

R E V I E W S

История белорусской государственности. В пяти томах. Т. 4. Белорусская государственность накануне и в период Великой Отечественной войны и послевоенного восстановления (1939 – 1953 гг.) / А.А. Коваленя и др., Минск: Белорусская наука, 2019. – 567 с., ил.

The history of the Second World War and the post-war period has drawn the interest of Belarusian researchers on multiple occasions. This should not come as a surprise, because irrespective of its purely academic value, this topic has a social and political dimension. In recent years, a number of academic publications of various length have been penned that contribute to contemporary Belarusian historiography of the subject. Another, this time written by a team of historians from leading Belarusian universities and scientific and research centres, was published in 2019. The monograph we are reviewing is entitled “The History of Belarusian Statehood.” The appearance of the publication is the consequence of changes that are to be made in the curricula of Belarusian universities. The Belarusian authorities intend to introduce a new subject with the above name, which will replace the former “History of Belarus.” We should stress here that the reviewed monograph is the fourth volume of a multi-volume work dealing with the history of statehood in Belarus. Issuing the monograph provided an opportunity to summarise previous research on the social and political history of Belarus between 1939 and 1953.

First, one should note the title of the work, which will certainly spark discussions among historians. The existence of Belarusian statehood in the period under consideration is a controversial issue. We must remember that Belarus was then part of the Soviet Union and not an independent political entity. Laying this dispute aside, however, I will now focus on the monograph’s contents.

The book begins with a chapter on the state of research on the topic and its sources. While rather extensive, it cannot be considered exhaustive, as it encompasses Belarusian publications only, while a full picture of the issue cannot be obtained without analysing the output of foreign historiography. The book ignores, among others, works of Polish academics who managed to fill major gaps in research on Polish–Belarusian and Polish–Soviet relations in the discussed period. As a general rule, the authors took advantage of new (especially foreign) literature to a very limited extent.

Even a brief perusal of the work’s contents allows us to conclude that it is greatly partial and filled with biased opinions. One can hardly resist the feeling that the authors want to endorse their own preconceived notions. As early as in the Preface, the most important conclusions and findings concerning the circumstances surrounding the outbreak of the Second World War, the attitude of the civilian population to the German occupying troops, and the role of the Soviet state are laid out (pp. 3–5). The preface avows that the struggle against the German invader had a mass nature and that its scale was greater than in any other European country (p. 4). This statement is repeated on multiple occasions throughout the book.

The second chapter is entitled “The international situation and Belarus on the eve of and early in the Second World War.” Chronologically, it deals with the period preceding the outbreak of the Second World War and its first phase (until June 1941). The main focus is on the events of 1939 and their consequences for Belarus. The point of departure for the argument is the non-aggression pact entered into by the Third Reich and the Soviet Union on 23 August 1939. The authors concentrate solely on the positive outcomes of that agreement, underscoring that it did not contain provisions concerning military cooperation or impose an obligation to conduct joint wartime operations against a third party (p. 56). On several occasions, even in the Preface, the monograph stresses that the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact did not turn the Soviet Union and the Third Reich into allies, and played a pivotal role for the Belarusians, who gained an opportunity to redress the historical grievances caused by the 1921 Peace of Riga (pp. 3, 58). Justifying the signing of a pact between Hitler and Stalin, the monograph’s authors claim that it should be treated as a consequence of pre-war European diplomacy whose roots go back to the Munich Agreement. At the same time, they uphold the view that the Soviet Union was forced to seek an agreement with Nazi Germany because no better alternative was available due to Paris and London stalling with signing an anti-German pact. According to the authors, thanks to signing the pact, the Soviet Union was able to “*postpone the conflict for two years and, by moving her border westward, bolster its defensive capacity and avoid a decisive collapse early in the war*” (p. 58). On the other hand, when explaining Soviet wartime moves against Poland after 17 September 1939, the authors assert that “*the main objective of the Soviet Union was not to wage war on Poland but to occupy ethnically Belarusian and Ukrainian territories*” (p. 60). Such an interpretation is basically identical to the position taken in Soviet historiography, now strongly championed by certain Russian researchers. The point of these actions is to whitewash the USSR and shift the burden of responsibility for triggering the war on the West. Unfortunately, the authors of the reviewed work do not mention the additional protocols to the pact, which virtually paved the way for the partition of Central and Eastern Europe between two totalitarian states.

In addition, they are far from impartial when discussing the Soviet assault on Poland, writing that the majority of the local Belarusian population received these events as historical justice, reflected in mass welcomes of the Red Army as a liberator from national oppression and the spontaneous establishment of people’s committees in towns and villages (p. 64). Contrary to this view, the reality was slightly different. First, research shows that most Belarusians took a waiting stance, not wishing to support one side or the other. Second, some population groups indeed reacted kindly to the Red Army entering the north-western territories of the Second Polish Republic. There is no reason to claim, however, that this occurred as a result of Belarusian national emancipation. Belarusian peasants saw the Soviet invasion mostly as an opportunity to improve their economic and social circumstances. This was primarily the result of effective Soviet propaganda and ignorance of the essence of communism. With respect to economic issues that contributed to a pro-Soviet outlook, it must be stated that the Polish state, failing to resolve economic issues plaguing the eastern borderlands countryside, was unable to curry favour with the locals and exposed them to communist propaganda that exploited this area. The book does not mention any massacres and bestialities that rolled through the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic in September 1939, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of innocent people. It is known that in September 1939, pro-communist bandit groups killed at

least 62 landowners in northwestern Poland. To be fair, it must be noted that these bestial killings affected members of various nationalities, even Belarusians. Unfortunately, the authors of the reviewed work pass over this in silence.

The evaluation of Soviet activities in territories incorporated into the USSR must not be overlooked by the Polish reader. For example, the statement that the people's committees established in September 1939 were "new democratic bodies" (p. 72) is highly debatable. Discussing the elections to the People's Assembly of Western Belarus, shadowed by the NKVD, the authors claim that the considerable activity of the population is evidence of the region's inhabitants support for establishing Soviet power (p. 78). Elsewhere, they write that the elections to the People's Assembly were more democratic than the 1935 Polish parliamentary elections (s. 76). Such statements bear proof of either extravagance or ignorance of historical facts. The authors themselves show a certain inconsistency when they admit that democratic rights and liberties were in practice purely formal, because only the communist party had a key role in political and social life (pp. 93–94).

Describing the attitudes of the population in the so-called Western Belarus between September 1939 and June 1941, the authors focus on the successes and achievements of the new regime, mentioning, among others, the development of education and ideological work among young people while stressing the alleged tolerance of all nationalities (pp. 88–89). The only negative change for them was the policy of militant atheism that resulted in the closing down of numerous churches of different denominations (p. 99). It is a pity that the authors did not confront their findings with the results of Polish, German and some Belarusian researchers who view the Soviet economic, cultural and educational policy in a different light. As a result, an idealised and idyllic image of Soviet reality is produced. Writing about social attitudes and resistance to the new authorities, the authors mention only that "*some of these changes displeased part of the population. Strong protests erupted among well-to-do peasants, former settlers, foresters, colonists and policemen*" (p. 90). This statement is a glaring contradiction in comparison with the results of archival research. Even a cursory perusal of both Soviet and Polish sources allows us to conclude that already in late 1939 and early 1940 disappointment with Soviet policy among local (including Belarusian) peasants became common. Soviet reprisals were given little mention in the book. The monograph mentions four deportations that took place between February 1940 and June 1941, affecting in the estimate of the authors more than 123,000 people (pp. 90–91). No mention is made of other categories of Soviet regime victims; for example, due to compulsory enrolment in worker brigades and impressment into the Red Army. It should be stressed that the work does not contain the slightest hint of the fate of Polish soldiers killed in Soviet captivity. The authors entirely ignored the issue of mass arrests and executions conducted by the NKVD between 1939 and 1941, and yet the Stalinist terror took its toll among both Poles and Belarusians. The Soviet security service ruthlessly exterminated the intellectual elites of both nations. In September 1939, everyone who did not manage to escape was killed. The list of NKVD victims includes, among others, Anton Luckievich, Viachaslau Bahdanovich, Anton Nekanda-Trepka, Uladzimir Samoila, Janka Pazniak and Makar Kraucou. Their contributions to the Belarusian national revival were unquestioned. All of them perished in Soviet dens because they did not fit the artificial "Soviet man" model. The reader will not learn about this from the reviewed book. The authors offer a general conclusion that "there were numerous errors," but in the main the changes were positive. It is obvious that the events of 1939 will always be perceived

and assessed differently by Polish and Belarusian researchers. Instead of trying to establish their own (Belarusian) viewpoint, the authors prefer to perpetuate the Soviet narrative.

The passages on the Soviet–Finnish war are likewise astonishing. The book’s narrative suggests that the cause of Soviet aggression against Finland was the need to ensure the safety of Leningrad as a major industrial hub, yet it is a proven fact that Stalin’s intention was not only to move the border away from “the cradle of the revolution” (p. 68). Actually, the USSR intended to occupy Finland and turn it into another Soviet republic. For this purpose, a puppet government led by Otto Kuusinen had already been established to announce the incorporation of Finland into the Soviet Union. It was only because of Finnish tenacity and Red Army incompetence that these plans fell through. In discussing the international and military situation in the region, the authors gloss over the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states in the summer of 1940.

The longest chapter of the monograph is titled “The Belarusian statehood in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945).” Among others, the section concerning Third Reich preparations for war with the USSR is notable. Having carefully analysed this section of the work, I must state that the authors have not demonstrated a profound knowledge of this subject. Following in the footsteps of Soviet historiography, they overestimate the role of European industry in forging the military might of Germany. The statement that German power was largely contributed to by France, Great Britain and the United States is rehashed (pp. 106–107). The Soviet myth about the alleged superiority of German forces over the Red Army is also repeated. In analysing the order of battle of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army on the eve of the conflict, the authors write that “*the differences in the number of troops and armaments of both sides were minor*” (p. 123). The statement that Wehrmacht’s military equipment and arms were superior cannot withstand criticism. Actually, it was the Soviet Union that had a decisive advantage over Germany and all her allies, and despite commonplace opinions, Soviet equipment was no worse than its German counterparts. Moreover, in some respects Soviet technology was clearly ahead (especially as regards tanks). Currently, it is no secret that the USSR was also getting ready to face the Third Reich in war. To this end, military preparations were taking place in the border strip, a fact unnoticed by the book’s authors. The description of the 1941 military campaign leaves much to be desired; the authors list numerous examples of Red Army soldiers’ heroism and bravery. Not much can be learned from the book about other attitudes of theirs (such as desertion) and members of the authorities. This distorts the real picture. The question therefore remains: with such dogged Red Army resistance, how did German armies manage to take the field by storm and arrive on the outskirts of Moscow after a few months? The monograph’s authors offered a succinct answer: “*Overcoming the resistance of the Red Army, the enemy set his sights on Moscow, while the Western Front troops and volunteers heroically defended the Belarusian borderlands, but under the pressure of superior, well-armed and trained enemy forces had to fall back, taking heavy losses in manpower, armament and equipment*” (p. 160). These explanations are quite in keeping with the narration of the previous era, when Soviet propaganda and historiography assiduously concealed the truth about the Red Army’s 1941 debacles from the public, using the technical and numerical superiority of enemy forces as a smokescreen.

A large part of the monograph is devoted to German occupation of Belarus. The activities of the occupying forces as regards propaganda and youth policy have been described in detail. Considerable attention is paid to the activities of such Belarusian organisations

as the Association of Belarusian Youth, the Association of Russian Youth, the Association of Tatar Youth, etc. Nazi plans for the Belarusian nation are also analysed. It cannot be denied that plans drawn up by the architects of the “New Europe” did not provide for the establishment of an independent Belarusian state (even as a puppet entity). It is also a fact that, according to their racial segregation theories, Third Reich leaders treated Belarusians as “sub-human,” refusing to acknowledge them as a political subject. However, the statement of the authors that collaboration with the occupying forces was unwarranted is difficult to accept. Instances of collaboration cannot be explained solely by the intention to curry favour with the new regime (p. 201). The authors view collaborators as people who colluded with the enemy subconsciously, lured by propaganda or giving in to their ambitions. Collaboration with Germans is treated by them as tantamount to treason. This assessment is no different compared to Soviet historiography. The book offers the reader a simple outlook according to which society is explicitly divided into good and bad people. Collaborators (traitors and troublemakers) are opposed by brave patriots fighting in the ranks of the Soviet resistance and Red Army. Further, the authors stress that collaborators included among others those with a criminal past (p. 250), but it would be a mistake to assume that there were no such people on the other side. Actually, the collaboration of Belarusians with the occupying Germans is a much more complex matter than the authors of the reviewed monograph imagine. The book does not engage in any deeper analysis of causes which made part of society (including a large majority of intelligentsia) actively collaborate with the Third Reich. The instances of collaboration must be viewed through the lens of anti-Soviet sentiments, yet the authors do not seem to acknowledge the fact that prior to the outbreak of war such feelings pervaded a large part of society. This was caused mainly by the Stalinist policy of political reprisals and terror, as well as by the imposition of collective farming. All of this should have been mentioned prior to making a definitive assessment. It should also be noted that most active collaborators had never been Soviet citizens, so did they really betray the Soviet Union?

A relatively large amount of space in the monograph is devoted to the confrontation between Soviet and Nazi propaganda. The book discusses the contribution of Belarusian intelligentsia to the clash of ideologies. This chapter is among the most interesting in the work. It is a pity, however, that in analysing the methods of ideological struggle and propaganda literature the authors do not measure both sides of the conflict with the same yardstick. German indoctrination is heavily criticised: the authors believe that pro-German youth organisations were used for Germanisation and indoctrination of young people in the spirit of national socialism. A quite different assessment is made with respect to analogous Soviet organisations (Komsomol), which are treated as furthering patriotic education, even though both cases are instances of totalitarian indoctrination. When the Soviets and Germans appealed to the feelings and national slogans of Belarusians, was this not just a method to gain adherents? The authors are, however, right in saying that German propaganda measures were ineffective, because the brutal terror of the occupying armies compromised these efforts and dissuaded people from siding with the Nazis (p. 172).

The next chapter of the book is devoted to armed struggle against the German occupants. It is known that the armed resistance movement in Belarusian territories was politically diverse, with Soviet, Polish and Ukrainian militant groups active. The authors focus mainly on Soviet resistance. The monograph discusses various aspects of this movement from military, intelligence and sabotage activities to propaganda and culture (e.g. folklore).

Even here, however, the authors failed to avoid simplifications and understatements. The Soviet resistance was described with a one-sided slant. The uncritical approach to the military activity of the partisans is apparent. It is a fact that the records of partisan groups often exaggerated the losses dealt to the enemy, yet the authors seem not to notice this. Several important facets of partisans' activity, such as their relations with civilians, require deeper study. The authors assert that such relations were exceptionally good, with partisan commanders making all efforts to curb any abuses and reprehensible acts towards the population (p. 287). Numerous studies prove that practice in this respect varied. We must stress that our point is not to malign or whitewash anyone. Historians should pursue their art using research methods and not their own sympathies or antipathies; otherwise, they risk being trapped in myths and mistaken assessments. The issue of relations between the people and their "avengers" involved a broader question of popular support for Soviet resistance. According to the book's authors, the Belarusian nation acted as one in its struggle with the invaders, as confirmed by participation in partisan forces and the underground. The authors state that the support of Belarusians for the USSR was commonplace. To quote them: "*patriotic feelings ran exceptionally high in the nation. The drive to defend the motherland against foreign oppressors pervaded all groups of Belarusian society*" (p. 146). By way of example, there is another passage: "*Numerous centres of anti-German resistance sprouted spontaneously, which bears telling proof of the high civic, patriotic and moral values of Belarusians and their readiness for devoted struggle for Soviet state values and defence of the motherland*" (p. 278).

Such opinions are basically identical to those that dominated Soviet historiography. It must be remembered that during Soviet Union times the statement that the entire Soviet nation participated in the struggle against "the German fascist invader" was given an almost dogmatic character, serving as one of the pillars of state ideology. In light of historical facts, we may assert that wartime reality had little to do with such slogans. The multinational and multicultural society living in Belarusian territories was not monolithic either politically or ideologically. Political moods fluctuated and depended on many factors. For example, the level of support for the USSR varied by region. In western Belarus, Soviet partisans struggled due to lack of support from the locals. This is indirectly admitted by the authors themselves, who write that 16 large partisan formations were shifted from east to west in 1943 and 1944 to bolster Soviet forces (p. 288). The political feelings were also affected by national identification. A large part of Belarusian-speaking peasants had no crystal-clear feeling of national awareness. There can be no doubt that a large majority of Belarus inhabitants, no matter the differences in nationality, were primarily interested in saving their own lives. In these circumstances, backing either side of the conflict was relegated to the background or used a means of survival. Hence, ascribing pro-Soviet attitudes to the entire nation is a serious lapse. The number of people (374,000) that at one time belonged to partisan formations in Belarus is indeed impressive. Following in the footsteps of Soviet historiography, the authors of the reviewed book view this as a demonstration of Soviet patriotism. In reality, not very many partisan groups were motivated by politics or ideology. Joining such formations was affected by the general military situation on the front and the setbacks of the Third Reich, as well as the terror perpetrated by the invaders on civilians that gave rise to vindictive and revenge-seeking feelings. It is no accident that the number of partisans rose as the tide on the Soviet-German front turned and the German armies lost the initiative.

The authors of the monograph touched upon the activities of the non-Soviet armed underground: Polish (the Wilno, Nowogródek and Polesie Home Army districts in the northwestern territories of the Second Polish Republic) and Ukrainian (OUN-UPA formations active in Polesie). It is worth noting that with respect to Polish pro-independence underground, the authors use expressions such as “illegal Polish armed forces,” “illegal Polish structures,” and “illegal Polish agents.” It should be remembered here that according to the erstwhile international law, it was the Soviet partisans operating in the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic who could be called illegal forces. Disregarding this issue, it should be noted that this is a new approach compared to Soviet historiography, which used appellations such as “White Poles” and “White Polish bands.” In the monograph under review, the activities of the Polish and Ukrainian underground are shown in the context of relationships with Soviet partisans. As we know, these relationships were not free from conflicts. In analysing the reasons for such a course of events, the authors put the blame for the unsuccessful Soviet–Polish cooperation on the Poles, writing that “*the excessive ambitions of Polish commanders and overvalued assessment of their own capabilities prevented them from engaging in necessary dialogue with Soviet Union leaders, giving rise to national and confessional conflicts among the population*” (p. 373). Such a generalised and unfortunate statement reveals the lack of intention to study of the actual reasons for the Polish–Soviet conflict. This confirms that the authors show the essential activity of the Polish underground resistance in a superficial and fragmentary way. In contrast with Soviet historiography, the authors are more restrained in expressing direct assessments, having abandoned the rhetoric peculiar to the Soviet era. Nevertheless, reading the book leaves no doubt as to who are considered “intruders” in Belarusian lands, as opposed to the “rightful defenders” of national interests. There is a tendency to stress the contacts of some Home Army commanders with the Germans and hence show Polish partisans in an unfavourable light. The commonplace myth of Belarusian historiography that the Home Army is responsible for crimes on Belarusian civilians is repeated.

The monograph does not contain a separate chapter or section discussing wartime losses. As a rule, the issue of losses is treated in the book in a haphazard way. The authors provide a great deal of information on particular instances of extermination of civilians, but the reader can hardly gain an impression of its nature and scale, because these figures are lost among details about resistance and struggle against the Germans. I would also like to point out another deficiency. The work cites numerous instances of the participation of Belarusians in the struggle against the Third Reich under the wings of the Red Army, yet the authors overlook the fact that Belarusians also fought alongside the Western allies. The presence of Belarusians in armies other than the Red Army is summarised in the book in a single sentence while discussing the events of 1939, where it is stated that no less than 70,000 of them served in the Polish army (p. 59), and yet the participation of soldiers of Belarusian nationality in the Polish Armed Forces in the West is a standalone chapter of history.

The last chapter of the work, “State development and social and political processes from 1945 to 1953,” devoted to the social and political situation of the Belarusian SSR during the post-war Stalinist period, appears less tendentious. This part of the book recreates in detail the process of rebuilding the state and party organisation of the Belarusian SSR in the period under consideration. The authors, while writing about reconstruction of state structures of the Belarusian SSR, admit that they had no bearing on the fate of the

country. The actual decisions were made by the communist party that had a monopoly on power. The authors avoid mentioning a number of sensitive issues, such as post-war reprisals and deportations. This topic was merely touched upon as a footnote to the methods of informing the BSSR ideological policy. The last two sections of the monograph, "The struggle against anti-Soviet organisations and groups" and "The Belarusian statehood in political processes from 1945 to 1953," are worthy of attention. The former section discusses in a rather balanced way the activities of the Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Belarusian armed underground. In the latter, based on archival sources (for example from the Belarus MFA archive), the authors analyse issues related to changes of the Belarusian section of the Polish–Soviet border. These documents show the impotence of state and party leaders of the BSSR and the all-powerful role of the Kremlin in setting the borders of the republic. And although the book does not say this, an attentive reader will easily discern that Soviet Belarus was just a minor gear in the huge Soviet totalitarian system and a tool in the hands of its leaders.

To summarise, it must be said that the reviewed monograph does not offer a sufficiently novel view of Belarusian history between 1939 and 1953. The assessment of historical facts found therein is usually not much different from findings that dominated Soviet historiography. The authors take a selective and biased approach to a number of important issues, such as the outbreak of the Second World War, resistance and collaboration, relations between nationalities, and Soviet reprisals. In assessing the attitude of Belarusians in the discussed period, the authors drew a clear dividing line between the good, who supported the USSR, and the evil, who did not. The resulting picture is dry and generalised, deprived of many important nuances of wartime life. It does not fully show the tragedy of normal people, their everyday hardships and dilemmas resulting from the brutal reality of German occupation. This is because the monograph's authors mostly share Soviet historical narration concerning the Second World War and its interpretation based on the "Great Patriotic War of the Soviet nation." The Second World War and post-war Stalinist years were a very complex and dramatic period in the history of Belarus and her neighbours. Unfortunately, the authors shrank back from taking a critical view of that reality. They did not wish to acknowledge that in the period under consideration, Belarusians found themselves between a rock and a hard place: the two most terrible twentieth-century totalitarian systems. As a consequence, like other Central and Eastern European nations, they had to pay a huge price for that. The reviewed monograph is a telling proof that contemporary Belarusian historiography is unable to break from the pattern imposed in Soviet times. It also shows that the current historical science of our eastern neighbours is still saddled with heavy ideological pressure. This is aligned with the more general context of Belarusian politics. Belarusian authorities nowadays treat the Second World War (or rather the Great Patriotic War) as one of the most basic pillars of their historical memory and state ideology. They uncritically repeat Soviet traditions, identifying with everything left behind by the Soviet Union. In this context, the reviewed book forms an official interpretation of Belarusian history in the period between 1939 and 1953. This does not mean, of course, that there are no Belarusian historians that see their country's past differently.

Reading the reviewed monograph leads to a certain reflection. In fact, no one today is depriving the Belarusians of the right to their own interpretation of history, but is referring one's narration of the past to a country that has been non-existent for more than two

decades a good idea? Will Belarusian historical science be able to reject the ideological straitjacket and demythologise its Soviet past? Although more than twenty years have passed since Belarus regained her independence, these questions remain current for Belarusians.

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