 – 1920 metais," *Parlamento Studijos* (January 2013), Nr. 15: 100 – 101.

¹⁰⁸ "U Wilni i wakolicach," *Homan*, Nr. 75, 18 September 1917, 3.

¹⁰⁹ "Pamiaci Ivana Luckieviča," 24; Vitan-Dubejkaŭskaja, *Mae ŭspaminy*, 94 – 95.

¹¹⁰ Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas (hereafter LCVA), f. 368, ap. 1, b. 14, l. 5.

unit. In practice, this translated into a request to merge the existing military administrations of Białystok-Hrodna and Lithuania. Secondly, the meeting demanded the proportional representation of Belarusians in the Regional Council for all occupied Belarusian-Lithuanian lands, as opposed to the proposition of Taryba to include merely a representation for the Belarusian minority. Finally, the meeting stated that Belarusian participation in Taryba was impossible, due to the latter's unfair organization, thereby declaring their intention to start preparations for the Belarusian Conference in Vil'nia. It was to gather Belarusians from the occupied lands in order to ensure their effective and fair participation in the provisional organization of governance.¹¹¹

Implementing these decisions and attempting to create a counterweight to Taryba, the Organization Committee for the Convocation of the Belarusian Conference had already started its daily meetings by November 1917. It was chaired by Anton Luckievič, with Vincent Sviatapolk-Mirski and Kazimir Šafnagel' serving as his deputies, while Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski was assigned secretary duties. The presidium of the Organization Committee consisted of Jazep Lickievič, Jazep Salavej, Daminik Siamaška, Janka Stankievič, and Jazep Turkievič, as well as representatives of the Belarusian Catholic clergy, Jan Siemaškievič and Uladzislaŭ Taločka, and Orthodox archpriest Michail Golenkievič. With the principal aim of unifying “all circles and political directions of the Belarusian community for the sake of the all-national cause of calling the All-Belarusian National Conference” to represent the Belarusian lands of the occupied Ober Ost, the presidium established a coalition editing body for *Homan*.¹¹² As is evident from its composition, the preparation of the Belarusian Conference overshadowed the competition between the socialist and more moderate right-leaning currents within Belarusian politics, represented by the brothers Luckievič and Lastoŭski, respectively. In essence, the

¹¹¹ LCVA, f. 368, ap. 1, b. 14, l. 5.

¹¹² “Od redakcyi,” *Homan*, Nr. 91, 13 November 1917, 1.

positions of Lastoŭski's Union and the Luckievičs-led faction were converging by the fall of 1917, as the latter had also started emphasizing the need to include of eastern Belarusian lands into the future federative state with the Lithuanians.

To sum up, the political program of the Organization Committee focused on the independence of all Belarusian-Lithuanian lands under the German occupation, with provisions for the eventual inclusion of eastern Belarusian territories. The future state was envisioned as a federation of two fully autonomous units with borders, delineated according to the ethnographic principle, guaranteeing equal rights for all nationalities and confessions. The role of the Belarusian language received special attention, as it was noted that it had to be used in governmental and public institutions, schools, and in Orthodox and Catholic churches along with Lithuanian.¹¹³

In late January 1918, the German authorities finally granted permission for the convocation of the Belarusian Conference, most likely due to the need to keep in check the increased independent activities of Taryba, in addition to the unclear situation caused by a break in the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations.¹¹⁴ The Belarusian Conference gathered between 25 and 28 January 1918 in Vil'nia, declaring its intention to solve “important political and cultural-national tasks.”¹¹⁵ It was conceived as a common platform of cooperation for all Belarusian activists from the German zone of occupation who had to coordinate their positions on the political situation. The second goal of the Belarusian conference was the establishment of Belarusian national representation, which had to prepare for the organization of the Constituent *Sejm* in the Belarusian and Lithuanian lands, which was authorized to decide on the future form of state organization. Meanwhile, the national representation had to take over the leading role in Belarusian

¹¹³ LCVA, f. 368, ap. 1, b. 16, l. 4.

¹¹⁴ Gimžauskas, *Bielaruski faktar*, 69.

¹¹⁵ “Bielaruskaja Konferencija,” *Homan*, Nr. 8, 25 January 1918, 1.

politics in Ober Ost, protecting and guaranteeing the interests of the Belarusian people in the process of potential state building in the region.¹¹⁶ In accordance with these tasks, the Belarusian Conference elected the Great Belarusian Rada in Vil'nia¹¹⁷ to act as the highest national authority of Belarusians in the occupied lands. The Presidium of the Rada consisted of Anton Luckievič, Ivan Luckievič, Kazimir Šafnagel', Uladzislaŭ Taločka, and Daminik Siamaška.¹¹⁸ Although designed to include twenty Belarusian representatives from all areas of Ober Ost, the initial membership of the Rada was limited to fourteen persons, due to the absence of the representatives from the Białystok and Hrodna regions. They were not able to reach Vil'nia to attend the Conference, as the German authorities refused to issue travel permits for them.¹¹⁹

The resolutions of the Belarusian Conference emphasized the unity and common economy of the Belarusian-Lithuanian lands, regardless of the front line dividing them. Successful post-war development was thus connected to a common statehood. With reference to self-determination principles, Conference delegates demanded an independent sovereign democratic state, consisting of two principal autonomous territories, Belarusian and Lithuanian, maintaining close links with Kurland. The borders between the Belarusian and Lithuanian autonomies were to be drawn according to the native language of the population. The Belarusian language was to be guaranteed equal official rights in the government, judicial system, schools, and churches. The realization of these demands was assigned to the planned future Constituent *Sejm* of Belarus and Lithuania, whose members had to be elected proportionately to represent the respective nations in a fair manner. The Belarusian Conference stressed the indivisible

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Not to be confused with the Great Belarusian Rada in Minsk, which was created in October 1917, acting as one of the chief organizers of the All-Belarusian Congress. See Chapter 4.

¹¹⁸ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 140, ark. 31.

¹¹⁹ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 140, ark. 124 adv.

territorial rights of the Belarusian people on both sides of the front, demanding the inclusion of eastern areas in the planned revived state of the Grand Duchy. Delegates of the Conference specifically noted that they did not recognize the legitimacy of Taryba as a representative of the Ober Ost people.¹²⁰

With regard to the first two resolutions, the Conference considered it necessary to place a request with the authorities for permission to resume contact with the eastern Belarusian territories. It also protested against the intentions of Poles to incorporate Belarusian lands, including the Białystok region, and condemned plans which instrumentalized Belarusian territories in political games. Another protest was directed against the dissolution of the All-Belarusian Congress in Minsk by the Western front Bolsheviks on 18 (N. S. 31) December 1917, interpreted as a serious violation of the principle of self-determination. Finally, the Conference expressed a wish for Belarus to be freed from any kind of “guardians,” demanding the removal from its territories of all foreign Russian and Polish armies and announcing the plan to create a Belarusian army or militia instead.¹²¹

These resolutions indicate that even by early 1918, *krajovasc'*-inspired approaches still prevailed in Belarusian political thinking, yet the idea of the unification of all Belarusian territories and the establishment of autonomy based on the ethnic principle implied that the future state would have a strong Belarusian component, due to the numerical predominance of an ethnically Belarusian population. Thus, national activists signalled their potential leadership ambitions, which were unacceptable for the Lithuanians, who could easily proceed with the creation of their own nation-state with guaranteed German support.

On 18 February 1918, when the German armies started the offensive on the

¹²⁰ LCVA, f. 368, ap. 1, b. 14, l. 15 – 16.

¹²¹ LCVA, f. 368, ap. 1, b. 14, l. 16.

Eastern front, advancing further east, the Belarusian Rada in Vil'nia issued a call to the German Empire, as well as to all other states that supported the right to self-determination, reminding them of the decisions of the Belarusian Conference in Vil'nia and the resolutions of the All-Belarusian Congress in Minsk. It requested assistance in the reconstruction of the independence of the common Lithuanian-Belarusian state (Grand Duchy) without taking into consideration the division of the Belarusian territories by the front line, arguing for the indivisibility of Belarusian lands.¹²² Similar concerns regarding the need to prevent further territorial divisions and to secure Belarusian autonomy with the inclusion of the occupied territories settled by the Belarusian population also dominated the agenda of the Executive Committee formed by the Council of the All-Belarusian Congress. It operated unofficially in Minsk after the dispersal of the All-Belarusian Congress on 18 (N. S. 31) December 1917 and made an attempt to argue this issue at the peace talks in Brest-Litovsk.¹²³

Peace Negotiations in Brest-Litovsk

In February 1918, Germany and Soviet Russia were involved in peace negotiations in Brest-Litovsk, which started after the signing of the ceasefire on 15 (O. S. 2) December 1917. The new Soviet power entered the negotiations with a program based on its earlier decree on peace, proclaimed on 8 November (O. S. 26 October) 1917. The emphasis on the peace program received full support from Lenin, as it was vital for the new Soviet government in its efforts to preserve power. With the signing of the armistice it acquired stable support among the soldiers, and was no longer facing the threat of popular opposition, as had been the case with the Russian Provisional Government, which

¹²² BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 140, ark. 37 adv.

¹²³ See Document Nr. 0072 "Deklaracyja bielaruskaj delehacyi na mirnych pieramovach u Bierasci za 19.01.1918," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 40 – 42.

had refused to take Russia out of the war.¹²⁴ The Bolshevik peace program resolutely renounced forced annexations and indemnities, demanding the immediate liberation of the occupied lands and self-determination rights for nationalities.¹²⁵ The German diplomats interpreted this program in a different light, seeing no contradiction in the detachment of Poland, Lithuania, Kurland, parts of Estonia and Livonia from Russia, since it was presented not as an annexation, but as a free expression of the popular will.¹²⁶ These differing views on the principle of national self-determination concerned the future borders between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers, and thus became the major issue of contention between the peace talk parties.

For instance, during the discussion of the territorial questions on 12 January 1918, both sides expressed their positions on the contested former Russian borderland regions. As the Soviet delegation argued, the new Russian state was not attempting to hold former territories of the Russian Empire by force, dedicating itself to “safeguarding real freedom of self-determination.”¹²⁷ Yet it refused to recognize the separation of Poland, Lithuania, and Kurland, as apparently none of them possessed genuine “democratically elected organs” to express the popular will.¹²⁸ Responding to that, General Hoffmann pointed out in a blunt manner that constant Soviet appeals to national self-determination rights did not conform in any way to the recent Bolshevik actions, citing as examples the violent dispersal of the All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917 and the Bolshevik ultimatum to Ukraine, which led to an armed conflict. Criticizing the inconsistencies of the Soviet approach, Hoffmann noted the seemingly more democratic German policies, which were apparently taking into account popular will on the occupied

¹²⁴ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 259 – 260.

¹²⁵ Winfried Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918* (Wien: Oldenbourg, 1966), 17.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17; *Proceedings of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference. The Peace Negotiations Between Russia and the Central Powers, 21 November, 1917 – 3 March, 1918* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1918), 44 – 45.

¹²⁷ *Proceedings of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference*, 81.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

territories by calling into life local representative assemblies and supporting their wishes to part from Russia.¹²⁹

In addition to these misunderstandings, the proclaimed Soviet commitment to peace was accompanied by the hesitant stance of the Soviet delegation. Its head, Lev Trotsky, mostly known for his “neither war, nor peace” approach, was sent to Brest-Litovsk with the task of stalling the negotiation process, as the Bolshevik authorities awaited the “inevitable” outbreak of the proletarian revolution in Europe.¹³⁰ By contrast, the German Empire was anxious to secure a prompt solution on the Eastern front. Signing a separate peace with Soviet Russia allowed for the concentration of more forces on the Western front to start a new victorious offensive there. In this regard, the interests of the German military command played a significant role in influencing diplomacy throughout the negotiations. Ludendorff in particular was confident of German progress in the war and wanted to complete the negotiations in Brest-Litovsk as soon as possible.¹³¹

Equally important for the imperial government at this stage of the war was the need to secure material support of the German war effort through the economic exploitation of Eastern Europe, which explains the growing role of the Ukrainian factor in German Eastern policy by the latter stages of 1917. By January 1918, both Ludendorff and the German diplomats had already played with the idea of “creating a Ukrainian state,” just they had done in the Baltics. This sudden interest in Ukraine by the end of the war was determined mostly by the practical considerations of possible economic benefits, including the extraction of resources, foodstuffs, grain, and cattle.¹³² On the eve of the First World War, the Ukrainian share of the world production of grain was estimated to be

¹²⁹ Ibid., 82.

¹³⁰ Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 21.

¹³¹ Ibid., 18.

¹³² Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung*, 80.

nearly 10% (250 million tons), accounting for 80% of the entire Russian grain exports.¹³³ Further, German involvement in Ukraine was perceived as a reinforcement of the anti-Polish policy. Finally, the German emperor, Wilhelm II, was convinced that Ukraine was the main supplier of food to Russia. Thus, control over Ukraine could turn it into a tool exerting pressure against Russia, and serve as another guarantee of security for the German Empire, especially in light of the unpredictable situation after the Bolshevik takeover of power.¹³⁴

Within Ukraine, the Central Rada acted as a representation of the political aspirations of Ukrainians after the February Revolution. Its demands were similar to those of the Belarusians throughout 1917, as they focused around achieving autonomy within the future democratic Russian federation. However, Ukrainian political parties had a stronger support base among the population, securing 80% of votes in the elections to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly in November 1917, while the Bolsheviks managed to get only 10%. By that time, the Central Rada had already proclaimed Ukrainian autonomy in the First Universal on 23 (O. S. 10) June 1917. The Ukrainian National Republic, with acknowledgement of its federative ties to the Russian republic, was declared in the Third Universal on 20 (O. S. 7) November 1917.¹³⁵ The Soviet government did not hesitate to resort to violence in order to regain control over Ukraine, and demanded freedom of action for the Ukrainian Bolsheviks in an ultimatum issued on 17 (4) December 1917, threatening military actions if Ukraine would not give up its demands for autonomy. After the Central Rada rejected the ultimatum, the Ukrainian Bolsheviks proclaimed the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic on 25 (O. S. 12)

¹³³ Stephan M. Horak, *The First Treaty of World War I: Ukraine's Treaty with the Central Powers of February 9, 1918* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1988), 4.

¹³⁴ Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung*, 80 – 81.

¹³⁵ Horak, *The First Treaty of World War I*, 19, 30; III Universal Ukrain'skoi Tsentral'noi Radi, <http://gska2.rada.gov.ua/site/const/universal-3.html> (Accessed 26 October 2015).

December in Kharkiv, while the Red Guard units under the command of Antonov-Ovseenko were progressing in the direction of Kyiv.¹³⁶ One day before the ultimatum, the Central Rada had already made its first contact with the representatives of the German government in Brest, who recognized the potential effect of using Ukraine as a “Trojan horse.”¹³⁷

The delegation representing the Ukrainian Central Rada faced some obstacles on its way to Brest, as the Bolsheviks at first refused it the right to cross the front line under the false excuse that the delegation would not arrive in Brest in time. The Bolsheviks did not want to share their role of representing the whole of Russia’s nationalities, despite formally granting the latter the rights to self-determination.¹³⁸ As already pointed out in the example of the All-Belarusian Congress,¹³⁹ the Bolsheviks preferred a “controlled and directed” form of national self-determination. The actions of the Ukrainian Central Rada, similar to those of the All-Belarusian Congress with its critical positions towards the usurpation of power by the Bolsheviks, did not fit into this specific interpretation.

Initially, the Ukrainian delegation joined the Brest-Litovsk peace talks with consultative rights only. However, by 4 January 1918 the Germans had already officially started separate negotiations with the Ukrainians. At this time, the Central Rada merely aimed to receive a confirmation of state sovereignty from the new Russian government, as declared in the Third Universal on 20 November 1917. The struggle for recognition of the Ukrainian state was still accompanied by the hopes of possible participation in the construction of the future federal democratic Russian state. Being aware of the precarious economic situation of the Central Powers, the Ukrainians even boldly threatened to leave

¹³⁶ Paul Robert Magosci, *A History of Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 511 – 512.

¹³⁷ Horak, *The First Treaty of World War I*, 31; Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung*, 78, 83.

¹³⁸ Horak, *The First Treaty of World War I*, 30.

¹³⁹ See Chapter 4.

the negotiations if the Ukrainian state was not recognized. On 12 January 1918, Germany and Austria-Hungary made the first step towards a separate peace with Ukraine by recognizing the Central Rada as the legitimate Ukrainian government.¹⁴⁰ In light of the protracted Soviet conduct of the negotiations, separate talks between the Central Powers and the Ukrainian delegation benefited both parties. The former gained access to much-needed resources, while the Ukrainian Central Rada could count on support in its struggle against the Bolsheviks.¹⁴¹

In contrast to Ukraine, the issue of Belarusian autonomy was not discussed in Brest. The lack of German interest can be explained by the fact that Belarus did not possess such vast and strategic resources as did Ukraine, while the Soviet delegation was even less likely to tolerate another group which could interfere in its manipulative games with the principle of national self-determination, and result in further territorial losses. Nevertheless, the Executive Committee of the Council of the All-Belarusian Congress managed to send an unofficial delegation to the peace talks. It consisted of Symon Rak-Michajloŭski, Aliaksandr Cvikievič, and Ivan Sierada. Belarusian delegates were detained by the Bolsheviks, and could reach Brest only through Ukraine. Trotsky did not agree to Belarusian participation in the negotiations, as Soviet Russia did not recognize Belarusian autonomy. The Belarusian representatives were able to take part in the negotiations only as observers from the Ukrainian side, and thus failed to articulate their interests in an effective manner.¹⁴² According to the declaration that the Belarusian delegation brought to

¹⁴⁰ Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung*, 79 – 81.

¹⁴¹ Aleksandr Shubin, “The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk: Russia and Ukraine,” *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 13 (January 2008): 91.

¹⁴² Rak-Michajloŭski and Cvikievič managed to establish some contacts to the German delegation in Brest, as they submitted a short report, covering the history of the Belarusian movement and the state of Belarusian politics on 25 February 1918. However, the timing of this report suggests that the Germans might have been interested in this information only for the practical reason of establishing an efficient occupation regime, as on this day they entered Minsk. See Document Nr. 0090 “Karoŭkaja daviwedka ab historyi bielaruskaha ruchu i ab stanoviščy bielaruskaha pytannia da 1 – 13 liutaha 1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 49.

Brest, the delegates' chief aim was to prevent further divisions of Belarusian territories. Yet similarly to the Ukrainians, the Belarusian representatives arrived in Brest with their beliefs intact in the possibility of constructing a democratic federation with the Russian republic.¹⁴³

On 18 January 1918, an impasse was reached in the German-Soviet talks, when General Max von Hoffmann presented the Soviet delegation with a map displaying the German vision of the future borders of Eastern Europe, excluding Poland, Lithuania, and Kurland from the Russian-controlled sphere. Trotsky protested against the detachment of the former Russian imperial possessions of Poland and Lithuania, as well as lands settled by Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Estonians. He requested a ten-day long break in the work of the political commission and left for Petrograd for consultations.¹⁴⁴ The Bolshevik Central Committee was not unified in its views, as Lenin supported peace in order to keep the socialist state intact at all costs, even sacrificing some of the rhetoric of self-determination; the circle around Bukharin supported the concept of the “revolutionary war” against Germany in the hope that the German army would be infected with revolutionary slogans, while the rest agreed with Trotsky’s strategy of “neither war, nor peace.” The meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee eventually re-confirmed Trotsky's approach as the negotiation strategy.¹⁴⁵

After the talks in Brest-Litovsk were resumed on 29 January, it was too late for the Soviet state to interfere in the progress of the German-Ukrainian talks. As Russia failed to guarantee Ukrainian autonomy, the Central Rada finally gave up its long-lived hopes for a Ukrainian future within the Russian democratic federation, and reoriented

¹⁴³ Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa*, 218 – 219; F. Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie. Ocherk istorii natsionalnogo i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia belorussov* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1921), 40.

¹⁴⁴ *Proceedings of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference*, 115 – 116.

¹⁴⁵ Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 21 – 22.

itself towards the new ally which it found in Germany. After the proclamation of independence on 22 January 1918 in the Fourth Universal, the Ukrainian government received full authority to conduct its international relations, which led to the signing of a separate peace with the Central Powers on 9 February 1918. In light of the Bolshevik offensive on Kyiv, the Germans used Ukrainian vulnerability to dictate their own peace terms.¹⁴⁶

On 10 February 1918, Trotsky delivered a passionate speech against imperialism, announcing that Russia had ordered the demobilization of its troops. He refused to accept the peace conditions of the Central Powers, stating that they represented a “permanent threat” for the Russian people and that they violated the interests of the peoples of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Kurland, and Estonia. Trotsky declared Russian withdrawal from the war, yet refused to sign the peace treaty, as in his opinion, it was annexationist in character.¹⁴⁷ German Foreign Minister von Kühlmann noted that a one-sided termination of the state of war and demobilization of the Russian army did not automatically lead to peace. Since the only purpose of the December armistice was the signing of peace and this goal was not achieved, Germany intended to resume military action. In regard to Trotsky’s statement on the termination of war, Kühlmann requested to confirm the borders of Russia. In response, Trotsky refused to continue negotiations and announced his departure to Petrograd.¹⁴⁸

Germany now had the full freedom to decide whether to interpret the new circumstances as a continuation of war or as peace. Kühlmann was inclined towards keeping the state of war, yet at the same time he also did not want to terminate the armistice. The German Foreign Minister realized that the unclear situation in the East

¹⁴⁶ Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung*, 83 – 84.

¹⁴⁷ *Proceedings of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference*, 172.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 170 – 171.

benefited Germany most, and feared possible serious internal repercussions in war-weary German society should military action be resumed. His tactic was thus oriented towards “peace of mutual exhaustion.”¹⁴⁹ The German Supreme Command, on the contrary, could not accept an unfinished state of affairs on the Eastern front. Ludendorff and Hindenburg supported taking immediate and resolute military actions, fearing that the Bolsheviks would soon gain control over Ukraine and deprive Germany of much-needed grain. Eventually, tensions between the military circles and the Foreign Ministry diplomats resulted in an inconsistent compromise as a solution, where the German Empire opted for the military advance, yet gave up the idea of an offensive against Petrograd, taking into account some of Kühlmann's reservations. As the peace treaty was not signed, Germany commenced military action against Soviet Russia on 18 February 1918, easily advancing further east.¹⁵⁰

On the next day, the Bolshevik government declared its readiness to sign the peace treaty on German terms in an urgent wireless message. As the German military command refused to recognize it as an official document, a few more days passed before the talks could be resumed on 28 February after the receipt of the hard copy of the Russian request.¹⁵¹ The negotiations ended with the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty on 3 March 1918, entirely on German-dictated terms. A description of the treaty as “Carthaginian” fully reflects the German dominance in the region by March 1918.¹⁵²

The issue of national self-determination dominated the Brest-Litovsk peace talks, but in a rather unconventional way, as the representatives of the Central Powers and Soviet Russia constantly referred to it, yet hardly took into account the actual concerns of

¹⁴⁹ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Brest-Litovsk. The Forgotten Peace. March 1918* (New York: Norton Library, 1971), 103.

¹⁵⁰ Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik*, 24 – 26.

¹⁵¹ *Proceedings of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference*, 175 – 176.

¹⁵² Chernev, “The Brest-Litovsk Moment,” 379.

the nations in the contested regions, withholding from them the right to negotiate peace solutions. The peace negotiations between Soviet Russia and imperial Germany represented a mockery of the idealistic Fourteen Points peace program¹⁵³ of the American President Woodrow Wilson, made public on 8 January 1918, right before the second phase of the negotiations in Brest commenced.

The participation of the Ukrainian delegation, which was able to secure a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers, was the only exception. This special treatment of Ukraine is primarily explained by the pragmatic German interest in its vast economic resources, increasingly important for the war-exhausted Central Powers. Another reason was the opportunity to use Ukraine as political leverage against both Poland and Soviet Russia, including it as a link in the belt of pro-German semi-states, designed to increase the security of the German Empire.¹⁵⁴ By contrast, the Belarusian issue remained marginal, as it could not offer the Central Powers anything useful in terms of strategic resources. Eventually, the failed Soviet strategy to stall the Brest-Litovsk negotiations along with the ongoing demobilization of the Russian army made it easy for the German army to advance east and occupy almost all of the Belarusian territories by 3 March 1918. For a while, it seemed that the German Empire had become the undisputed ruler of East-Central Europe.

Conclusion

On the eve of the First World War, a new form of a regional identity emerged in the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Loosely based on the patriotic

¹⁵³ Wilson's Fourteen Points represent a good example of political idealism. He offered a general vision of peaceful cooperation in the postwar world, emphasizing the democratic rights of various peoples. With regard to the former western borderlands of Russia, he only stressed the need of the evacuation of Russian territories and opportunities for the "independent determination of her own political development." See Christian Rust "Self-Determination at the Beginning of 1918 and the German Reaction," *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 13 (January 2008): 49.

¹⁵⁴ Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung*, 80.

feelings and loyalty towards the old multinational polity of the Grand Duchy, *krajovasc'* represented a broad and inclusive concept. Due to its tolerant and democratic character, it became a popular trend in the pre-war years. *Krajovasc'* inspired the emergence of federative state-building solutions within the framework of projects designed to revive the Grand Duchy as an equal union of all nations in the lands of historic Lithuania, including Lithuanian Poles, Belarusians, Lithuanians, and eventually Jews and other minorities. Yet its fortunes changed drastically throughout the course of the war, due to the growing intensity of Polish and Lithuanian “national egoisms” in the region.

The Belarusian national movement stood aside in this respect. Remaining the last faithful supporter of *krajovasc'*-based political thinking, it actively participated in the various attempts at political cooperation among the Ober Ost nationalities. Yet while Belarusian activists sought support amongst their neighbours, the Grand Duchy Confederation projects were in rapid decline by 1916. The failure of all these initiatives demonstrated the limits of *krajovasc'*, as it entered an uneven competition with the radicalizing and growing national sentiments in the region. In particular, the rise of Polish national aspirations during the First World War soon prompted the Lithuanian Poles to abandon *krajovasc'* in favour of an independent Poland. Consequently, Polish-centered visions of federalism replaced *krajovasc'*-based approaches to the state-building in the region. The essential difference of the Polish version entailed the primacy of the independent Polish state to lead all union-building initiatives on the lands of the former Grand Duchy, departing from the notion of the equal roles of nationalities. This approach dominated Polish policies in the region up until 1921. Lithuanians were the next in line to develop their own form of “national egoism.” They abandoned the projects of a joint state with Belarusians as soon as the German authorities indicated their plans to use the Military Administration of Lithuania as a basis for the creation of a loyal German-

dependent Lithuanian semi-state. This prospect caused the crisis of all joint Belarusian-Lithuanian political initiatives.

Belarusians continued to emphasize federative solutions, yet their demands gradually radicalized too, especially when they started claiming rights to the city of Vil'nia as their future capital, and adopted the idea of the indivisibility of all Belarusian territories, thus advocating their eventual reunification with eastern Belarus. This approach contradicted the vision of the Lithuanians, who rejected the broad notion of a Belarusian-Lithuanian state, instead aspiring to create their own nation-state. It was to encompass only the ethnically Lithuanian territories, but with the important addition of the Vil'nia and Hrodna regions, where the Belarusian population comprised a majority. In this way, the Lithuanians wanted to secure the core regions of the former Grand Duchy and make sure that the ethnic Lithuanians would not be outnumbered by the Belarusians in the future state. Finally, the Lithuanian national movement also chose to claim to be the sole heir of the old multinational Grand Duchy, which contradicted the convictions of Belarusian national activists about the centrality of the Belarusian component in the latter's legacy.

Based on the progressive principles of civic nationalism, *krajovasc'* essentially placed Belarusian nation-building in the background during the initial period of the German occupation. The attractiveness of federative solutions in the Belarusian case is explained by two main factors. Firstly, it could buy time to complete the phase of active national agitation and the promotion of the Belarusian national idea among wider circles of the population. Secondly, sustainable post-war development and security were tied to economic potential and resources that were easier to attain through a federative state. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Belarusian elites, both in Ober Ost and in eastern Belarus, preferred this type of state organization. Only in the final year of the war did

Belarusian political thought in Ober Ost gradually evolve from federalist concepts towards accepting the need of their own statehood formed on an ethnic basis and uniting all of the Belarusian territories divided by the front line.

Eventually, external political factors delivered a decisive blow to all federation projects in the region. As the possibility of the conclusion of a separate peace with Russia waned by early 1917, German foreign policy abandoned its *divide et impera* nationalities policy in Ober Ost, opting to expand its spheres of influence. The annexation drive was disguised by the popular principle of national self-determination, which was misused by the Germans with the primary aims of weakening Russia and counteracting Polish ambitions in the region. Resource deficits motivated the German authorities towards further experiments with nationalism, causing a gradual shift of priorities in East-Central Europe. By late 1917, the German imperial government started expressing interest in Ukraine, which had more to offer in terms of strategic resources and pressures on Russia than the Belarusian region. The signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty on 3 March 1918 resulted in the expansion of German dominance in Eastern Europe. Almost all Belarusian territories were now under German occupation, yet the new power refrained from guaranteeing their territorial indivisibility in the future.

Chapter 7

Belarusian Statehood in the Making: BNR and Soviet Belarus

Under what conditions did the idea of a separate Belarusian nation-state emerge, what meaning did it have for the Belarusian national movement, and how was it implemented? The answer to these questions lies in the crucial period in the history of Belarusian statehood in 1918. Firstly, it is associated with the independence proclamation of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR, *Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika*) on 25 March 1918, in Minsk. Secondly, the rival Soviet project, emerging in 1919, is also traced back to early 1918. At that time, the Soviet state reoriented itself towards the appropriation of the Belarusian national movement and, combined with the efforts of the left-wing Belarusian socialists in Russia, contributed to the development of a parallel notion of Belarusian statehood, leading to the proclamation of the Socialist Soviet Republic of Belarus (SSRB) on 1 January 1919, in Smolensk.

This chapter will trace the dual origins of Belarusian statehood by providing a comparative perspective of the early state- and nation-building efforts of the Belarusian national activists, both from national and Bolshevik-friendly camps through the course of 1918. The latter were represented by the Belarusian organizations in Petrograd and Moscow that grouped around the Belarusian National Commissariat (*Bielnackam*), under the auspices of the central Bolshevik authorities in early 1918. Gradually, it started to position itself as an alternative force to the Minsk-based national elites, by expanding its own political activities, publishing a newspaper, and engaging in a humanitarian mission with the numerous Belarusian refugees, who were still residing in Russia. Politically, the

Belarusian socialists in Russia accepted cooptation into the Bolshevik state and party structures, hoping to achieve a Soviet-based Belarusian statehood.

Their political adversaries in Minsk were the former delegates of the All-Belarusian Congress, which had been violently dissolved by the Bolshevik authorities of the Western front. They reorganized into the Congress Council, which attempted to capitalize on the lack of coordinated actions between the Minsk Bolsheviks and the central authorities in Petrograd. However, the break in the Brest-Litovsk peace talks and the advance of the German armies to the east in February 1918 changed the balance of forces in the region. Subsequent German occupation of the Belarusian territories ended the first brief period of Soviet power in Belarus, presenting new opportunities for the national movement. Following the inclusion of minorities as well as municipal and zemstvo members, the Congress Council transformed into the Rada (Council) of the BNR in February 1918. Its ranks were soon expanded by the Belarusian national activists from the Great Belarusian Rada in Vil'nia, representing western Belarus within the German-occupied zone of Ober Ost. In contrast to the Belarusian Bolsheviks in Russia and the Obliskomzap, the Rada of the BNR could claim more legitimacy as the democratically elected representative body of the Belarusian people, as much as it was feasible under the conditions of war and revolution. It proclaimed the independence of the first Belarusian state, yet was forced to struggle with the occupation authorities for the recognition of its demands.

Historical evaluations of the BNR often highlight its insufficient state authority and dependence on the German toleration. For instance, echoing some of the critical evaluations of the first Belarusian state as an “annex of the occupation regime”¹ and a

¹ V. A. Krutalevich, *O Belorusskoi Narodnoi Respublike* (Minsk: Pravo i ekonomika, 2005), 205.

“virtual republic,”² Per Anders Rudling describes it as a “powerful fiction,”³ which turned to be very attractive for the nationalist believers and did not lose its appeal with time. This approach to the BNR focuses on its lack of essential state attributes, first and foremost – a monopoly on power, indispensable for a modern state according to Max Weber’s definition.⁴ This chapter will approach the discussion of the BNR from a slightly different angle, moving away from the question of whether it can be defined as a real state or not, towards an analysis of the overall trends that its proclamation revealed about Belarusian national politics in 1918.

In what follows, I will concentrate on two currents of the Belarusian movement in Minsk and in Russia and their respective approaches to the state- and nation-building process during 1918. However, the focus on the formation of Belarusian statehood during 1918 also requires some background context, uncovering the motivations of the great powers in the region, namely the German Empire and Soviet Russia. Both referred extensively to the popular principle of national self-determination, and both consistently abused it for their own ends, limiting the amount of options available to the Belarusian national activists. Finally, the clash of German and Soviet interests over Belarusian territories in winter 1918 was complicated by a local military factor: the presence of the First Polish Corps in eastern Belarus. The latter resulted in a greater instability and militarization of the region, preventing Belarusians from establishing control over key cities and expanding Belarusian military units, thus further weakening Belarusian claims on political power on the eve of the German occupation in 1918.

² Aleh Lickievič, “Bielaruskaja virtualnaja respublika,” *Bielaruskaja Dumka* (2008), Nr. 3: 68.

³ Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906 – 1931* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 121 – 122.

“One Hundred Days” of the Soviet Power in Belarus

During November 1917, Soviet power gradually established its authority in most of the large cities and towns of the unoccupied parts of eastern Belarus. The Bolsheviks benefited from considerable support from the Second, Third, and Tenth armies of the Western front, which still numbered about 1.5 million soldiers. In late November 1917, the Minsk Bolsheviks established the Oblast Executive Committee of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies of the Western Oblast' and Front (Obliskomzap), claiming authority over the Minsk, Mahilioŭ, Viciebsk, and parts of Vil'nia provinces, as well as over the whole area of the Western front. However, the actual power of the Obliskomzap in this short first episode of the Soviet power in Belarus was rather limited. It extended effectively only over the front areas and parts of the Minsk and Vil'nia provinces, where the front was located. Positions of the Obliskomzap were soon weakened by Lenin's Decree on Peace, which caused high rates of demobilization from the Russian army and narrowed its support base among the soldiers. The Soviet of People's Commissars of the Western Oblast' and Front acted as the Obliskomzap's executive organ of power. These two major Soviet institutions⁵ on the Belarusian territories remained in place until 19 February 1918, when the Bolsheviks hastily fled from Minsk due to the new German offensive, which started after Trotsky failed to secure a peace settlement during the negotiations with Germany in Brest-Litovsk.⁶

The First All-Belarusian Congress, convening in Minsk on 5 – 17 (N. S. 18 – 31) December 1917 and gathering representatives of various political currents within the Belarusian national milieu, extensively discussed possible forms of the state organization

⁵ See Chapter 4.

⁶ I. M. Ignatenko and G. V. Shtykhov, *Istoriia Belorusskoi SSR* (Minsk: “Nauka i tekhnika,” 1977), 239; Z. Žylunovič, “Liuty – Kastyčnik u bielaruskim nacyjanalnym ruchu,” in *Bielarus'. Narysy historyi, ekanomiki, kul'turnaha i revoliucyjnaha ruchu*, eds. A. Stašeŭski, Z. Žylunovič, U. Ihnatoŭski (Miensk: Vydannie Centralnaha Komitetu Bielaruskaje Savieckaje Socyjalistyčnaje Respubliki, 1924), 200.

on the Belarusian territories. Debates led to a compromise resolution, uniting different factions of the Congress in recognizing the need to establish its own organ of local power in Belarus to replace the militarized Obliskomzap, controlled entirely by the front Bolsheviks. At the same time, the Congress did not display firm intentions towards separation from Russia, refraining from discussing possible independence and remaining faithful to the principle of Belarusian autonomy. Nevertheless, Minsk Bolshevik authorities actively interfered in the work of the Congress from the day of its opening. At first, they carried out subversive provocations among the Congress delegates, aiming to disrupt the proceedings. After the Bolshevik agitators failed to sabotage the Congress from within, the Obliskomzap took more decisive steps, using the Congress resolution on the establishment of local power as an excuse for a violent dissolution of the Congress in the early hours of 18 December 1917.⁷

By January 1918, the Obliskomzap ensured the precarious positions of the Belarusian movement in Minsk, depriving it of any public influence and eliminating it as a threat. Even the cultural and educational activities declined, especially compared to the summer and fall of 1917.⁸ According to the memoirs of Waclaw Solski, a Polish socialist and a member of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Western front, who was in close contact with the Minsk Bolsheviks during 1917 – 1918 and cooperated with them in the Minsk Soviet, the main concern for the Obliskomzap in January 1918 was not the Belarusian nationalism, but rather the relations with the Minsk City Duma. Problems with food supplies, the spread of “black markets,” and speculation impacted on the life in the city and needed immediate attention. Remarkably, the Minsk City Duma was the only intact “pre-October” institution operating in the city by January 1918. It still included

⁷ Vasil' Zacharka, “Haloŭnyja momanty bielaruskaha ruchu,” *Zapisy* (1999), Nr. 24: 26 – 27.

⁸ F. Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie. Oчерk istorii natsionalnogo i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia belorussov* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1921), 40.

representatives of various political parties. For a while, it even managed to hold meetings and debates open for the public. The Obliskomzap temporarily tolerated the existence of the City Duma, hoping for its assistance in food procurement.⁹ Only on 22 January 1918, the Minsk Soviet, chaired by Karl Lander, issued a decree dissolving the City Duma and taking over its responsibilities. Described as an “organizing center of counterrevolutionary elements,” the City Duma was accused of engaging in a political struggle with parties that supported Soviet power.¹⁰ According to Solski, the deputies refused to obey this order and remained in the meeting through the night, awaiting the arrival of soldiers. Eventually, intimidated deputies left in the morning and did not convene again.¹¹ Solidifying their grip on power in Minsk, Western front Bolsheviks proceeded with the dissolution of the Minsk Municipal Food Committee on 24 January 1918 on the grounds of its “bourgeois” majority, which allegedly encouraged “criminal free speculation.”¹²

However, Soviet power on the Belarusian territories was far from stable, as instances of armed clashes with the Belarusian militia units in Viciebsk demonstrated. One of the bigger incidents took place after the Bolsheviks attempted a raid on the cathedral and military warehouses in the city.¹³ On 6 February 1918, a reinforced unit of the Red Guards attacked the building where the Viciebsk Belarusian organizations were located. All correspondence and finances of the Belarusian Rada of the Northern Front, the Viciebsk Belarusian Rada, and the BSH were confiscated. The eyewitness report of K.

⁹ Waław Solski and S. N. Khomich, *1917 god v Zapadnoi oblasti i na Zapadnom fronte* (Minsk: Tesei, 2004), 201 – 203.

¹⁰ Document Nr. 30 “Dekret Minskogo Soveta o rospuske gorodskoi dumy i upravly i peredachi Minskomu Sovetu funktsii upravleniia gorodom,” in V. I. Adamushko, ed., *Minskii gorodskoi Sovet deputatov: 1917 – 2012. Dokumenty i materialy* (Minsk: Belorusskii dom pechati, 2012), 42.

¹¹ Solski, *1917 god v Zapadnoi oblasti*, 204. See also Document Nr. 56 “Iz vospominanii K. I. Landera “1917 god,” in Adamushko, *Minskii gorodskoi Sovet deputatov*, 72.

¹² Document Nr. 31 “Postanovlenie Minskogo Soveta o rospuske Minskogo gorodskogo prodovol'stvennogo komiteta,” in Adamushko, *Minskii gorodskoi Sovet deputatov*, 42.

¹³ Bielaruski Dziaržauny Archiū-Muzej Litaratury i Mastactva (hereafter BDAMLIM), f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 137, ark. 115.

Chadkievič unmasked the “Bolshevik self-determination of people” as “dispersal and crushing of the revolutionary-democratic organizations.”¹⁴ Fearing a German advance, the Bolsheviks briefly left Viciebsk in early February 1918, only to return after the German armies halted, failing to reach the city.¹⁵ The work of Belarusian organizations in Viciebsk was paralyzed henceforth. The Rada of the Northern Front was dissolved and only the Viciebsk BSH section, headed by Michail Mialeşka, attempted to operate illegally from the underground. Securing their power claims in Viciebsk, the Bolsheviks relied on the First Polish Revolutionary Regiment, which belonged to the Red Army and was hostile towards the Belarusian national movement.¹⁶

Formation of the Bolshevik-loyal Polish military units was authorized by Miasnikov in late November 1917, as the Soviet power aimed to neutralize the independent activities of the First Polish Corps,¹⁷ which posed serious security concerns for the Bolsheviks in Belarus. The history of the First Polish Corps dates back to the summer of 1917, when the Russian military command allowed for the creation of the Polish military units in Russia. It immediately attracted high numbers of soldiers of Polish origin, who were serving in the Russian army during the First World War.¹⁸ Within a few months, the First Polish Corps under the command of the General Józef Dowbór-Muśnicki numbered about 30,000 soldiers.¹⁹ Anticipating to leave for Poland at the first suitable opportunity, the Polish troops preferred to maintain neutral positions. However, at the time of the October takeover by the Bolsheviks, they declared their readiness to

¹⁴ BDAMLIM, f. 3, vop. 1, spr. 137, ark. 116 adv.

¹⁵ Aleh Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR* (Bielastok: Bielaruskae Historyčnaje Tavarystva, 2009), 61.

¹⁶ Nacyjanal'ny Archiū Respubliki Bielarus' (hereafter NARB), f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 8, ark. 35, 35 adv.

¹⁷ M. Ja. Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio na Bielarusi ŭ peryjad Liutaŭskaj i Kastryčnickaj revaliucyi: sakavik 1917 – sakavik 1918*, častka 2 (Minsk: Bielaruski dzjaržaŭny pedahahičny universitet imia Maksima Tanka, 2001), 89.

¹⁸ Wiktor Sukiennicki and Maciej Siekierski, *East Central Europe During World War I: From Foreign Domination to National Independence*. Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 330.

¹⁹ Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki, *Moje wspomnienia* (Poznań: Nakładem Przewodnika Katolickiego, 1936), 104.

protect the population of Minsk, should it be required.²⁰ Following the decisions of the Second Congress of the Polish soldiers of the Western front, which took place on 13 – 18 November 1917 and supported the expansion of the Polish military units “for protection of lives and properties of the population in the areas where Polish troops were stationed,”²¹ Polish units started to interfere in local affairs in order to protect the estates of the Polish landowners during the Bolshevik-led pogroms.²²

The Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Western front attempted to neutralize Poles and submitted a request to the Commander-in-Chief Krylenko, requesting to disband the Corps under the excuse that its soldiers assisted local landowners, instead of granting the land committees free access to the estates. In November 1917, the Polish Corps headquarters were ordered to move away from Minsk. At that time, most of the Polish units were stationed in eastern Belarus, in the area of Rahačoŭ, Žlobin, and Babrujsk. At first, Bolshevik strategy aimed to divide the Polish forces from within, by promoting the creation of alternative, “proletarian” Polish units. Simultaneously, Bolsheviks initiated a denigration campaign of the First Polish Corps in the press. The disruption of Polish supply lines followed, culminating in provocations of a direct conflict.²³

On 12 January 1918, the First Polish Corps openly confronted the Soviet units in the vicinity of Žlobin. Yet Poles did not escalate the conflict, preferring defensive actions, as their relations with the Babrujsk Soviet demonstrated: both parties divided the spheres of influence in the city.²⁴ On 20 January 1918, the commander of the Western front Miasnikov ordered the dissolution of the Polish Corps, offering its soldiers a chance

²⁰ “U Minsku,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 29, 14 November 1917, 4.

²¹ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio*, 88.

²² Józef Dowbór-Muśnicki, *Krótki szkic do historii I-go Polskiego Korpusu*. Cz. 2 (Warszawa: Placówka, 1919), 68 – 71, cited in Sukiennicki, *East Central Europe During World War I*, 465.

²³ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio*, 88 – 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

to join the Red Army. Dowbór-Muśnicki was labelled as the “enemy of the revolution,” while all Polish officers caught with weapons were to be tried immediately and shot, should they show any signs of resistance. An information blockade, confiscation of foodstuffs and correspondence, along with the bans on money transfers, depleted the ranks of the Polish Corps, seriously impacting its fighting efficiency, yet failing to subordinate it.²⁵ In January 1918, Soviet power did not yet possess enough resources to defeat the Poles, as the Western front was in the process of an uncontrolled demobilization. Commander-in-Chief Krylenko was struggling to keep the Stavka intact to keep a sufficient amount of available old army units to fight the Polish Corps, which in January 1918 still numbered around 14,000 soldiers, while the number of the Red Army volunteers was only about 1,500.²⁶

In contrast to the First Polish Corps, Belarusian attempts to organize military units were more modest, suffering both from the Bolshevik-imposed restrictions and competition with the better organized Poles. The Central Belarusian Military Rada (Central'naja Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Rada, CBVR)²⁷ was formed only in late October 1917 and had to work under unfavourable circumstances, as already on 8 December 1917 Krylenko issued an order, halting the process of nationalization in the army and banning all national activities in the front zone.²⁸ The CBVR continued to operate without official approval, focusing on conducting national agitation and establishing Belarusian committees in the army. Remarkably, this process was more successful not in Belarus, but among the numerous Belarusians who served at the distant Romanian front,²⁹ which still did not recognize the authority of Krylenko as the Commander-in-Chief. The leadership

²⁵ Ibid., 93 – 94.

²⁶ Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 228.

²⁷ See Chapter 4 for details on the activities of the CBVR.

²⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 42.

of the Romanian front therefore did not object to the nationalizing process, viewing it as a lesser evil to the Bolshevization of the soldiers.³⁰

Within Belarus, the deputy chair of the CBVR Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, along with some younger officers, was trying to accelerate the formation of the Belarusian units. One of the unexpected complications in this process arose within the CBVR itself, where they had to confront General Kipryjan Kandratovič,³¹ who was in charge of the process of formation of the Belarusian military units. As an older member of the military, he had a corresponding mentality of subordination to orders. In particular, Kandratovič was not inclined to allow any independent initiatives in the army matters without explicit orders from above. In this situation, only the efforts of the local Belarusian front committees and their activists led to some partial progress. For instance, they had a first modest success with the First Belarusian Regiment, originally numbering about 350 soldiers. However, in early December 1917, following Krylenko's order prohibiting nationalization processes in the army, this regiment was merged with the 289th Reserve Infantry Regiment.³²

According to Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, by the time when he and more active members of the CBVR managed to force Kandratovič out from his position of authority, a lot of time was wasted, allowing the Bolsheviks to strengthen their positions in Minsk. The Western front command and Miasnikov in particular displayed outright hostility

²⁹ Belarusian units at the Romanian front included the 4th Army Corps, transformed into the Belarusian Infantry Division, two Belarusian militia squads, and Belarusian National Hussar Regiment. After Romania signed peace with Germany, the latter requested the disbanding of the national units. All soldiers were decommissioned and the transfer of the units to Belarus was no longer feasible. See Document Nr. 0177 “List bielaruskaha kamisara Rumynskaha frontu K. Manceviča Narodnamu Sakrataryjatu BNR,” in Siarhej Šupa, ed., *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki* (Vil'nia: Bielaruski instytut navuki i mastactva, 1998), 76.

³⁰ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 54 – 55.

³¹ General Kipryjan Kandratovič (1859 – 1932), a native of the Lida region in Belarus, was a graduate of the prestigious Nicholas General Staff Academy. Together with Józef Dowbór-Muśnicki, Kandratovič participated in the Russo-Japanese war (1904 – 1905), commanded a separate corps in Eastern Prussia during the First World War, was active in the CBVR, and served as a military minister in the BNR government in 1918. See Leanid Laŭreš, “Heneral Kandratovič: dva imhnenni viečnasci,” *Naša Slova*, Nr. 12, 19 March 2014, 6.

³² Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 51.

towards the establishment of the Belarusian military units. Fearing that Belarus might follow Ukraine, which started the war against the Bolsheviks, the Obliskomzap authorities resolved to prevent similar developments. Due to the short-term absence of Krylenko from Stavka in December 1917, Miasnikov temporarily became the acting Commander-in-Chief, using his new authority to concentrate more Bolshevik-loyal troops in Minsk and to suppress the formation of the Belarusian military units.³³

Other adversaries of the CBVR were the Poles. After the February Revolution, Minsk served as an important political center of the Polish nationalists on the unoccupied Belarusian territories. Since 1915, large numbers of Polish refugees had settled in the cities of eastern Belarus, significantly changing their demographic outlook and influencing the national politics in the revolutionary time. The re-establishment of the Minsk Catholic diocese in 1917 and the active participation of local Poles in public life benefited the process of Polish national consolidation, creating competition for the Belarusian nation-building efforts. For instance, throughout 1917, the Polish political club engaged in organization of meetings and lectures, while the Polish Educational Society of the Minsk Region (*Polska Macierz Szkolna Ziemi Mińskiej*) took responsibility for the opening of elementary schools, libraries, and reading rooms. The Polish Council of the Minsk Province (*Rada Polska Ziemi Mińskiej*), established in May 1917, pursued similar tasks. More importantly, all Polish organizations, including the socialists, supported the idea of establishing Polish statehood. This common goal allowed them to maintain a high degree of cohesion and national unity, which other national minorities often lacked, as for instance Jews, who at that time were widely involved in the activities of the All-Russian parties.³⁴

³³ K. Jezavitaŭ, "Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Rada," *Kryvič*, Nr. 1 (7), 1924: 42 – 43.

³⁴ Dariusz Tarasiuk, *Między nadzieją a niepokojem: działalność społeczno-kulturalna i polityczna Polaków na wschodniej Białorusi w latach 1905 – 1918* (Lublin: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2007), 111; Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio*, 108 – 109.

In early 1918, the Polish Military Organization (P.O.W., Polska Organizacja Wojskowa) in Minsk closely followed all steps of the CBVR. The P.O.W. was subordinated to the Polish Council, which directed the actions of Dowbór-Muśnicki's Corps and enjoyed support of the large Polish landowners from Belarus and Lithuania. Many of the P.O.W. members held important positions in the Western front headquarters and maintained personal contacts with Miasnikov. Jezavitaŭ noted their extremely hostile positions towards the CBVR, suspecting that the Poles might have influenced the decision of the Western front command, taken around 20 January 1918, to transfer the 289th Reserve Infantry Regiment out of Minsk to guard railways in the provinces. Consisting of mostly Belarusian soldiers, the regiment spread over the large territory between Minsk, Smolensk, Viciebsk and further east, thus significantly reducing the Belarusian military presence in Minsk.³⁵

Jezavitaŭ was also concerned about the First Polish Corps' activities in eastern Belarus, in the area of Bychaŭ, Rahačoŭ, and Babrujsk. In particular, he feared a Polish takeover of Babrujsk, where a large fortress and a military warehouse were located. Their estimated capacity was sufficient to sustain the existence of several military corps. Since the poorly guarded warehouse was an easy target, Jezavitaŭ planned to turn Babrujsk into a base for Belarusian military units. In January 1918, he was sending out telegrams, urging already existing Belarusian units to send people to Babrujsk.³⁶ Yet only one Belarusian squadron directly clashed with the Polish Corps, failing to prevent the Polish occupation of Babrujsk on 20 January 1918. The city fortress and military warehouses became the center of Dowbór-Muśnicki's operations in the region.³⁷ On 19 February 1918, Polish soldiers advanced west towards Asipovičy, gaining control over the main road

³⁵ K. Jezavitaŭ, "Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Central'naja Rada," *Kryvič*, Nr. 9, 1925: 80 – 92.

³⁶ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 58.

³⁷ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 55.

leading to Minsk. To the east of Babrujsk, they managed to force the Bolshevik units beyond the Dnepr River in the vicinity of Rahačoŭ and Žlobin.³⁸ Thus, in addition to the Soviet Russia and Germany, the First Polish Corps temporarily turned into another external player on the Belarusian territories in early 1918.

Realignment of the Belarusian National Forces in 1918

How did the dispersal of the All-Belarusian Congress by the Bolshevik authorities of the Western front influence the alignment of the Belarusian national forces? Congress participants who could avoid arrests, gathered in the early morning of 18 December 1917 in the buildings of the Libava-Romenskaja railroads. At the meeting, they discussed the violent dispersal of the Congress and decided to transform the Congress Council³⁹ into a provisional local executive power. The Council was to be expanded by the inclusion of peasants', workers', and soldiers' representatives as well as national minorities. Further, the meeting agreed that the Belarusian Oblast' Committee (BOK), the Great Belarusian Rada (VBR), the Regional Bureau, and other organizations which had participated in the organization of the Congress, had ceased to exist and were to transfer their responsibilities as well as properties to the Congress Council. The CBVR was kept intact in the capacity of a subordinate body to the Council, entrusted with the task to implement all decisions and resolutions of the Congress. The Second All-Belarusian Congress was to be called as soon as possible, following the resolution of 17 December

³⁸ Due to the large numbers of Polish officers in the Russian army, the First Polish Corps included in its ranks special elite officer legions. Among the officers serving in the Corps was Władysław Anders, who would lead the Polish Armed Forces in the East in 1941. In March 1918, the First Polish Corps took an oath of loyalty to the Regency Council in Warsaw. Polish soldiers left Belarusian territories in late May 1918, following the ultimatum of the German occupation authorities to the General Dowbór-Muśnicki to evacuate the Babrujsk fortress and leave behind all weapons, or face the superior forces of the Tenth German Army. See Ihar Mel'nikaŭ, "Zabyty korpuz zabytaha henerala," *Novy Čas Online*, http://159.253.18.178/poviaz_casou/zabyty_korpuz_zabytaha_hienier/ (Accessed 10 November 2015).

³⁹ According to Jazep Varonka, it included thirty-six persons. See Document Nr. 0065 "Spis siabroŭ Rady 1-ha Usiebielaruskaha Zjezdu," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 37 – 38.

1917.⁴⁰

In order to conduct work in a more efficient manner and to maintain conspiracy, the Council immediately formed the Executive Committee, chaired by Jazep Varonka. This institution was to take over the executive power in Belarus, in case of favourable conditions for this transition. Until that moment, the whereabouts of the Executive Committee were to be kept in secret. From 18 (N. S. 31) December until 19 February 1918 it existed illegally, emerging from the underground only when the Obliskomzap Bolshevik authorities left Minsk due to the German advance.⁴¹ Conspiratorial measures were implemented to such a degree that sometimes not all of the seventeen members of the Executive Committee were aware of the exact plans, which were developed by a smaller group.⁴² Leaders of the Congress Council were subject to political persecution by the Obliskomzap. For instance, its chair, Jazep Varonka, was arrested twice in the first half of January 1918.⁴³ Nevertheless, even in its illegal position, the Executive Committee was considered to be the single legitimate organ of power, formed by a popular representation of the Belarusian people and taking responsibility for their political future after the dissolution of the All-Belarusian Congress.⁴⁴

The head of the CBVR, Symon Rak-Michajloŭski, stressed the need of constant communication with the Executive Committee, noting that priorities had to focus on “solidarity in building up the agitation-political department.”⁴⁵ Rak-Michajloŭski correctly observed that the Belarusian movement had to establish a better public visibility. He argued that the best way to do this was to demonstrate the existence of national

⁴⁰ See Prilozhenie Nr. 17 “Postanovlenie Soveta Siezda,” in Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 110.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² NARB, f. 567, vop. 1, spr. 11, ark. 3.

⁴³ U. F. Ladyseŭ and P. I. Bryhadzin, *Pamiž Uschodam i Zachadam. Stanaŭlenne dziaržaŭnasci i terytaryjalnaj celasnasci Bielarusi (1917 – 1939)* (Minsk: BDU, 2003), 66.

⁴⁴ A. Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk vozniknoveniia Belarusskoi narodnoi respubliki* (Kiev, 1918), 11.

⁴⁵ Lietuvos Mokslų Akademijos Vrublevskių Biblioteka, Rankraščių Skyrius (hereafter LMAVB, RS), f. 21, b. 2209, l. 1.

demands to the civilian and military powers by producing as many protest resolutions from various localities as possible. He noted that previously neither the Bolshevik authorities nor the media had received enough information about Belarusian interests and demands. According to the head of the CBVR, “while all other nationalities literally “bombed” everyone⁴⁶ with their protests and resolutions, raising their voice all over the Russian republic, we remained silent. Now we have to speak up and raise our voice all at once, as the existence of Belarus is under a mortal threat.”⁴⁷ Dissolution of the Congress, persecution of the Executive Committee and members of the CBVR, along with the ban on organization of Belarusian army units were identified as the main themes for the protest resolutions.⁴⁸

This call did not remain unnoticed. Deputies of the Minsk City Duma condemned the violence against the First All-Belarusian Congress already on 18 December.⁴⁹ The Executive Committee of the Congress Council refuted Trotsky's references to the Congress as a gathering, instigated by the “agrarians” who allegedly attempted to rob the working people of their rights to the land. A corresponding disclaimer was sent out to all newspaper offices for dissemination.⁵⁰ Complaints against the actions of the Western oblast' commissars were signed by the Belarusian soldiers and the civilian population in Smolensk.⁵¹ Socialist parties in Minsk, Viciebsk, Odessa, Petrograd, along with the soldiers of the South-Western front, also protested against the dissolution of the All-Belarusian Congress. Even the Belarusian Social-Democratic Workers' Party (Bolsheviks), which emerged in Petrograd in June 1917, stated that events

⁴⁶ In original: “vsekh, vsekh, vsekh” – usual form or address in proclamations during the revolutionary time.

⁴⁷ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2209, l. 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio*, 108 – 109.

⁵⁰ Document Nr. 0075 “Redaktsiiam vsekh gazet,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 42 – 43.

⁵¹ LMAVB, RS, f. 21, b. 2209, l. 4 r.

that took place in Minsk on 18 December 1917 should be regarded as a misunderstanding, and called for the creation of a commission to investigate the circumstances of the Congress dissolution. However, the central authorities ignored this request.⁵²

In the aftermath of the All-Belarusian Congress dissolution, Minsk Bolsheviks raided the CBVR offices in the former Governor's House in the early hours of 20 December 1917.⁵³ According to the eyewitness account of Jezavitaŭ, Bolsheviks apparently did not feel confident as again they chose to act under cover of the night and were accompanied with armoured vehicles and a cavalry unit. The Soviet of the People's Commissars confiscated the Governor's House, previously used by the CBVR and the Congress Council.⁵⁴ The latter managed to requisition another building, located at Palicejskaja⁵⁵ Street and continued working in the underground.⁵⁶

Celebrating their “triumph,” the Bolsheviks organized a military mass event in Minsk on 20 December 1917. They gathered the Minsk garrison and their new loyal troops around the Governor's House, parading regiments with orchestras, armoured vehicles, and cavalry on the main streets of the city under the slogans of strengthening Soviet power and combating “international imperialism” and the “bourgeois Constituent Assembly.” Belarusian affairs, its leaders, and supporters were denigrated in all speeches.⁵⁷ Minsk Bolsheviks also used their control over the media to slander the

⁵² Document Nr. 5 “Dokladnaia zapiska “Sovetskaia vlast' v Belorussii,” in V. D. Selemenev, ed., *Ianvariia 1919 goda: vremennoe raboche-krest'ianskoe sovet'skoe pravitel'stvo Belorussii: dokumenty i materialy* (Minsk: Limarius, 2005), 213.

⁵³ It was located on the Sabornaja Square, currently – Freedom Square.

⁵⁴ During 1917, the building was used by the authorities of the Provisional Government, later serving as a base for the VBR and the CBVR. Located on the Governor's Square in the center of Minsk, it represented a symbol of power and authority. As in 1917 the Bolsheviks were confined to the peripheral area near the railway station, occupying the building of the Commercial School, possession of the Governor's House bore an obvious symbolic value for them in asserting their rule in Minsk. See Solski, *1917 god v Zapadnoi oblasti*, 39.

⁵⁵ Currently Janka Kupala Street. On Minsk toponymy in the early 20th century see Ivan Sacukievič, “Tapanimija vulic i ploščau Mienska ŭ XIX – pačatku XX st.” <http://philology.by/page/minsk-toponyms-19-beginning-20-centuries> (Accessed 14 November 2015).

⁵⁶ K. Jezavitaŭ, “Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Rada,” *Kryvič*, Nr. 1 (7), 1924: 43 – 44.

⁵⁷ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio*, 109; K. Jezavitaŭ, “Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Rada,” *Kryvič*, Nr. 1 (7), 1924: 44.

Congress and its participants, labelling them as counterrevolutionaries and provocateurs. The official statement of the Obliskomzap concerning the Congress dissolution was based on the accusation of the intentions “to create a separate parallel nationalistic power and insubordination to the existing Soviet power.”⁵⁸

As the initiative in the matter of the dissolution of the Congress was taken by the Commander of the Western front, Aleksandr Miasnikov, and the chair of the Soviet of People's Commissars of the Western Oblast' and Front, Karl Lander, without explicit orders from above, Belarusian national activists still counted on the central authorities in Petrograd to take their side in the conflict with the Bolsheviks of the Western front. Belarusian organizations and socialist parties addressed their protests to the Council of People's Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), and personally to the Commissar of Nationalities, Joseph Stalin. Nevertheless, none of these steps could shake the positions of the Obliskomzap, which held the real power in Minsk, especially since Stalin chose not to interfere in the actions of the Western front commanders.⁵⁹ The Petrograd authorities only tried to save their image, as initially they sanctioned the convocation of the Congress. Belarusian organizations in Petrograd and Moscow, as well as the Executive Committee of the Congress Council in Minsk, were reassured that the Petrograd Soviet of the People's Commissars recognized the rights of nations to self-determination. Krylenko even received an order to start negotiations with the CBVR.⁶⁰

The Executive Committee of the CBVR delegated Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ and Ivan Sierada to meet Krylenko on 29 December 1917. The Soviet Commander-in-Chief's behaviour was hostile, as he constantly referred to the independence intentions of

⁵⁸ *Sovetskaia pravda*, Nr. 15, 19 December 1917.

⁵⁹ Document Nr. 5 “Dokladnaia zapiska “Sovetskaia vlast' v Belorussii,” in Selemenev, *1 ianvariia 1919 goda*, 212 – 213.

⁶⁰ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 53.

Ukrainians, revealing his concerns that Belarusians would follow their southern neighbours on this path. Krylenko announced solidarity with the commander of the Western front Miasnikov, and refused to recognize national military units. Jezavitaŭ and Sierada refuted the accusations of the “bourgeois” character of the CBVR and the Congress Council, requesting that the Commander-in-Chief support the principle of national self-determination and allow the formation of the Belarusian army. Eventually, Krylenko agreed to a compromise solution of establishing Belarusian units within the future Red Army. Yet this step did not mean that the central authorities were interested in supporting Belarusian initiatives. Explanation of Krylenko's permission is to be found not in the persuasiveness of the CBVR delegation, but rather in his strained personal relations with Miasnikov. In the capacity of the commander of the Western front, Miasnikov had trouble subordinating to Krylenko's authority and often tried to dictate to him the course of actions, which resulted in feelings of mutual dislike. Apparently, Miasnikov learned about the plans of the CBVR to modify the regulations on Red Army organization in order to transform its Belarusian units into the Belarusian National Guards, and requested from Krylenko to revoke his permission. Asserting his authority as the Commander-in-Chief, Krylenko refused to obey Miasnikov, and allowed the CBVR to continue its work until mid-January 1918. Yet in practice, Miasnikov had more means to interfere, preventing any of the vague agreements from being implemented. Forced to appoint a special commission to deal with the creation of the Belarusian units, he deliberately chose members who were paralyzing its work.⁶¹

By late January 1918, alarmed by the activities of the Polish and Ukrainian military forces, the Bolshevik authorities decided to neutralize Belarusian attempts at creating army units by dissolving the CBVR, arresting its members, and closing down its

⁶¹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 42 – 43, 52; Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, “Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Central'naja Rada,” *Kryvič*, Nr. 9, 1925: 82 – 83.

newspaper, *Belorusskaia Rada*. On 31 January 1918, soldiers sent from Stavka in Mahilioŭ, assisted by the Minsk Bolsheviks, encircled the building of the CBVR and arrested the head of the military section Jezavitaŭ and the secretary Vasil' Zacharka. On the following day, four additional arrests were made.⁶² All arrested were escorted to the hotel *L'Europe* in the vicinity of the Governor's House, where the Cheka headquarters were located. Nevertheless, the CBVR did not stop working, as the Minsk Bolsheviks had enough resources only to arrest six persons, while the overall number of the CBVR members exceeded one hundred and not all of them were based in Minsk.⁶³

Both the Obliskomzap and the central Bolshevik authorities in Petrograd supported the crackdown on the CBVR. The Minsk Bolsheviks formally justified the arrests by the intercepted telegrams from Jezavitaŭ. His calls to Belarusian soldiers to head to Babrujsk and take over its fortress with the military warehouses were interpreted as the proof of the CBVR connection to the “Polish legionnaires.” On the level of central power, the attack on the CBVR coincided with the decision of the Bolshevik authorities in Petrograd to take control over the Belarusian question from above. The declaration of Ukrainian independence prompted the Soviet power towards more resolute actions against the Belarusian national movement and its appropriation. The establishment of the Belarusian National Commissariat at the People's Commissariat of Nationalities on 31 January 1918 was one of the first steps in this direction.⁶⁴ The Minsk Bolsheviks in turn planned to legalize their authority in Belarus by creating a counterweight to the All-Belarusian Congress. In order to link the Obliskomzap with the local Soviets in a closer and more legitimate manner, the Bolsheviks were preparing the convocation of the Oblast'

⁶² Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 55.

⁶³ Kanstancin Jezavitaŭ, “Bielaruskaja Vajskovaja Central'naja Rada,” *Kryvič*, Nr. 9, 1925, 89 – 90.

⁶⁴ Dorota Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa, 1918 – 1920: u podstaw białoruskiej państwowości* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2010), 223 – 224; Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 56.

Congress of the Belarusian provinces in mid-February 1918.⁶⁵ However, the rapid German advance interfered with the implementation of these plans.

The “Second” German Occupation of the Belarusian Territories

After the Soviet delegation left Brest-Litovsk on 10 February 1918 without signing a peace treaty, the German Empire interpreted its departure as the end of the armistice and decided to resume military actions. Trotsky’s strategy of “neither war, nor peace” backfired, and it would have placed the Bolshevik regime on the verge of collapse, had Germany decided to proceed with a more aggressive approach. Yet the direction of the German Eastern policy in 1918 was neither straightforward nor clear, as it was determined by the fluctuations between the annexationist drive of the German High Command, embodied by Ludendorff and the more cautious approach of the diplomatic circles, represented by the Foreign Minister Kühlmann. The latter did not want to take any steps that could potentially result in the overthrow of the Bolshevik power, as it would have harmed German interests in the region. Even though German diplomats despised Bolsheviks, the latter were still considered to be the only party interested in finding an acceptable solution through negotiations. This was especially important for Germany in 1918, as it wanted to spare soldiers and resources in the East, prioritizing military efforts on the Western front. Kühlmann considered the weak and uncertain positions of the Bolshevik regime to be beneficial for extracting the maximum benefits. His practical approach contrasted with the views of the military, which was eager to continue with the successful German advance. Eventually, Wilhelm II agreed with the strategy suggested by the Foreign Ministry and chancellor Hertling, choosing to keep the Bolshevik government in place as the only party willing to negotiate.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Siamenčyk, *Hramadska-palityčnae žyccio*, 116 – 117.

⁶⁶ Winfried Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918* (Wien: Oldenbourg, 1966), 82 – 84.

The 10th German Army under the command of Erich von Falkenhayn started its advance on 18 February 1918, moving east through the Belarusian territories.⁶⁷ At the same time, the units of the First Polish Corps under the command of Dowbór-Muśnicki left Babrujsk, heading west towards Minsk. Neither of the armies encountered resistance, as by this time demobilization and high desertion rates had significantly depleted the ranks of the Russian Western front, whose commanders along with the Obliskopzap hurriedly abandoned Minsk.⁶⁸ The Council of People's Commissars of the Western Oblast' and Front held an emergency meeting on 18 February 1918, at which everyone agreed to evacuate to Smolensk. Miasnikov barely could leave in time, as the railway workers refused to assist the Bolsheviks in the evacuation process.⁶⁹

The arrested members of the CBVR, among them Jezavitaŭ, Zacharka, and Mamon'ka, left the prison and immediately called an emergency meeting of the Executive Committee of the CBVR. It decided to transfer power in Minsk to the Council of the First All-Belarusian Congress. On 19 February 1918, it retook possession of the Governor's House⁷⁰ and announced in the press its decision to remain in Minsk, calling upon the Belarusian population to unite around the national democratic organizations. Belarusian military units and civilian militia took over the responsibility of guaranteeing order in the city after it was abandoned by the commissars of the Western oblast' and front. All arrested Belarusian activists were released and sessions of the Minsk City Duma were resumed.⁷¹

By the evening of 19 February, Belarusian forces controlled large sections of the city, including the armoury on Maskoŭskaja Street, the Governor's House, and the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 24 – 26.

⁶⁸ Ladyseŭ, *Pamiž Uščodam i Zachadam*, 67.

⁶⁹ Document Nr. 0095 “Zahad načalnika Libava-Romenskaj čyhunki za 2.03.1918 u sprave evakuacyi čyhunki z Miensku ŭ Maskvu,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 50.

⁷⁰ *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 6, 24 February 1918, 48.

⁷¹ Document Nr. 0081 “Infarmacyja dlja druku za 19.02.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 45 – 46.

building of the Cheka, located in the center. Jezavitaŭ became the commandant of Minsk. Simultaneously, the Poles also made an attempt to claim power in Minsk. Ignacy Matuszewski from the First Polish Corps was appointed as another commandant of Minsk, while the soldiers under his command were fighting the Bolsheviks and at the same time disarming the Belarusian units.⁷² The confrontation continued throughout the day of 20 February, until Polish forces controlled the armoury on Maskoŭskaja street and the railway station. The Belarusian units managed to hold the central part of the city around the Governor's House. Both Belarusians and Poles hoped for prompt reinforcements in order to eliminate the stalemate. Until then, they temporarily divided spheres of influence in Minsk, yet the first units of the German army had already started arriving in the city on 21 February.⁷³

According to the representative of the UNR government M. Lebedynec, reporting from Minsk, Belarusians failed to establish control over the whole city and oust the Polish legionnaires due to the evident and regrettable lack of human and financial resources. The report correctly identified internal squabbles within the Belarusian national milieu and the insufficient consolidation of the national forces during 1917 as the chief reasons of this weakness during the crucial period of the power vacuum.⁷⁴ Eventually, this harmed the image of the Belarusian movement in the eyes of the German military administration, which did not regard it as a strong political factor in the region.

Despite organizational problems and the disruptive presence of Dowbor-Muśnicki's soldiers in Minsk, Belarusian authorities represented the only legitimate power in Minsk in the period from 18 to 25 February 1918 as best as they could.⁷⁵ On 21 February 1918, the First Constituent Charter declared the full rights of the Belarusian

⁷² Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 58 – 59.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁴ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 19, ark. 145.

⁷⁵ Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 41.

people to self-determination. The Executive Committee of the First All-Belarusian Congress Council, expanded by the inclusion of the national minorities' representatives, assumed the provisional power in Belarus until the convocation of the democratic Belarusian Constituent Assembly. It formed the first Belarusian government, known as the People's Secretariat. Chaired by Jazep Varonka, it consisted of fourteen members, responsible for internal affairs (I. Makrejeŭ⁷⁶) and external affairs (Varonka), military (Jezavitaŭ), finances (G. Belkind), education (A. Smolič), judiciary (E. Belevič), agriculture (Tamaš Hryb), economy (I. Sierada), social security (Paluta Badunova) and other administration areas.⁷⁷

The future fate of the Belarusian state-building initiatives was closely connected to the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty. Demoralized by the successful German advance to the east in late February 1918, the Bolsheviks agreed to its unfavourable terms on 3 March 1918. With regard to the Belarusian territories, article three of the Brest peace treaty was particularly important, as it foresaw the establishment of a future border between Russia and Germany, where Russia was to give up the territories to the west of the agreed line, running west of Reval (Tallinn), through Dzvinšk to Pružany. This line roughly coincided with the borders of the front at the time of the armistice, signed on 15 December 1917, excluding central and eastern Belarusian territories from the German sphere of influence. Russia was to refrain from interference in the internal matters of the territories to the west of the agreed line (along with the Baltic region these included Hrodna and Vil'nia provinces), whose fate was to be determined by Germany.⁷⁸ However,

⁷⁶ Makrejeŭ and Belkind represented the All-Russian Socialist Revolutionaries and left the government in April 1918, as the party did not agree with the proclamation of the Belarusian independence. See *Dziannica*, Nr. 10, 30 April 1918, 4; Document Nr. 0173 "Chronika dlja hazetaŭ [za 3.04.1918]," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 73 – 74.

⁷⁷ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 100; see also Document Nr. 0089 "Abvestka Narodnaho Sekretaryjatu Bielarusi Nr. 3 za 23.02.1918," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 48 – 49.

⁷⁸ *Friedensvertrag von Brest-Litovsk*, in Horst Günther Linke, ed., *Quellen zu den deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen 1917 – 1945* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 54.

by March 1918 German armies had already advanced further east of the agreed border, occupying most of the Belarusian territories, including Polack, Barysaŭ, Rečyca, Mahilioŭ, and Homiel'.⁷⁹ Germany promised to evacuate the areas located to the east of the proposed border only after the conclusion of a general peace and a complete Russian demobilization.⁸⁰

Thus, the Brest peace treaty and German advance resulted in the new division of the Belarusian territories in 1918: the western areas of the “first” German occupation in Ober Ost, also known as lands “behind the trenches;” the territories of the “second” occupation in central Belarus around Minsk, facing an unpredictable and unclear future, and finally, the Bolshevik-held territories in the east around the major city of Viciebsk.⁸¹ As most of the Belarusian lands were located in the sphere which was to be ceded to Russia after the conclusion of the general peace, Germany was not engaging here in fake state-building as it did in the Baltics. Moreover, the supplemental treaty, signed by the Central Powers and Soviet Russia on 27 August 1918, contained an article on separatist movements, wherein Germany promised that it would “neither cause nor support the formation of independent states in those territories.”⁸²

The political implications of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty were reinforced by its character as a “bread treaty” for the Central Powers, desperate for resources to support their war effort, which influenced the decision to take advantage of Ukraine.⁸³ With German assistance, the Ukrainian Rada was reinstated in its positions in March 1918, and the Bolsheviks were ousted from the country. However, the socialist-dominated Rada was

⁷⁹ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Brest-Litovsk. The Forgotten Peace. March 1918* (New York: Norton Library, 1971) 271, 274; *Homan*, Nr. 19, 5 March 1918, 4.

⁸⁰ *Friedensvertrag von Brest-Litovsk*, 54 – 55.

⁸¹ Document Nr. 0112 “Vypiska z pratakolu pasiedžannia Mienskaj Haradzkoj Dumy za 18.03.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 56.

⁸² *Supplementary Treaty to the Treaty of Peace Between Russia and the Central Powers*, in Wheeler-Bennett, *Brest-Litovsk*, 429.

⁸³ Frank Grelka, *Die ukrainische Nationalbewegung unter deutscher Besatzungsherrschaft 1918 und 1941/42* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 80.

soon replaced by the more agreeable pro-German regime of Hetman Skoropadsky.⁸⁴ In contrast to Ukraine, Belarus lacked vast economic potential that could have prompted Germany to pay more attention to the local national movement. While the German authorities were to some degree familiar with the Belarusians in Ober Ost, they were not inclined even to differentiate between Belarusians and Great-Russians in the areas of the “second” occupation, indefinitely postponing discussions of this issue.⁸⁵ Moreover, German diplomacy was convinced that Belarusians did not display any intentions towards independence, which was not entirely false, as even the All-Belarusian Congress in its resolutions did not address the issue of independence and separation from Russia. Finally, the uneven development of the Belarusian national movement and low numbers of national activists continued to harm its image. In this respect, the “dual power” of Belarusians and Poles over Minsk on the eve of the German takeover of the city clearly demonstrated insufficient organization and a lack of military potential, turning the Belarusian movement in the eyes of the German officials into a minor local factor, which was insignificant in terms of *Realpolitik*.

Initially, relations of the Belarusian institutions with the German military authorities of the 10th Army, which established full control over Minsk on 25 February 1918, did not look promising. The new power disarmed existing Belarusian military units and confiscated the Governor's House as well as the possessions of the Belarusian People's Secretariat,⁸⁶ including the latter's funds (more than 300,000 rubles), which the People's Secretariat acquired from the state treasury after the Bolshevik withdrawal from Minsk.⁸⁷ The German authorities were unwilling to tolerate Belarusian claims, forcing the

⁸⁴ Piotr Stefan Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795 – 1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974), 363.

⁸⁵ Document Nr. 0185 “List Jazepa Varonki (Miensk) Ivanu i Antonu Luckievičam (Viľnia) za 5.04.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 78.

⁸⁶ Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 61 – 62.

⁸⁷ Document Nr. 0788 “List Narodnaha Sakrataryjatu BNR Haloŭnamu Kamandavanniu X Armii za 5.08.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 228.

People's Secretariat and the Executive Committee of the Congress Council to give up the functions of an acting power and to assume the role of a political center, advocating Belarusian interests.⁸⁸ In this manner, Belarusian institutions were effectively diminished to a local national representation with consultative tasks.⁸⁹

Establishment and Independence Proclamation of the BNR

From the Belarusian perspective, the Brest peace treaty signed between Germany and Soviet Russia on 3 March 1918 was an outright violation of the decisions of the First All-Belarusian Congress against the territorial divisions. Economically, all Belarusian lands faced an uncertain future, as Soviet Russia and Germany agreed to refrain from war damage payments, transferring this burden onto the local populations. Thus, dispersal of the All-Belarusian Congress by the Bolsheviks and their subsequent neglect of the Belarusian question during the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations led the Belarusian national elites to believe that only separation from Bolshevik Russia could secure national interests and grant access to the international politics.⁹⁰ They argued that only the proclamation of a Belarusian state could avert the external threats and political ambitions of neighbouring nations. Among the latter, Aliaksandr Cvikievič singled out Lithuanian attempts to appropriate the Vil'nia and Hrodna regions, Ukrainian claims towards the areas in the south, in the Palesse region, and last but not least, Polish aspirations to create a strong nation-state with the inclusion of ethnically Belarusian territories.⁹¹

On 9 March 1918, the Second Constituent Charter proclaimed Belarus a democratic republic (Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika, henceforth BNR). The declared

⁸⁸ Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk*, 13.

⁸⁹ Ja. Varonko, *Bielaruski ruch ad 1917 da 1920 hodu. Karotki ahliad* (Koŭna: n. p., 1920), 11.

⁹⁰ Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk*, 14 – 15.

⁹¹ Document Nr. 0112 “Vypiska z pratakolu pasiedžannia Mienskaj Haradzkoj Dumy za 18.03.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 56 – 57.

borders of the new state included the areas of settlement of ethnic Belarusians, as well as territories with their numerical predominance, while all other nationalities were assured of national autonomy rights. The future constitution was to be adopted by the Constituent Sejm of Belarus.⁹² The People's Secretariat remained in the capacity of an executive power organ.⁹³ It immediately sought assistance and alliance from other democratic forces in Minsk in an attempt to expand its political influence. For instance, discussing the circumstances of the BNR proclamation in the Minsk City Duma, Jazep Varonka noted that the Second Constituent Charter considered interests of all nations and pointed out the practical achievements of the Congress Council in maintaining order in the city during the Bolshevik evacuation. At this stage, the Minsk City Duma did not object to cooperation and agreed to send its representatives to the People's Secretariat, supporting it financially with 10,000 rubles.⁹⁴

The legislative power of the newly proclaimed BNR was temporarily delegated to the Council of the All-Belarusian Congress, or the Rada⁹⁵ of the BNR, as it was known henceforth.⁹⁶ The first chair of the Rada was Ivan Sierada, while Jazep Varonka served as his deputy.⁹⁷ On the eve of the independence proclamation on 25 March 1918, the core of the Rada consisted of the members of the Congress Council (twenty-seven persons), expanded by the inclusion of national minorities⁹⁸ as well as municipal and zemstvo

⁹² Document Nr. 0101 "II-ja Ūstaŭnaja Hramata Vykanaŭčaha Kamitetu Rady Pieršaha Ūsiebielarskaha Zjezdu za 9.03.1918," in *ibid.*, 52.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Document Nr. 0112 "Vypiska z pratakolu pasiedžannia Mienskaj Haradzkoj Dumy za 18.03.1918," in *ibid.*, 56 – 57.

⁹⁵ In English: Council.

⁹⁶ Document Nr. 0101 "II-ja Ūstaŭnaja Hramata Vykanaŭčaha Kamitetu Rady Pieršaha Ūsiebielarskaha Zjezdu za 9.03.1918," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 52.

⁹⁷ Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 42.

⁹⁸ Here some tensions arose due to Polish demands for a larger representation. Out of fifteen places, seven were assigned to Jews, four – to Poles, two – to Russians, and one place each for Ukrainians and Lithuanians. The Polish Council of the Minsk Province petitioned the head of the People's Secretariat Varonka, demanding ten places instead of four. Factions of the Rada considered Polish demands to be ungrounded, yet they failed to reach an agreement on this issue as Poles along with their four minority places already had four representatives in the group of cities and zemstvos. See *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 31, 29 April 1918, 1.

representatives.⁹⁹ It incorporated various political currents, not all of which were supportive of the idea to separate from Russia and to switch political orientation towards cooperation with the new German authorities.

On 24 March 1918, Ivan Sierada opened the session of Rada, welcoming the delegates of the Great Belarusian Rada from Vil'nia – the brothers Anton and Ivan Luckievič, Ja. Stankievič, and Ja. Turkievič, who finally received permission to travel from Vil'nia to Minsk. Thus, after three years of almost no communication, Belarusian national activists from Ober Ost could reunite with their counterparts from Minsk.¹⁰⁰ By that time, the Great Belarusian Rada in Vil'nia, established in late January 1918, actively promoted the idea of indivisibility of all ethnic Belarusian lands and the creation of a separate statehood on this basis. After several years of German occupation, accompanied by the experiences of interaction with Lithuanian and Polish national movements in the region, Belarusian elites in Ober Ost were the first to depart from the idea of maintaining ties to Russia,¹⁰¹ while the Rada of the BNR still did not manage to achieve unity on this issue. With the encouragement of Vil'nia Belarusians, the BSH members of the Rada proposed to discuss the proclamation of independence of the new Belarusian republic. In contrast to the Congress Council faction, which offered full support of this proposition, other factions within the Rada were divided over this issue, spending the whole night in heated debates.¹⁰² Disagreements over the independence proclamation already indicated deep internal divisions within the Rada, foreshadowing its future instability.

In particular, the BSH pro-independence faction encountered the opposition of the Socialist Revolutionaries, who enjoyed support within the Minsk City Duma and

⁹⁹ Document Nr. 0131 “Schema pradstaŭnictva ŭ Radzie BNR u dzien' pryniaccia pastanovy ab niezaležnasci 25.03.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 63.

¹⁰⁰ Anton Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu: vybranyja tvory*, ed. Anatol' Sidarevič (Minsk: “Bielaruski knihazbor,” 2003), 102.

¹⁰¹ See Chapter 6.

¹⁰² NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 118.

zemstvos.¹⁰³ Municipal institutions in Belarus were generally dominated by the All-Russian parties¹⁰⁴ that could not accept the idea of Belarusian separation from Russia. Later in 1918, they declared an intention to unite in the Oblast' Union of Zemstvos and Cities of Belarus as an alternative to the Rada and the People's Secretariat, which, in their opinion, “had forgotten the real needs of the Belarusian people.”¹⁰⁵ This group also actively used the local Minsk press to force the Rada to take a step back and proclaim the declarative character of its decision on independence.¹⁰⁶

However, the vote of the municipal and zemstvo delegates was not unanimous. The same applied to national minorities' delegates. The Bund voted against Belarusian independence, while the United Jewish Socialist Workers' Party and Poalei Zion abstained from voting.¹⁰⁷ These parties were reluctant to support independence, which they interpreted as a step towards further dispersion of the Jewish nation. They were more likely to accept the concept of “national personal autonomy.”¹⁰⁸ However, some of the Jewish socialists spoke in favour of Belarusian independence. For instance, among the latter was a certain Mac, a member of the United Socialists.¹⁰⁹

At six in the morning on 25 March 1918, a majority of the Rada finally approved the proposition of the BSH. The Third Constituent Charter proclaimed the independence of the BNR, renouncing all previous state ties, which “enabled a foreign government to sign the Brest agreement in the name of Belarus,” arbitrarily dividing its territories with no respect for the will of the people. The BNR government strove to revise the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty and declared that the borders of the new state

¹⁰³ NARB, f. 567, vop. 1, spr. 11, ark. 6.

¹⁰⁴ These parties triumphed during the electoral campaigns of 1917 in eastern Belarus and Minsk. See *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 13, 11 August 1917, 2.

¹⁰⁵ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 19, ark. 68.

¹⁰⁶ “Skrypty šovinisty,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 16, 11 April 1918, 1.

¹⁰⁷ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 118.

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁹ Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 104, 248.

extended to all ethnographically Belarusian territories, inclusive the Mahilioŭ, Minsk, Hrodna (with the city of Białystok), parts of Vil'nia, Viciebsk, Smolensk, and Chernihiv provinces.¹¹⁰ These claims were based on the *Ethnographic Map of the Belarusian Tribe*, developed by Jaŭchim Karski in 1903. Since it was the first map treating Belarusian as a separate language, it acquired political meaning in the revolutionary period, when national activists needed a precise definition of the future nation-state's borders. Karski used linguistic criteria of the spread of Belarusian dialects for development of his map, and Belarusian national activists eagerly used it for political aims of claiming more territories. In 1918, Karski's map served as the foundation for a special cartographic commission of the BNR, which developed the detailed map of the BNR to be presented at the Paris peace conference in 1919.¹¹¹

Even though territorial claims of the new state reflected the boldest dreams of Belarusian nationalists, in reality, the BNR desperately lacked armed forces to protect its declared borders, let alone reach them and establish an effective authority outside of Minsk. Ambitions of the first Belarusian state antagonized its neighbours and were perceived as threats to the interests of Soviet Russia, Germany, Ukraine, and Lithuania in the region. More importantly, the first Belarusian government had no support from the German occupational authorities, who could not accept any calls to renounce the Brest treaty, and who reacted negatively to the independence proclamation. In their eyes, the Rada of the BNR was a purely socialist and therefore untrustworthy institution.¹¹²

Belarusian attempts to receive official diplomatic recognition of the BNR by Germany remained unsuccessful.¹¹³ However, in contrast to the Berlin civilian authorities,

¹¹⁰ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 124.

¹¹¹ Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa*, 244 – 245; 255 – 263.

¹¹² Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 84.

¹¹³ Aliaksandr Cichamiraŭ, “Bielarus' u palitycy viadučych dzjaržaŭ Zachadu (1914 – 1945 hh.),” *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (2001), Nr. 15: 171.

German military powers in Minsk were inclined to show more flexibility towards the Belarusian question. First, as has been pointed out, the military command had its own vision of the Eastern policy and second, the occupation authorities were concerned about practical issues surrounding the establishment of the occupation regime. As soon as the Germans stopped perceiving the Belarusian factor as a threat, relations gradually stabilized. In May 1918, the commander of the German 10th Army, General Erich von Falkenhayn, appeared rather sympathetic to the representatives of the BNR government, vaguely promising the “desired political outcome” and reassuring them that the Rada was to act as an intermediary between the occupation authorities and the Belarusian people.¹¹⁴

Even though the German occupation authorities did not share political power with the BNR institutions, they were willing to delegate some responsibilities to the Belarusians to facilitate governance of the newly occupied territories. Following the visit of the head of the People's Secretariat Varonka to the German Chief of Staff von Stapff on 21 June 1918, the German army command agreed to introduce positions of special Belarusian advisers in the district commandants' offices. The authority to appoint these advisers belonged to the People's Secretariat. Yet the sole purpose of this concession was an improved regulation of relations between the army and the local population.¹¹⁵ The same applied to the assistance with the refugee repatriation and the issue of sending Orthodox priests to the Vil'nia and Hrodna provinces,¹¹⁶ where the local population was deprived of spiritual services since 1915, when almost all Orthodox priests were evacuated east.¹¹⁷ Echoing the approaches implemented in Ober Ost, the German authorities did not object to Belarusian cultural and educational activities.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 8, ark. 53.

¹¹⁵ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 19, ark. 304.

¹¹⁶ In 1918, German administrative reports pointed out that the Belarusian population in Białystok region was “thankful” to the authorities for the return the priests, who resumed regular Orthodox church services. See Bundesarchiv (hereafter BArch), PH 30-III/5, 24.

¹¹⁷ See Chapter 1.

¹¹⁸ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 19, ark. 304 adv.

On the other hand, the refusal of the German military authorities to tolerate the formation of Belarusian army units even by November 1918¹¹⁹ indicates that the German involvement in the Belarusian national politics was consistently determined by the pragmatic everyday needs of running an effective occupation regime, rather than in assisting another anti-Russian national force. Germany strictly adhered to the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty and its supplemental agreements, where it was obligated not to support any local separatist movements to the east of the future border to Soviet Russia. Consequently, Belarusian territories located in the areas of the new or “second” German occupation in 1918 were to be ceded to Russia under the terms of Brest-Litovsk treaty, and were treated as a temporary trophy. This circumstance precluded expansion of Belarusian political power under German occupation.

Small German concessions did not influence the vague political and legal status of the BNR, yet they allowed Belarusian activists to continue with the national agitation among the population. The BNR government was convinced that evidence of its support by Belarusian society would facilitate the task of achieving international recognition for the young Belarusian state.¹²⁰ In particular, the BNR institutions focused on financing publications of Belarusian periodicals, literature, religious and children's books, Belarusian primers and school textbooks, extending the support to the existing Belarusian publishing initiative in Vil'nia. One of the major projects in the educational sphere was the construction of a Belarusian high school in Budslaŭ (Vilejka district).¹²¹ The People's Secretariat also elevated the Belarusian language to the status of an official state language, stipulating that all official acts, documents and correspondence should

¹¹⁹ Cichamiraŭ, “Bielarus' u palitycy,” 172 – 173.

¹²⁰ Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa*, 327.

¹²¹ Document Nr. 0596 “Spravazdača kasy Narodnaha Sakrataryjatu za peryjad 30.03 – 1.07.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 196 – 197.

appear in Belarusian.¹²²

Yet financial difficulties limited these activities significantly, and even the daily newspaper *Bielaruski Šliach* appeared irregularly.¹²³ After German authorities confiscated more than 300,000 rubles from the People's Secretariat on 25 February 1918, the latter struggled to find sources of funding, relying primarily on Ukrainian trade and loans.¹²⁴ Moreover, existing restrictions on travel between Ober Ost and the areas of the so-called “second occupation,”¹²⁵ complicated communication between the BNR institutions in Minsk and the national activists in Vil'nia. The same applied to the national work in the provinces of Ober Ost, where, according to the German administrative reports compiled in September 1918, the ethnically Belarusian population remained passive and failed to present itself as a politically organized force.¹²⁶

BNR Between Germany and Russia: Political Crisis of 1918

German neglect of the Belarusian question highlighted the need to consolidate the national movement and to turn it into a more formidable political factor. Since the insufficient political power of the BNR was recognized even in the contemporary Belarusian press,¹²⁷ the Rada of the BNR was actively looking for allies in spring 1918. Finding common ground with the representatives of municipalities and zemstvos uncovered fundamental differences, as these institutions were dominated by the All-Russian parties. Therefore, they could not accept the idea of separation from Russia. However, the need to secure Belarusian interests in the conditions of the German occupation dictated a greater degree of independent actions. Therefore, attempts of the

¹²² Document Nr. 0173 “Hronika dlia hazetaŭ,” in *ibid.*, 74.

¹²³ Document Nr. 0712 “Chadajnictva Bielaruskaha Vydavieckaha Tavarystva ŭ Miensku “Zaranka” pierad NS BNR za 25.07.1918,” in *ibid.*, 215.

¹²⁴ Document Nr. 0596 “Spravazdača kasy Narodnaha Sakrataryjatu za peryjad 30.03 – 1.07.1918,” in *ibid.*, 196.

¹²⁵ BArch, PH 30-III/5, 8 r.

¹²⁶ BArch, PH 30-III/5, 24.

¹²⁷ See “Čarodnaje zadanne,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 16, 11 April 1918, 1.

Rada were directed towards consolidation of the existing Belarusian national milieu, as demonstrated by the start of cooperation with the Minsk Belarusian Representation. Both shared more common patriotic goals in contrast to the Russian-sympathizing municipal and zemstvo members.

The Minsk Belarusian Representation was the new organization of a moderate, centrist current. Founded on 25 February 1918, it united People's Socialists, Christian Democrats, and unaffiliated persons, who were excluded from the BSH-dominated national politics in the second half of 1917.¹²⁸ The Representation positioned itself as an heir of the Belarusian National Committee (BNK)¹²⁹ and even was chaired by its former head Raman Skirmunt, while the presidium included General Kandratovič, Orthodox archpriest Kulčycki, Pavel Aliaksiuk, Aliaksandr Ulasaŭ,¹³⁰ Roman Catholic priest Vincent Hadleŭski, and the former head of the Minsk section of the Society for the Aid of War Victims, Viktor Čavusaŭ.¹³¹ The Representation was conceptualized as a national interparty organization, promoting the political, cultural, and economic revival of Belarus. Supporting the coalition of socialists from the BSH and Belarusian national democracy, as the moderates defined themselves,¹³² the Representation prioritized the development of a Belarusian statehood within the declared ethnographic borders, promotion of Belarusian education, and regulation of relations with neighbouring nations.¹³³

The members of the Representation recognized that the independence was to

¹²⁸ Vincent Hadleŭski, “Z bielaruskaha palityčnaha žyccia ŭ Miensku ŭ 1917 – 18 hh.,” *Spadčyna* (1997), Nr. 5: 28 – 30.

¹²⁹ The BNK was the first short-lived organizational structure of Belarusian national activists in the period between March and July 1917. It united two major Belarusian parties, the BSH and the BNPS (Belarusian People's Party of Socialists). Both were socialist in character, yet the BNPS included more moderates and emphasized national development rather than prioritizing social issues. As the result of the disagreements between these parties in July 1917, the People's Socialists were largely excluded from decision-making and the organizational activities of the Belarusian movement, while the BNK was replaced with the Central Rada of Belarusian Organizations, where the BSH played the leading role. See Chapter 2 for a detailed analysis.

¹³⁰ Editor-in-chief of the first Belarusian newspaper *Naša Niva* during 1906 – 1914.

¹³¹ Hadleŭski, “Z bielaruskaha palityčnaha žyccia,” 30 – 31.

¹³² “Try Centry,” *Bielaruski Śliach*, Nr. 16, 11 April 1918, 1.

¹³³ “Adozva Mienskaha Bielaruskaha Predstaŭnictva,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 10, 24 March 1918, 79.

be treated as a practical matter in politics. In the conditions of the German occupation, they pointed out that the Rada of the BNR did not have better options than to interact and to work with the new authorities, hoping to convince them to share power in civilian matters. Such a form of cooperation could potentially secure the national-self-determination rights and enhance chances of achieving sovereignty in the future.¹³⁴ From these rather realistic positions, the Minsk Belarusian Representation supported cooperation with the German occupation authorities, yet at the same time emphasized the Belarusian independence as the ultimate goal.¹³⁵

The positions of the Representation and reorientation towards Germany did not enjoy popularity among the Belarusian socialists, who constituted the majority of the Rada. The chair of the People's Secretariat, Jazep Varonka, was direct in admitting that he did not trust Skirmunt, Aliaksiuk, and Hadleŭski.¹³⁶ Another BSH activist, Tamaš Hryb, was even more resolute in his evaluations, referring to the Representation as an organization of “landowners and nobles,” aiming to undermine the unity of the national front.¹³⁷ This statement holds true only if Hryb's interpretation of the “national front” implies the unchallenged leadership status of the BSH within Belarusian national politics, which it enjoyed since July 1917. In this regard, the inclusion of moderates posed a problem for the dominance of the BSH, yet from a long-term perspective it diversified and democratized the Belarusian movement.

The Great Belarusian Rada in Vil'nia welcomed this step, trying to reconcile both groups and shift the emphasis towards the more important task of state-building, instead of focusing on the differences in social programs.¹³⁸ Political cooperation of the

¹³⁴ *Bielaruskij Šliach*, Nr. 5, 28 March 1918, 1; NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 86.

¹³⁵ “Adozva Mienskaha Bielaruskaha Predstaŭnictva,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 10, 24 March 1918, 79.

¹³⁶ Document Nr. 0303 “List Jazepa Varonki Antonu Luckieviču za 27.04.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 132.

¹³⁷ NARB, f. 567, vop. 1, spr. 11, ark. 4.

¹³⁸ Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 169.

Belarusian national forces could also stabilize the Rada, providing it with an absolute pro-independence majority.¹³⁹ Brothers Ivan and Anton Luckievič argued that it could improve the image of the BNR in the eyes of the German authorities.¹⁴⁰ Another reason for their sympathies appears to have been the closeness of the Minsk moderates to the political views of the Vil'nia Belarusians, echoing the latter's visions of a common Belarusian-Lithuanian state.¹⁴¹ The program of the Minsk Representation, published in *Vol'naja Bielarus'* in March 1918, called for the settling of Belarusian-Lithuanian ties “on the basis of common state-building in connection with Kurland in order to restore the old trade routes to the sea.”¹⁴² The April statement on the positions of the Representation was more specific, calling for a “union with Lithuania and Kurland, reviving the ancient independent Belarusian-Lithuanian statehood.”¹⁴³

However, in contrast to the Ober Ost Belarusians, the idea of a federation of the successor nations of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania did not find any support or understanding in eastern Belarus. People from this region¹⁴⁴ were generally more reluctant to terminate all ties to Russia, often demonstrating a lack of national-oriented thinking. For instance, when Mitrafan Doŭnar-Zapol'ski, historian and ethnographer by profession, proposed to negotiate with the Germans a possible project of a regional federation of Belarus, Ukraine, and Lithuania, he faced opposition from a certain Trempovič, who protested against the “final” separation from Russia. Instead, he wanted Belarus to participate in the future construction of “Great Russia,” implying that it should have declared support for the Whites in fighting the Bolsheviks in the civil war.¹⁴⁵ Even the

¹³⁹ Document Nr. 0195 “Čarnavik lista Antona Luckieviča (Vil'nia) [siabram Mienskaha Bielaruskaha Pradstaŭnictva (Miensk) za 7.04.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 87 – 88.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ See Chapter 6.

¹⁴² “Adozva Mienskaha Bielaruskaha Predstaŭnictva,” *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 10, 24 March 1918, 79.

¹⁴³ “Try centry,” *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 16, 11 April 1918, 1.

¹⁴⁴ On the peculiarities of positions of the Belarusian national movement in eastern Belarus see Chapter 3.

¹⁴⁵ Document Nr. 0488 “Pratakol Nr. 15 pasiedžannia delehacyi NS BNR u sprave pieramovaŭ za 10.06.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 173.

head of the People's Secretariat, Jazep Varonka, did not exclude federation with the Russian state in its non-Soviet version.¹⁴⁶

The Rada of the BNR, originating from the All-Belarusian Congress, consisted primarily of national activists from eastern Belarus, displaying a similar way of thinking. Eventually it influenced cooperation attempts of the Minsk Representation and the Rada, although for a while it seemed that they might succeed. With the assistance of the Vil'nia Belarusians, the whole Representation was incorporated into the Rada of the BNR on 12 April 1918.¹⁴⁷ The leading members of the BSH, including Jazep Varonka and Arkadz' Smolič, agreed to cooperation, yet the left wing of the party protested.¹⁴⁸ Within the Rada, the Representation formed the faction of the center, second in size after the biggest faction of the bloc, which included the Congress Council members and the BSH. The left wing of the BSH, consisting of Tamaš Hryb, Paluta Badunova, and six others, in protest against the inclusion of the moderates, formed a separate SR faction.¹⁴⁹

The rift within the BSH, leading to its division, deepened on 25 April 1918, after the Rada sent a telegram to the German Kaiser Wilhelm II. By that time, Germany had already recognized the new Ukrainian state in the course of the Brest-Litovsk peace talks, followed by the recognition of Lithuania on 23 April 1918. Hoping to achieve a similar recognition of the BNR and to increase its visibility in international politics, Raman Skirmunt, the head of the Minsk Representation and new member of the Rada, acted as the main initiator of contacting the Kaiser. As the Rada of the BNR was previously involved in interactions with the German government,¹⁵⁰ the fact of sending a

¹⁴⁶ Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 300 – 301.

¹⁴⁷ Hadleŭski, “Z bielaruskaha palityčnaha žyccia,” 32.

¹⁴⁸ NARB, f. 567, vop. 1, spr. 11, ark. 6.

¹⁴⁹ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 252.

¹⁵⁰ The People's Secretariat had sent a telegram to the German chancellor Hertling in March 1918, requesting participation in the decision-making process on the Belarusian territories. See *Vol'naja Bielarus'*, Nr. 10, 24 March 1918, 79. See also Document Nr. 0186 “Memaryjal Narodnaha Sekretaryjatu BNR Imperskamu Kancleru Niamieččyny za 5.04.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 79 – 84.

telegram to the Kaiser was not an extraordinary step as such. The debates developed around its contents rather than the need to send it.¹⁵¹

The final version, authored by Jazep Varonka, who managed to dismiss Skirmunt's draft,¹⁵² described the Rada as the legitimate representation of the Belarusian people and thanked the Kaiser for the “liberation from the foreign rule and anarchy.”¹⁵³ With regard to the independence and indivisibility of Belarus, proclaimed in the Third Constituent Charter, the Rada asked the German Empire for protection and guarantees of the territorial integrity. The telegram was signed by the chair of the Rada, Ivan Sierada, the head of the People's Secretariat, Varonka, and Rada members Skirmunt, Aŭsianik, Aliaksiuk, Krečeŭski, and Liosik.¹⁵⁴

The majority of the Rada voted in favour of the telegram, while only four members were against and another four abstained. Although it remained unanswered, as Germany was not inclined to revise the Brest peace commitments,¹⁵⁵ it had far-reaching consequences for the internal stability of the BNR. The telegram caused discord within the Belarusian movement, destroying the apparently temporary unity of interests. The major party, the BSH, split into three groups: the left wing, inspired by the anti-German positions of Badunova and Hryb, formed the Belarusian Party of the Socialist-Revolutionaries (Bialruskaja Partyja Sacyjalistaŭ-Revalucyjneraŭ, BPSR). Politically it was close to the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries and Belarusian Bolsheviks, focusing on the organization of land redistribution, rather than state-building activities. It still supported the BSH program in the national aspects, yet did not consider them a priority. This position secured the BPSR considerable support among the peasantry, primarily

¹⁵¹ Hadleŭski, “Z bielaruskaha palityčnaha žyccia,” 34 – 35.

¹⁵² See Document Nr. 0303 “List Jazepa Varonki Antonu Luckieviču za 27.04.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 132.

¹⁵³ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 146.

¹⁵⁴ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 21, ark. 146.

¹⁵⁵ Hadleŭski, “Z bielaruskaha palityčnaha žyccia,” 36.

concerned about the land issue.¹⁵⁶

The Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (Bielaruskaja Sacyjal-Demakratyčnaja Partyja, BSDP) was formed by the centrists within the BSH, joined by the Vil'nia Social-Democratic Workers' Group. Led by Anton Luckievič, Arkadz' Smolič, and Ivan Kraskoŭski, it promoted Belarusian independence, a democratic form of government, and nationalization of the land by means of social reforms.¹⁵⁷ Finally, the smallest of all three BSH successors, the Belarusian Party of the Socialists-Federalists (Bielaruskaja Partyja Sacyjalistaŭ-Federalistaŭ, BPSF), formed around Jazep Varonka with the support of Kanstancin Ezavitaŭ, Vasil Zacharka, Ivan Sierada, and Anton Aŭsianik.¹⁵⁸ It focused on balancing major social and national issues, promoting independent Belarus in a possible federation with a democratic Russia, but not yet with its Bolshevik version.¹⁵⁹ Two of the successors of the BSH, the more radical leftist BPSR with Hryb and the BPSF with Varonka, appear to have been in clear opposition to the moderate current, while other socialists and the BSDP, including the brothers Luckievič, Liosik, Harun, and Smolič, demonstrated more flexibility to compromise and cooperate.¹⁶⁰

Divisions within the BSH deepened the political crisis of the BNR government. On 12 April 1918, in the same session when the Minsk Belarusian Representation was coopted into the Rada, Varonka had already discussed the options to restructure the People's Secretariat. He argued for a more efficient cabinet system to replace the *ad hoc* Secretariat, formed on the eve of the German takeover of Minsk. Taking into account the inclusion of moderates into the governing structures of the BNR,¹⁶¹ the majority of the

¹⁵⁶ Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa*, 299 – 300.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁵⁸ Luckievič, *Da historyi bielaruskaha ruchu*, 169.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 300 – 301.

¹⁶⁰ Anatol' Sidarevič, "Urady BNR i kabinet Ramana Skirmunta," *ARCHE* (2008), Nr. 4: 121.

¹⁶¹ To reflect the political cooperation with the Minsk Representation, the Rada of the BNR also reelected its presidium. The new coalition presidium was chaired by Jazep Liosik, who replaced Ivan Sierada. Smolič and Ulasaŭ were elected to serve as his deputies. NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 8, ark. 39, 39 adv.

Rada proceeded with voting for the coalition cabinet “for the sake of Belarusian statehood.”¹⁶² After the announcement of the Varonka government’s resignation on 14 May, Raman Skirmunt was entrusted with the task of forming the new People's Secretariat. Replacement of Varonka's socialist-dominated Secretariat with a moderate government aimed to facilitate relations with the German occupation authorities. Yet the formation of the new government was delayed until the summer. Skirmunt's inclination to settle the land question through agricultural reforms and his reluctance to nationalize the land did not win him support in the Rada. Moreover, his failure to address Polish-Belarusian relations caused reservations among the left wing of the Rada, complicating formation of the cabinet.¹⁶³

A crisis broke out on 9 July 1918, when the Rada of the BNR officially confirmed the mandate of Skirmunt's government. The moderate faction of the Rada also could prevail against the socialist faction in the minor question, deciding against the creation of special commissions within the Rada.¹⁶⁴ In defiance, Varonka's Secretariat met on 13 July and confronted the members of the new cabinet, Astroŭski and Aliaksiuk, over the issue of power transfer.¹⁶⁵ The Belarusian historian Anatol' Sidarevič suggests several explanations for Varonka's actions. One of the concerns was the perception that moderates were taking the lead, instead of enforcing the agreement on the coalition government. In addition, Varonka might have resented the loss of his position in the government, reinforced by his personal dislike of Skirmunt and Aliaksiuk.¹⁶⁶

The left-wing BSH successor parties undermined the chances of political

¹⁶² Document Nr. 0213 “Karotkaja spravazdača z 5-ha pasiedžannia II sesii Rady BNR za 12.04.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 92.

¹⁶³ Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa*, 315 – 316.

¹⁶⁴ Sidarevič, “Urady BNR,” 118 – 120. The commissions within the Rada were nevertheless created in August 1918. See Document Nr. 0784 “Chronika dlia hazet. Miensk, 5.08.1918,” in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 227.

¹⁶⁵ NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 7, ark. 77, 78.

¹⁶⁶ Sidarevič, “Urady BNR,” 122.

consolidation within the governing institutions of the BNR in 1918. The BPSR and the BPSF did not trust Skirmunt's government, accusing it of Polonophile tendencies, although the Minsk Representation did not make any statements regarding Poland. In fact, its orientation was anti-Russian, offering new ways of building Belarusian statehood with regard to the existing political circumstances, which at that time favoured a pro-German direction. Yet the Belarusian left wing was extremely suspicious towards local Poles, using the exaggeration of a perceived Polish threat¹⁶⁷ for the construction of a powerful image of the national "other." This reasoning often denied the local Poles the right of being represented in the Belarusian government. An exclusivist way of thinking of the nation and a lack of confidence was characteristic for the BPSR and BPSF, as in their understanding being Belarusian was invariably connected to peasant origins. Eventually, such a stereotypical approach made them suspicious even towards the Belarusian national activists who belonged to the Roman Catholic faith.¹⁶⁸

The internal crisis of the Belarusian national politics was complicated by the international situation. In the sphere of foreign policy, Skirmunt prioritized international recognition of the Belarusian state, which was dependent on the positions of either Russia or Germany. Since Russia did not welcome the proclamation of the BNR independence and still planned forced "federation" with the Soviet state,¹⁶⁹ Skirmunt's reasoning in favour of German orientation offered more room for maneuver for the Belarusian statehood. However, by mid-1918 Germany was focused on its Western front and did not intend to destabilize the situation in the East by violating its agreements with Russia.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ For instance, Varonka was especially adamant about perceived Polish threats in his speech on 9 July 1918, accusing "certain new local elements" of enlisting into the ranks of the Belarusian nation after the failure of Polish forces to gain power in Minsk. See NARB, f. 325, vop. 1, spr. 8, ark. 83.

¹⁶⁸ Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa*, 320.

¹⁶⁹ See Document Nr. 1038 "Pro memoria Nadzvyčajnaj Delegacyi Rady BNR (Kieŭ) Narodnamu Sakrataryjatu BNR (Miensk)," in Šupa, *Archivy Bielaruskaj Narodnaj Respubliki*, 269.

¹⁷⁰ Stanislaŭ Rudovič, "...Bielaruski dzejač z vialikich panoŭ." Epizody palityčnaj bijahraffii Ramana Skirmunta," *Historyčny almanach* (Horadnia: Bielaruskaje historyčnaje tavarystva, 1999), 34.

The tendency of moving out of the Russian orbit was continued by the third People's Secretariat, which promptly replaced Skirmunt's government on 22 July. Chaired by Ivan Sierada, it appeared less controversial for the Belarusian socialists, but in essence continued to focus on the relations with the German authorities. Looking for a detour route to achieve recognition of the BNR by Germany, its government had been attempting to establish closer ties to Ukraine – another newcomer on the political map of Europe. However, in contrast to the BNR, it enjoyed German support.¹⁷¹ A delegation led by Aliaksandr Cvikievič had travelled to Kyiv already in April 1918.¹⁷² Along with the recognition of the BNR and finding a regional ally, its main task was to secure financial assistance.¹⁷³ However, initial discussions were dominated by the issue of the southern border of the BNR to Ukraine and in particular, Ukrainian ambitions towards the contested Palesse region.¹⁷⁴

Between September and November 1918, up until the last days of Skoropadsky's regime, the BNR delegations continued to negotiate the issue of the recognition of independence by Ukraine. Anton Luckievič discussed this question with the Ukrainian foreign minister Doroshenko, offering to create a common front against the Bolsheviks and suggesting the creation of a regional federation. Ukrainian authorities assured the delegation only of their sympathies towards the BNR, but refused to recognize its independence until there was an agreement from the German side. Doroshenko offered financial assistance and promised to act as an intermediary in establishing contacts with Berlin. Yet at the same time, Ukrainians appropriated the region of western Palesse and used their relations to the BNR to exercise pressure on

¹⁷¹ *Bielaruski Šliach*, Nr. 5, 28 March 1918, 1.

¹⁷² It was able to establish diplomatic and economic ties: Belarusian consulates operated in Kyiv and Odessa, and a Belarusian Commerce Chamber opened in Kyiv. See Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 44.

¹⁷³ Tacciana Paŭlava, "Asnoŭnyja napramki zniešnepalityčnaj dzejnasci BNR u 1918 – 1920 hh.," *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne* (2001), Nr. 15: 80.

¹⁷⁴ Belarusian-Ukrainian border negotiations and arguments of both sides are discussed in detail by Dorota Michaluk. See Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa*, 247 – 257.

Soviet Russia, threatening to recognize the Belarusian state, should Russia refuse to transfer the eastern Palesse areas to Ukraine.¹⁷⁵ Thus, the international situation was not favourable for the BNR, leaving it powerless and without any reliable allies in the region.

Soviet Version: Belarusian National Commissariat

The divisions within the BSH, which affected the BNR governance, date back to the 3rd Congress of the party, which was held between 14 and 20 October 1917 in Minsk. It resulted in first serious crisis within the main Belarusian political party, caused by the uncompromising positions of its left wing, which antagonized the majority of the party by advocating the primacy of socialism over the program of national consolidation.¹⁷⁶ The left wing of the BSH received support from the Petrograd section of the party and the Belarusian social-democrats in Russia, who were represented by the Belarusian Social-Democratic Workers' Party (Bielaruskaja Sacyjal-Demakratyčnaja Rabočaja Partyja, BSDRP).¹⁷⁷ Together they became the foundation of the Belarusian political forces operating in Soviet Russia during 1918.

In the early stages of 1918, all Russian-based Belarusian socialists had to decide how to engage in the national politics and whether to do so under the auspices of the Soviet government or not. Their options were limited by either hopeless confrontation with the Soviet power or a faint chance at Belarusian self-determination, albeit directed and controlled from above. Bolshevik regime consolidation did not leave them much of a choice. The dissolution of the All-Belarusian Congress on 18 December 1917 and

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 324 – 326.

¹⁷⁶ Žylunovič, “Liuty – Kastyčnik,” 193.

¹⁷⁷ Its roots are traced back to the Petrograd conference of the BSH in June 1917. Led by Alaiksandr Čarviakoŭ, the BSDRP took shape in late September 1917, incorporating members of the Narva organization of the BSH. At first, it existed as a separate party with representation at the Bolshevik party committee. In March 1918, the BSDRP merged with the Russian Communist Party and was reduced to a status of a section within the latter. Its members later made careers in the government of the BSSR. See Anatol' Sidarevič, “Da historyi Bielaruskaj Sacyjalistyčnaj Hramady: ahliad krynicaŭ,” *ARCHE* (2006), Nr. 4: 158; Ladyseŭ, *Pamiž Uschodam i Zachadam*, 42; Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 47 – 48.

following identical fate of the Russian Constituent Assembly on 6 January 1918 made it clear that the Bolsheviks were determined to hold onto power by any means. On the other hand, the greater flexibility that the Bolsheviks demonstrated in handling the national issue attracted sympathies of many non-Russian socialists. Unlike their adversaries in the Civil War who fought for the “one and indivisible” Russia, Bolsheviks recognized the potential of national movements to serve as tools to strengthen Soviet power. National minorities were allowed a symbolic representation in the government, along with the prospects of participation in the decision-making process within the People's Commissariat for Nationality Affairs (Narkomnats). In its essence, the Narkomnats was an improvised institution, created as a recruitment tool for national elites who were willing to collaborate with the Bolsheviks and ensure mass support for the Soviet power in the non-Russian regions.¹⁷⁸

In the Belarusian case, the trend towards the Soviet cooptation of national elites became evident with the decision to establish the Belarusian National Commissariat (Bielaruski Nacyjanal'ny Kamisaryjat, Bielnackam) in Petrograd as a subdivision of the Narkomnats on 31 January 1918, following the attack on the CBVR and its members in Minsk. From the Bolshevik perspective, it was designed to provide an institutional legitimation of the appropriation of Belarusian nationalism.¹⁷⁹ The left wing of the BSH and the Belarusian social-democrats in Russia formed the core of the Bielnackam, treating it as a realistic opportunity to advance the Belarusian national cause within the Soviet state. Being aware that wartime destruction made it hardly possible for Belarus to survive as an independent state without assistance of the great powers, the majority of

¹⁷⁸ Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917 – 23* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 31. On Narkomnats and its place within the early Soviet government structures see Stephen Blank, *The Sorcerer as Apprentice. Stalin as Commissar of Nationalities, 1917 – 1924* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 7 – 29.

¹⁷⁹ Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa*, 223 – 224; Latyšonak, *Žaŭnery BNR*, 56.

Belarusian socialists in Petrograd agreed that statehood remained their priority, even if it was to be built under close Soviet supervision and in connection with Russia. The prospect of holding the Second All-Belarusian Congress further reinforced the decision of Belarusian socialists to cooperate with Soviet power. Yet in exchange, they had to give up their own independent roles and recognize the rights of the Soviet government to decide all crucial aspects of the Belarusian state-building process.¹⁸⁰

Cooperation with the Soviet authorities promised some additional incentives and immediate benefits, including financial assistance for publishing activities, access to refugee relief funds, and the formal possibility to join the Soviet governing institutions. Being aware of these opportunities, the general meeting of the Petrograd section of the BSH and BSDRP sent a delegation to the central Soviet government already in early January 1918 to negotiate possible assistance options. Starting from February 1918, Belarusian socialists in Russia continued their activities within the institutional structures of Bielnackam, headed by A. Čarviakoŭ, one of the organizers and leaders of the BSDRP. Zmicier Źylunovič from the left wing of the BSH served as the chief secretary of the new organization. In March 1918, along with other Soviet state institutions, Bielnackam moved to Moscow and started publishing its own newspaper *Dziannica* there. Branch departments of Bielnackam existed in Petrograd, Viciebsk, Smolensk, and Saratov.¹⁸¹ The main tasks centered on the spread of Soviet propaganda among ethnic Belarusians through cultural and educational activities, organization of moral and legal assistance to Belarusians, publications of translated and original literature and last but not least – research and regulation of the refugee problem.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Ryhor Laz'ko, "Bielnackam i Narkamnac: pieršy prykry vopyt uzaemaadnosin (studzien' – červien' 1918 h.)," *Bielaruski Histaryčny Časopis* (2012), Nr. 2: 6 – 7.

¹⁸¹ Siarhei Siniak, "Bielaruskae pytanne i kanflikt bielaruskich aktyvistaŭ Maskvy i Petrahrada (1918 – 1919 hh.)," *Bielaruski Histaryčny Časopis* (2012), Nr. 2: 17.

¹⁸² "O deiatel'nosti Belarusskago Natsional'nogo Komissariata," *Dziannica*, Nr. 11, 1 May 1918, 1.

With regard to the BNR, Bielnackam members were divided in their opinions, as part of them supported the creation of an independent nation-state, while the other part sympathized with Marxist internationalism.¹⁸³ While the latter tended to denigrate the BNR, the first group recognized that they had similar goals.¹⁸⁴ For instance, Jaŭsej Kančar, the former head of the Belarusian Oblast' Committee, was among those who did not object to the BNR. Speaking on the occasion of the Belarusian refugees' meeting in Petrograd on 14 April 1918, which was attended by about 8,000 people according to *Dziannica*, Kančar commended the efforts of the Executive Committee of the First All-Belarusian Congress towards securing the existence of the Belarusian republic.¹⁸⁵ However, in the course of 1918, the positions of the Belarusian socialists in Russia towards the BNR became more confrontational. Bielnackam started presenting itself as a superior solution to the BNR, aspiring to the status of a new Belarusian political center. Zmicier Źylunovič in particular was keen on attacking the BNR and his former party colleagues from the BSH.¹⁸⁶

Even though the Bielnackam was careful not to demand full participation in the decision-making process regarding the governance of the Belarusian territories,¹⁸⁷ it gradually emerged in the role of an alternative to the former Obliskomzap Bolsheviks throughout 1918. The latter fled from the advancing Germans to Smolensk, which became the center of the Western oblast', which in April 1918 included territories of

¹⁸³ This tendency reflected divisions among the Bolshevik leadership, which did not have a clear idea on settling the nationality question after the October Revolution. While Lenin argued for a gradual road towards socialism allowing for nationalities to complete all stages of historical development as suggested by Marx, other Bolsheviks, among them Bukharin and Piatakov, interpreted the principle of national self-determination as being counterproductive and emphasized economic factors as crucial instruments for the construction of socialism. Francine Hirsch terms these two currents as ethnographic and economic paradigms respectively, arguing that Soviet nationality policy developed as a result of competition between these two approaches. See Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 64 – 65.

¹⁸⁴ Laz'ko, "Bielnackam i Narkamnac," 11.

¹⁸⁵ *Dziannica*, Nr. 11, 1 May 1918, 3.

¹⁸⁶ Laz'ko, "Bielnackam i Narkamnac," 11 – 12.

¹⁸⁷ "O deiatel'nosti Belarusskago Natsional'nogo Komissariata," *Dziannica*, Nr. 11, 1 May 1918, 1.

Smolensk, Viciebsk, and Mahilioŭ provinces. The Obliskomzap transformed into the Executive Committee of the Western Oblast' (Oblastiskomzap), headed by Miasnikov.¹⁸⁸ The new Bolshevik institution retained extremely anti-Belarusian positions, opposing even the officially approved activities of the Bielnackam. For instance, in September 1918, it resisted the latter's proposition to rename the Western oblast' into the "Belarusian oblast"¹⁸⁹ and to transfer power over the unoccupied territories of Viciebsk, Mahilioŭ, parts of Smolensk, Orel, and Pskov provinces with ethnic Belarusian populations to the representatives of the Belarusian peasants and workers. Smolensk Bolsheviks immediately labelled Bielnackam's activities as being "chauvinistic" and "counterrevolutionary," interfering in its work on the unoccupied Belarusian territories.¹⁹⁰ For instance, despite the requests of the local population, not a single Belarusian school was opened in eastern Belarusian districts under Soviet power. Publication of Belarusian books was not possible there either, and the ban extended even to the publication of translated Communist agitation materials.¹⁹¹ The Smolensk department of the Bielnackam was promptly closed by the Executive Committee of the Western oblast' already in June 1918.¹⁹² The branch in Viciebsk was able to continue working under pressure until late 1918, when it was also dissolved on the orders of the Viciebsk Committee of the Communist party.¹⁹³

These experiences of Bielnackam reflect consistently hostile reactions of the official leadership of the Western oblast' towards Belarusian national demands. More generally, these tensions also demonstrate the overall problematic position of the Narkomnats in the system of the Soviet government, caused by the vaguely defined role

¹⁸⁸ Ignatenko, *Istoriia Belorusskoi SSR*, 245.

¹⁸⁹ Instead, it was renamed as the Western Commune.

¹⁹⁰ See Document Nr. 5 "Dokladnaia zapiska "Sovetskaia vlast' v Belorussii," in Selemenev, *I ianvariia 1919 goda*, 218.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Laz'ko, "Bielnackam i Narkamnac," 8.

¹⁹³ *Dziannica*, Nr. 42, 17 December 1918, 3.

of this ministry. The Bolshevik authorities treated it primarily as a subordinate organ of the central government, while the representatives of the non-Russian nationalities interpreted their inclusion into the Narkomnats as recognition of their expertise in national politics, treating it as a tool of political advocacy.¹⁹⁴

The case of the Bielnackam can be interpreted as a confirmation of this trend, illustrating the growing frustrations and disillusionment of the Soviet-coopted national elites as they realized their subordinate positions. For instance, in spring 1918 the Bielnackam's Military Department optimistically planned for the creation of Belarusian detachments within the Red Army, pursuing a similar tactic as the CBVR in January 1918. However, this plan was never implemented. Moreover, the Military Department itself was soon disbanded,¹⁹⁵ forcing the Bielnackam to switch their focus towards cultural and humanitarian tasks.

Deprived of the opportunity to expand its activities on the Belarusian territories, Bielnackam turned its attention to the Belarusian refugees in Russia. Due to the slow evolution of modern Belarusian nationalism in the pre-war years, refugees were hardly exposed to a comprehensive national agitation at home. Displacement and resettlement only worsened the situation, as Belarusians in Russia did not possess their own stable national refugee organizations throughout the First World War. Consequently, they did not show any particular interest in national politics. Motivated only by the primary concern of returning home, Belarusian refugees did not attach any particular value to national identifications and often did not hesitate in declaring their belonging to different nationalities,¹⁹⁶ making use of the services offered by the Polish and Lithuanian National Commissariats, which had been established prior to the Bielnackam.¹⁹⁷ A

¹⁹⁴ Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 32.

¹⁹⁵ Laz'ko, "Bielnackam i Narkamnac," 7 – 8.

¹⁹⁶ NARB, f. 4, vop. 1, spr. 68, ark. 34.

¹⁹⁷ Laz'ko, "Bielnackam i Narkamnac," 6.

representative of the Bielnackam, reporting from the Saratov province, noted that Belarusian Catholics residing there apparently were “taken over” by Polish national refugee organizations, while the Orthodox remained an unorganized “inert mass” in terms of political participation, still in need of being educated about “civil and national self-consciousness.”¹⁹⁸ Left without connections to their homeland, Belarusian refugees in Russia often lived in an information vacuum. The report from Saratov province also mentioned that even by 1918 Belarusian refugees were not informed about the political situation in Belarus and Russia.¹⁹⁹

Throughout 1918, Bielnackam emissaries visited various districts in the Russian provinces, attempting to overcome these signs of “national indifference.”²⁰⁰ Emphasizing Bielnackam's attention to the specific needs and concerns of Belarusians, they organized committees for the Belarusian refugees, distributed political brochures, and recruited activists to continue their work on the local level.²⁰¹ For some of the refugees, these contacts with the Bielnackam might have been the first encounter with the Belarusian national idea, even if it was in Soviet “packaging.”

In practical terms, by fall 1918, the Refugee Department of the Bielnackam assisted in the repatriation of about 70,000 people²⁰² (the majority of them, about 50,000, were natives of Hrodna province).²⁰³ The Cultural-Educational Department of the Bielnackam negotiated with the central government the issue of re-evacuation of

¹⁹⁸ NARB, f. 4, vop. 1, spr. 67, ark. 4.

¹⁹⁹ NARB, f. 4, vop. 1, spr. 67, ark. 4.

²⁰⁰ For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon see Chapter 3.

²⁰¹ NARB, f. 4, vop. 1, spr. 67, ark. 4 adv.

²⁰² The exact number of Belarusian refugees in Russia during the First World War remains unknown, since the official statistics assigned Belarusians together with Ukrainians into the category of “Great Russians.” Researchers suggest that a total of about 1.4 million people were evacuated from the Vil'nia, Hrodna, Minsk, Viciebsk, and Mahilioŭ provinces, where the majority of the ethnically Belarusian population resided. See Peter Gattrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 212 – 214; Eugeniusz Mironowicz, Siarhiej Tokć, and Ryszard Radzik, *Zmiana struktury narodowościowej na pograniczu polsko-białoruskim w XX wieku* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2005), 24 – 26.

²⁰³ NARB, f. 4, vop. 1, spr. 67, ark. 105.

pedagogical institutions to Belarus and established contacts with Belarusian teachers, instructing them on how to organize and run cultural groups.²⁰⁴ Other celebrated achievements included the opening of the Belarusian People's University in Moscow on 11 July 1918, offering a series of lectures on Belarus-related subjects. Primarily it was oriented towards the needs of the Belarusian schoolteachers.²⁰⁵

Despite the lack of support from the central government and insufficient funding,²⁰⁶ Bielnackam expanded its activities beyond Petrograd and Moscow, for the first time making a serious attempt to establish targeted relief for the Belarusian refugees in Russia and to promote Belarusian national identity among these people. Bielnackam's energetic work and connection of national agitation to the practical needs of the refugees, along with promises of material benefits enjoyed by other nationalities, popularized the option of identifying as Belarusian among the refugees. In this manner, it pioneered and advanced the national cause among the Belarusian refugees in Russia, neglected in the course of the entire First World War.

Towards Belarusian Soviet Statehood

Belarusian Bolsheviks from the Bielnackam made an attempt to solidify their status within the central party structures already in May 1918. They aspired towards the establishment of a separate Belarusian section at the Central Committee of the Communist party, as the only official organization of Belarusian Communists at that time had been the district-level local Petrograd section. Yet the Central Committee refused the request and an official Belarusian Communist organization in Moscow, along with sections in other cities, emerged only in November 1918.²⁰⁷ Soon thereafter it called a

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ "Otkrytie v Moskve Belorusskago Narodnago Universiteta," *Dziannica*, Nr. 20, 21 July 1918, 3.

²⁰⁶ Document Nr. 5 "Dokladnaia zapiska "Sovetskaia vlast' v Belorussii," in Selemenev, *I ianvariia 1919*, 216 – 217.

²⁰⁷ Laz'ko, "Bielnackam i Narkamnac," 14.

conference of the Belarusian Communist sections on 21 – 23 December, declaring the creation of a Belarusian Soviet Republic in the capacity of “an outpost of the Russian revolution” to be a priority task.²⁰⁸ The conference concluded with the election of Zmicier Źylunovič as the chair of Bielnackam and the head of the Belarusian sections within the RKP(b) (Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)).²⁰⁹

German defeat in the First World War on 11 November 1918 resulted in the subsequent annulment of the Brest peace treaty on 13 November and the return of Soviet power to Minsk and central regions of Belarus. For the Belarusian national activists it posed a new set of problems and threats. The future administrative status of the Belarusian territories remained unclear up until late December 1918. In contrast to the BNR government, which was evacuated from Minsk and moved to Hrodna, where German armies remained until the early spring of 1919,²¹⁰ Belarusian Communists in Russia saw a chance to advance their struggle for Belarusian Soviet statehood. They attempted to implement their plans by seizing the initiative from the Western oblast’ Bolsheviks, who in their own words “protected only the oblast’ structures, but not the nation.”²¹¹ The central Soviet government remained undecided on the issue until the end of 1918. Eventually, it was the international situation in the region that prompted it to create revolutionary governments on the territories vacated by the German armies, as was the case with Soviet Lithuania, Latvia, and also Belarus.

Russian Bolsheviks expected that German defeat in the First World War would revitalize national aspirations in the borderlands, encouraged by the previous German policies of fostering anti-Russian moods among the local national movements. To

²⁰⁸ Document Nr. 5 “Dokladnaia zapiska “Sovetskaia vlast’ v Belorussii,” in Selemenev, *1 ianvariia 1919*, 220.

²⁰⁹ Siniak, “Bielaruskae pytanne,” 22.

²¹⁰ Andrej Čarniakevič, *Naradženne bielaruskaj Harodni. Z historyi nacyjanal'naha ruchu 1909 – 1939 hadoŭ* (Minsk, Vydavec A. M. Januškievič, 2015), 25 – 27.

²¹¹ Document Nr. 12a “Protokol Nr. 12 zasedaniia TsB KPB ot 31/1,” in Selemenev, *1 ianvariia 1919*, 92.

neutralize this threat, the Central Committee of the Communist Party decided to employ a similar strategy by creating a *cordon sanitaire* of buffer republics.²¹² Lenin himself mentioned to the Smolensk Bolsheviks that the Belarusian republic was to be designed as a buffer state at the border to the West.²¹³ The Belarusian Soviet state was thus conceptualized from above as a counterbalance to the newly created independent Polish state, as well as to Ukraine, where Bolsheviks were concerned about existing and potentially destabilizing “nationalist tendencies.”²¹⁴ Furthermore, the Soviet government had doubts about the feasibility of the project of Soviet Lithuania, exacerbated by the ambitions of some Polish political forces to restore the 1772 pre-partition Commonwealth borders.²¹⁵ As a side effect, support of the Belarusian statehood could improve the image of the Soviet state as a protector of non-Russian nationalities. Later, it evolved into one of the strategies to weaken the Polish state from within. Known as “the Piedmont principle,” this approach influenced the development of nationality policy in the Belarusian Soviet state during the interwar period.²¹⁶

At the same time, the Bolsheviks realized that establishment of Soviet Belarus “would strongly encourage national-chauvinistic dreams.”²¹⁷ The member of the Central Committee of the RKP(b) Ioffe warned that without strong control, “bourgeois elements will use national slogans to confuse proletarian self-consciousness, as it is happening in Poland.”²¹⁸ With these reservations in mind, the People's Commissar of Nationalities Stalin kept the Belarusian state-building process under close supervision and control,

²¹² Document Nr. 30 “Protocol Nr. 10 zasedaniia Central'nogo Biuro Kommunisticheskoi partii (bolshevikov) Belorusii,” in V. I. Adamushko et al., eds., *Vitebskaia guberniia, 1917 – 1924 gg. Dokumenty i materialy* (Vitebsk: Vitebskaia oblastnaia tipografiia, 2012), 98.

²¹³ Document Nr. 12a “Protokol Nr. 12 zasedaniia TsB KPB ot 31/1,” in Selemenev, *1 ianvariia 1919*, 92.

²¹⁴ Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 150.

²¹⁵ Zachar Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi: 1795 – 2002* (Minsk: Encyklopedyys, 2003), 212.

²¹⁶ Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 150; Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 139 – 140; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923 – 1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 9.

²¹⁷ Document Nr. 30 “Protocol Nr. 10 zasedaniia Tsentral'nogo Biuro Kommunisticheskoi partii (bolshevikov) Belorusii,” in Adamushko, *Vitebskaia guberniia*, 98.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

interfering whenever necessary. On 25 December 1918, he met with Žylunovič and his party colleagues to discuss the proclamation manifesto of the new republic²¹⁹ and handed down the list of ministers for the first Belarusian Soviet government.²²⁰ He specifically pointed out the subordinate positions of the future Central Bureau of the Belarusian Communist Party to the central Soviet institutions.²²¹

On the same day, the Central Committee of the RKP(b) sent a telegram to Smolensk Communists, ordering the formation of the Belarusian Soviet government.²²² Being aware of the anti-Belarusian positions of the Western oblast' administration, Belarusian Communists tried to negotiate with Stalin the composition of the future government, yet Stalin sided with Miasnikov, forcing Žylunovič and Belarusian Communists to obey the Central Committee of the RKP(b) and agree to be a minority in their own government. The latter was to be composed of seven Belarusian Communists, seven members of the Executive Committee of the Western oblast', and two members appointed by Moscow.²²³

Meanwhile in Smolensk, the Oblastiskomzap organized the 6th North-Western Regional Conference of the Communist Party and promptly transformed it into the 1st Congress of the Communist Party of Belarus (KP(b)B), declared to be an indivisible part of the RKP(b). The Central Bureau (TsB) of the new party division was headed by Miasnikov.²²⁴ This step effectively sidelined Belarusian Communist sections within the RKP(b), formed in Moscow in November 1918. When Žylunovič and the delegation of Belarusian Communists arrived in Smolensk, anticipating the meeting of the new

²¹⁹ The location of the document with the decision of the TsK to form Belarusian government remains unknown. See Emanuil Iofe, "Neviadomy Zmicier Žylunovič," *Maladosc'* (November 2012), Nr. 780: 89.

²²⁰ Ignatenko, *Istoriia Belorusskoi SSR*, 250.

²²¹ Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 212.

²²² *Ibid.*, 211 – 212.

²²³ Document Nr. 5 "Dokladnaia zapiska "Sovetskaia vlast' v Belorussii," in Selemenev, *1 ianvariia 1919*, 221.

²²⁴ Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 212.

government, they found out that Miasnikov had called a meeting of the Central Bureau of the Communist Party of Belarus without waiting for them. Only two Belarusians (Žylunovič and Lahun) were allowed to join the new TsB, outnumbered by thirteen Oblastiskomzap members.²²⁵ Conflict developed immediately, as Žylunovič demanded fair representation of the Belarusian Communists both in the Central Bureau and in the Belarusian government.²²⁶

According to the protocol of the first meeting of the Central Bureau of the KP(b)B on 31 December 1918, the Oblastiskomzap Communists ignored Žylunovič's requests to include the representatives of the Belarusian Communist section from Moscow into the new TsB, refusing even to recognize them as a legitimate party section.²²⁷ In protest, Žylunovič walked out of the meeting and submitted a complaint to the central authorities.²²⁸ Apparently, as a compensation for Miasnikov's manipulations with the new TsB, Žylunovič requested to exclude three Smolensk Communists from the Belarusian government (Miasnikov, Kalmanovich, and Pikel). Yet Stalin refused and left the Belarusian Communists outnumbered in their own government.²²⁹ Eventually, they had to obey all decisions issued by the Central Committee, as it predictably sided with Miasnikov, who became its primary liaison in Belarus, receiving direct orders from Moscow regarding the organization of the Belarusian government.²³⁰ Following Miasnikov's initiative, the new TsB and Belarusian Communists held another meeting, which decided to issue a manifesto of the Provisional Worker-Peasant Soviet Government of Belarus on 1 January 1919. The text of the official proclamation of the Soviet Socialist

²²⁵ Document Nr. 5 "Dokladnaia zapiska "Sovetskaia vlast' v Belorussii," in Selemenev, *1 ianvariia 1919*, 221.

²²⁶ Iofe, "Neviadomy Zmicier Žylunovič," 89.

²²⁷ Document Nr. 1 "Protokol Nr. 1 zasedaniia Tsentral'nogo Biuro Kommunisticheskoi partii (bolshevikov) Belorussii 31 dekabria 1918 goda," in Selemenev, *1 ianvariia 1919*, 46 – 48.

²²⁸ Document Nr. 5 "Dokladnaia zapiska "Sovetskaia vlast' v Belorussii," in *ibid.*, 221.

²²⁹ Iofe, "Neviadomy Zmicier Žylunovič," 90.

²³⁰ Document Nr. 4 "Protokol zasedaniia Tsentral'nogo Biuro Kommunisticheskoi partii Belorussii 3 ianvaria 1919 goda," in Selemenev, *1 ianvariia 1919*, 51.

Republic of Belarus (SSRB) was coordinated with Moscow and was signed only by five members of the new government, including Žylunovič, Čarviakoŭ, Miasnikov, Ivanov, and Reingold. It appeared in the press on 2 January 1919 first in Russian, and only later in Belarusian translation.²³¹

In order to consolidate power over the newly created SSRB and eliminate all possible competition from the Belarusian Communists, Miasnikov and his Central Bureau outlawed the Belarusian Communist sections at the RKP(b) on 15 January 1919, explaining this step by their alleged “nationalist agitation” and intentions to “disorganize local Communist and Soviet work.”²³² Arrests of several Belarusian Bolsheviks followed. In a grim coincidence, they were ordered by the head of the Minsk garrison Krivoshein, who commanded the violent dissolution of the All-Belarusian Congress on 18 December 1917. Western oblast’ Communists did not hesitate to test their power by any means, and were known for their mocking of Belarusian national culture in the press. The opening of national schools and the publication of newspapers in Belarusian was considered to be superfluous.²³³

Official legitimization of the puppet Soviet Belarusian statehood was provided through the All-Belarusian Congress of Soviets of Workers', Peasants', and Soldiers' Deputies, which took place in Minsk on 2 – 3 February 1919. All delegates were loyal party appointees, and none directly elected by the Belarusian population. The Congress formed the Central Executive Committee. Belarusian Communists were excluded from this institution, while its presidium, chaired by Miasnikov, de facto received the authority of a government. More importantly, the Congress decided to unite the western parts of

²³¹ Document Nr. 5 “Dokladnaia zapiska “Sovetskaia vlast' v Belorussii,” in *ibid.*, 222; Document Nr. 1 “Manifest Časovaha Rabotničja-Sialianskaha Saveckaha Urada Bielarusi,” in *ibid.*, 13 –16.

²³² Document Nr. 7 “Protokol Nr. 7 zasedaniia Tsentral’nogo Biuro Kommunističeskoj partii (bolshevikov) Belorussii ot 15 ianvaria 1919 goda,” in *ibid.*, 65.

²³³ Document Nr. 5 “Dokladnaia zapiska “Sovetskaia vlast' v Belorussii,” in *ibid.*, 226 – 228.

Soviet Belarus with the Minsk, Hrodna and parts of Vil'nia provinces into one republic with Soviet Lithuania, while the eastern Belarusian territories along with the Mahilioŭ, Viciebsk, and Smolensk provinces were transferred to Russia.²³⁴

The motivations of the central Soviet authorities are summarized in the statement of the representative of the Central Committee Ioffe, who feared that even the mere fact of establishing a statehood in the region with weak nationalism could ignite and catalyze national mobilization processes, threatening to transform “the proletarian republic into a bourgeois republic” and endanger Soviet class politics. These considerations led him to believe that national forces could be controlled by a “divide and rule” strategy, where the size of the buffer states was to be limited.²³⁵ As a result, divisions of the SSRB and mergers of the remaining Belarusian territories with Soviet Lithuania effectively ended the brief period of the first Belarusian Soviet statehood and established another short-lived buffer state, which was to fall victim to the advancing Polish armies already by spring 1919.

Throughout 1918, the Bielnackam and Belarusian Bolsheviks made a commendable attempt to implement the project of Belarusian Soviet statehood. However, it did not take them long to realize that the Bolsheviks were not willing to share any of the decision-making power. Therefore, the Bielnackam was not able to boast great successes of political advocacy. It failed to influence Soviet policy-making in relation to Belarus and did not manage to establish any effective representation on the eastern Belarusian territories, losing the political struggle against the Western oblast' Communist functionaries. The status of the Bielnackam within the Soviet state was in certain respects reminiscent of the experiences of the BNR under German occupation, yet in contrast to Germany, Soviet Russia had clear long-term intentions of keeping Belarusian territories in

²³⁴ Šybeka, *Narys historyi Bielarusi*, 214 – 220; Turuk, *Belorusskoe dvizhenie*, 51.

²³⁵ Document Nr. 10a “Protokol Nr. 10 zasedaniia TsB ot 22/1,” in Selemenev, *I ianvariia 1919*, 81 – 82.

its possession, and therefore paid close attention to political control over the Belarusian socialists. By early 1919, Smolensk Communists with the support of the Central Committee could neutralize all efforts of the Belarusian Bolsheviks and assume actual power over the Belarusian territories, deciding their fate as they pleased.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that the BNR played the role of a political center which defended Belarusian interests, and was only striving to become a state as much as it was possible under the conditions of 1918. In this capacity, the BNR prioritized Belarusian national interests, departing from Russia-oriented state-building concepts. It continued national mobilization work among the population, popularizing the Belarusian language and advancing cultural and educational activities. In contrast to the Bolshevik military front authorities which claimed power over Belarus, the first Belarusian state derived its legitimacy from the elected First All-Belarusian Congress. The BNR established a state tradition, the first foundation myth, and a point of reference for the future national activists, and it should be evaluated first and foremost in terms of its lasting legacies for the Belarusian national movement.

Yet the BNR also suffered from a number of fundamental flaws, preventing its evolution into a fully functional nation-state. The principal weakness of the BNR was the lack of physical military power. It marginalized the Belarusian national movement both in the eyes of Germany and Soviet Russia, preventing the BNR from establishing itself as a subject of international politics in the region. Furthermore, provisions of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty deprived the BNR from the protection of the great powers. Germany strictly adhered to its agreement with Soviet Russia, concentrating on the war effort on the Western front and taking advantage of the resources in the conquered Eastern Europe.

In this regard, Ukraine was exploited as a principal pressure factor on Soviet Russia and played the key role in the “bread peace” scheme. It managed to sign a separate peace with the Central Powers and emerged as the primary beneficiary of political concessions. By contrast, Belarus was excluded from the German sphere of influence and was treated as a hostage to secure the Brest treaty implementation. Consequently, German occupation authorities effectively obstructed all attempts of the BNR to achieve recognition and acquire more political power throughout 1918. These circumstances left the first Belarusian state unable to defend itself after the German withdrawal from the Belarusian territories by late 1918.

Internally, the BNR was further weakened by the lack of agreement among the freshly-minted Belarusian statesmen, which translated into a transient and unstable nature of several BNR governments during 1918. Echoing the history of the Belarusian National Committee in 1917, socialists demonstrated an unwillingness to cooperate with moderate socialists. The oldest Belarusian party, the BSH, split over this issue into three smaller parties, leading to further fragmentation and marginalization of Belarusian politics. The fate of the moderates, who in 1918 gathered around the Minsk Belarusian Representation, was even more dramatic. Lacking strong organizational structures and facing hostility from the socialist part of the Belarusian national milieu, moderates failed to consolidate as a political force.

At the same time, the Belarusian left-wing socialists, who were based in Russia, did not lose hope in advancing the Soviet version of a Belarusian statehood, taking advantage of the flexible Soviet approach to nationalities policy. Adapting to the unexpected levels of nationalism in the former tsarist Russia, Bolsheviks attempted to use its potential in order to strengthen Soviet power in the non-Russian borderlands. In the Belarusian case, the aftermath of the First All-Belarusian Congress influenced the

Bolshevik decision to coopt national elites and appropriate the national movement. On the other hand, construction of the Belarusian Soviet state cannot be attributed exclusively to the need to control and use nationalism.

The lack of formal state attributes is even more apparent in the case of the first Belarusian Soviet state than in the BNR, as the emergence of the SSRB was completely dependent on the will of the central Soviet government in Moscow and on the actions of the Bolsheviks from the former Obliskomzap structures, known for their anti-Belarusian positions. Misled by the illusions of cooptation into the Soviet governing structures, Belarusian Communists were excluded from decision-making processes. The SSRB was conceptualized, managed, and redesigned by the central Bolshevik authorities and their proxies in Smolensk as a buffer state. Its rapid merger with Soviet Lithuania concluded the first short-lived episode of the Belarusian statehood on a Soviet basis. In sum, geopolitical strategic concerns to secure the western borders of the first socialist state through the creation of a chain of loyal puppet states defined Soviet strategy in Belarusian state-building in a similar manner, as they were important for the German *Ostpolitik*.

Concluding Remarks

Among all the successor nations of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Belarusians were the last to make the transition from the early modern version of patriotism, inclusive and non-national in character, to their own modern national project. Persisting loyalty to the old Commonwealth hindered the self-perception of Belarusian elites, who could enter Miroslav Hroch's *Phase B* of patriotic agitation only in the first decade of the 20th century. On the other hand, the population which was to be nationalized was also inclined to choose non-national forms of identification. At this time, people were more concerned with matters of everyday survival, often choosing a vague and therefore convenient local form of identity, instead of consciously identifying as Belarusians. Last but not least, the national activists opted for a particular emphasis on the peasant culture in the modern Belarusian national project. Suffering from negative connotations, this characteristic turned out to be detrimental to its image and thus failed to attract the majority of society. Thus, the national elites did not have enough time to consolidate their support among the masses before the outbreak of the First World War, which created a window of opportunity for stateless small nations seeking to free themselves of imperial rule.

With the start of the Great War, an unexpected demographic crisis, new territorial divisions, and major power shifts all negatively impacted on the Belarusian national movement. Suddenly scattered across the Russian Empire and the German-occupied lands, national activists lacked a distinctive center, and were forced to operate from various locations, without proper communication and exchange between them. The first and by far the most important among these centers was located in Vil'nia, where Belarusian publishing and cultural activities flourished in the pre-war decade. Weakened by evacuation and resettlement, the Belarusian national milieu in Vil'nia under German

occupation was nevertheless the most progressive in terms of developing Belarusian ethnic particularism. Benefiting from the cultural and educational concessions of the German military administration to the non-Russian nationalities, Belarusian national elites promoted a range of schooling and publishing initiatives aiming to nationalize the peasantry and strengthen their own positions, while facing the competing Lithuanian and Polish national projects. Politically, Vil'nia Belarusians pioneered the concept of Belarusian independence, as they were the first to recognize the futility of the plans for a federation with neighbouring nations.

Yet the prospects of retaining Vil'nia for the Belarusians waned with the turn of the German *Ostpolitik* in 1917, which started to favour the Lithuanian national ambitions. In the wake of the February Revolution, Belarusian national elites in Minsk suddenly came to the foreground, facing a dilemma of establishing a firm presence in the city, where the Belarusian national milieu had remained marginalized due to the extensive Russification policies of the 19th century. The start of the First World War in 1914 and the introduction of martial law, along with the arrival of Russian armies and Polish refugees, further minimized the space for negotiating Belarusian national interests between 1914 and early 1917. Only after the February Revolution was the Belarusian national movement in Minsk and eastern Belarus legalized. It used the liberalization of political life which introduced new freedoms for the nation-building activities. However, the revolution also left less time for the national elites, who were at once confronted with a variety of tasks, such as promoting Belarusian national consciousness among various segments of the population, involving the masses in the political process, and creating their own national narrative, while competing with the All-Russian parties and organizations.

In early 1917, Belarusian national activists were still euphoric about

revolutionary freedoms and hopeful for a strong federation of autonomous states in a future democratic Russia, yet a number of factors influenced their actions as the year of the revolution progressed. The physical dispersal of Belarusians as a result of massive population displacement and migration caused by the war complicated the initial conditions for national mobilization. Since Belarusian refugees were officially considered to be Great Russians, their national relief organizations were weak and under-financed. The national movement remained fragmented due to the political irreconcilability of the Belarusian socialists, along with their inability to agree on compromise solutions to benefit a Belarusian national project. The socialists, who aspired to leadership positions, prioritized social aspects over the national program and underestimated the implications of maintaining ties to Russia, where Bolsheviks were consolidating their grip on power and were unlikely to tolerate the independent actions of local national activists, as they demonstrated by the dissolution of the All-Belarusian Congress in late 1917. In other words, the dominant positions of the socialists contributed to the internal instability of the Belarusian parties and organizations. This trend came to the foreground in early 1917 and continued throughout 1918, impacting on all major Belarusian state-building initiatives.

The year 1918 represented a turning point for the Belarusian national movement in its transition towards the practical implementation of statehood projects, despite the unfavourable international situation. In fact, the latter accelerated this process, which can be traced back to the resolutions of the First All-Belarusian Congress in late December 1917, refusing to recognize the self-appointed Bolshevik powers of the Western front. However, the Congress did not resolve the issue of possible separation from the ephemeral future Russian democratic state. Only the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty by Germany and Soviet Russia without Belarusian participation finally convinced Belarusian national elites of the need to take responsibility for their

homeland, and to proclaim the BNR on 9 March 1918, followed by the declaration of its independence on 25 March 1918.

In 1918, supporters of the Belarusian state encountered the fierce opposition of those who could not imagine severing all ties to Russia. The latter current represents the third center of Belarusian national mobilization, which was located in Russia, where over a million ethnic Belarusians found temporary refuge from the privations of war and occupation. The Belarusian national milieu in Petrograd and Moscow connected all projects of Belarusian self-determination to Russia, believing either in the possibility of joining a democratic federation of states of the former Russian Empire, or the Soviet state in the status of an autonomous unit or a separate region.

From a realistic point of view and taking into account the geopolitical situation in the region by 1918, the chances that Belarusian national activists could achieve complete sovereignty without allying with some of the greater powers remained slim. The circumstances of the BNR proclamation hinted at the option of choosing Germany as an ally, however, neither Germany nor the Belarusian movement at that time were genuinely interested in such an alliance. By 1918, Germany had already found leverage against Russia in the region, while the Belarusian national milieu suffered a further loss of its integrity due to the anti-German prejudices and pro-Russian sentiments, which divided moderates and socialists. Eventually, the idea of Belarusian statehood and the goals of Belarusian national activists were appropriated by the Bolsheviks, who used concessions to nationalities in order to secure their hold on power. They took over the unsuspecting Belarusian Bolsheviks, who believed in the idea of a Belarusian state under Soviet patronage. Yet by early 1919, it had already become apparent that the Bolsheviks intended to use Belarusian statehood only as a buffer to protect the Soviet state.

In the long run, the establishment of Soviet rule determined the path of the

evolution of the Belarusian national project throughout the 20th century. Belarusian statehood was embedded in socialist paradigms, while the rivaling conception of the BNR was forced to remain in the background. However, seen from a different angle, the ultimate goal of Belarusian nationalists was achieved: a new political unit appeared on the map of Europe. Even though the Soviet state (mis)used it to achieve its own political ends, it nevertheless established a continuous statehood tradition which survived throughout the 20th century, serving as a basis for the creation of the independent Belarusian state in 1991.

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Dziannica
Dziennik Wileński
Homan
Kryvič
Naša Slova
Polymia
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Figure 2: Nationalities of Ober Ost



Presseabteilung Ober Ost, *Das Land Ober Ost. Deutsche Arbeit in den Verwaltungsgebieten Kurland, Litauen und Bialystok-Grodno* ([Kowno]: Verlag der Presseabteilung Ober Ost, 1917).

Figure 3: Belarusian Ethnographic Borders



Michas' Bič et al., eds, *Historyчны šliach bielaruskaj nacyi i dzjaržavy* (Minsk: Medisont, 2006), 365.

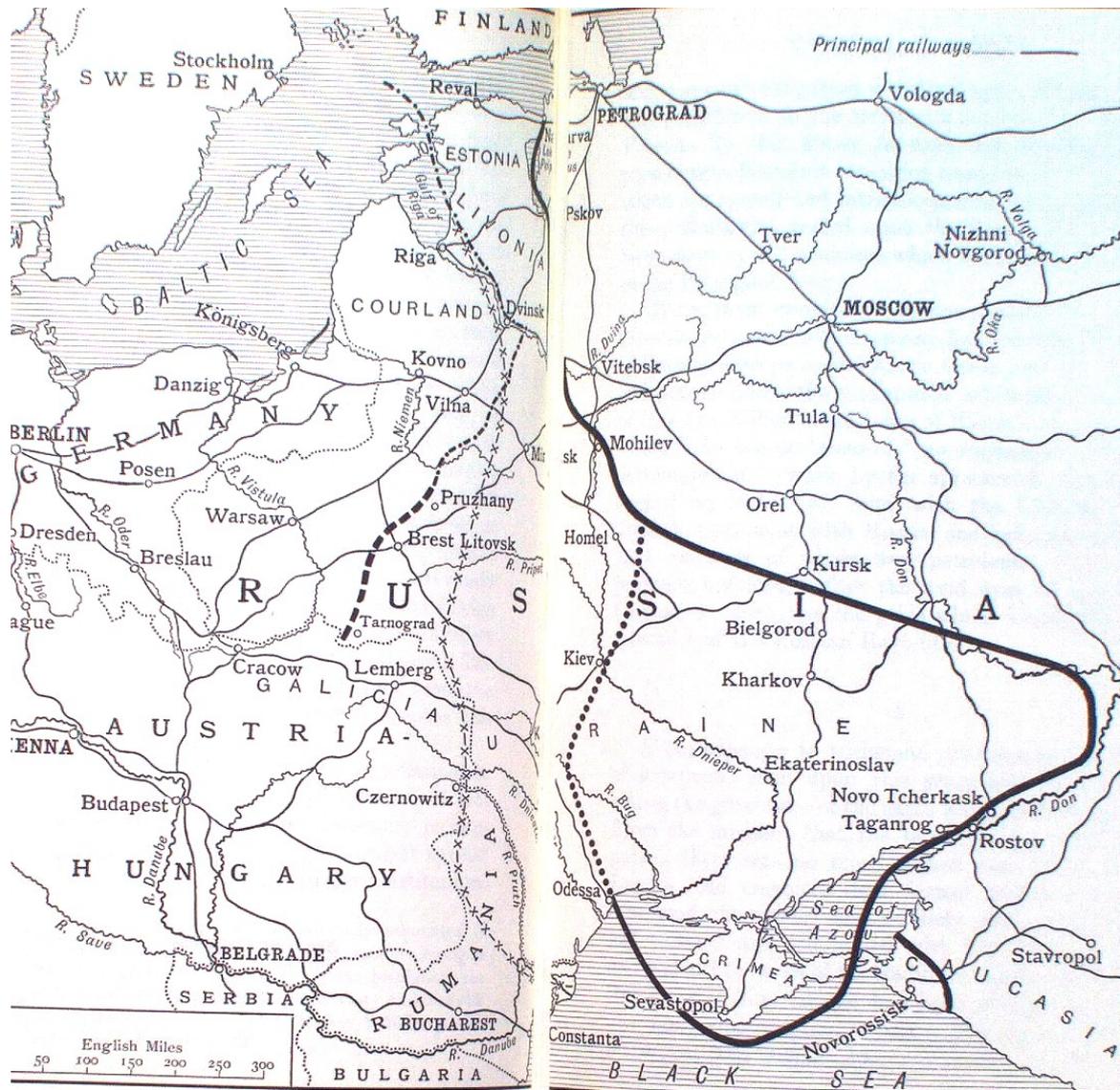
Figure 4: Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR) in 1918



————— Межы БНР
 Boundaries of the
 Belarusian People's Republic
 - - - - - Межы ВКЛ
 Boundaries of the
 Grand Duchy of Lithuania

Michas' Bič et al., eds, *Historyčny šliach bielaruskaj nacyi i dzjaržavy* (Minsk: Medisont, 2006), 368.

Figure 5: German Occupation of Eastern Europe in 1918 (solid black line indicates the extent of German occupation)



John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Brest-Litovsk. The Forgotten Peace. March 1918* (New York: Norton Library, 1971), 276.