Dorota Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa 1918–1920. U podstaw białoruskiej państwowości*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2010, 597 p. ISBN 978-83-231-2484-9

In the introduction to his two-volume set of documents, which is impressive in its scope, the Belarusian historian Siarhiej Shupa in 1998 equated the archives of the Belarusian People's Republic to the hulk of a sunken vessel, which has unexpectedly emerged from nothingness and become an imposing source of exploration, exciting the researcher's imagination by its attractiveness.¹ The Belarusian People's Republic (BPR) is indeed not an ordinary object of historical study. For many years, its very existence within the Soviet system was totally ignored, and later the inquiry that was started into the theme provoked a lot of controversy, even about the definition of the object, which has not yet quietened down. In 1918, in Central and Eastern Europe, a series of new states were founded on national grounds, and the BPR was one of them. Their development advanced in different ways, but today the states of this region proudly proclaim in unison that they are the successors and heirs of the statehood of that time. The only exception is the Belarusian state, in which the place of the BPR in the development of the statehood of the Belarusians is still questioned, and the discussion of the topic goes beyond the limits of scholarly debate. However, this should only make research into the history of the BPR even more relevant.

However, it seems that Shupa descends into the realm of BPR history not explored for so many years, having formulated his own criteria and objectives in advance. Otherwise, he may have to face the situation about which it is said, 'the material controls the author'. Of course, if the author is determined to write a major treatise in the spirit of traditional historicism, which in the case of the BPR has not really been done, up to now this risk is less relevant for him. It seems that the Polish historian Dorota Michaluk found, according to S. Shupa, the hulk of the sunken ship that attracted her so much, that she decided to convey it in detail to the modern reader in the form of a work of such great scope, seeking to retell in detail 'how

¹ S. Shupa, 'Belaruskaia Narodnaia Respublika i iae arkhivy', *Arkhivy Belaruskai Narodnai Respubliki*, I, ed. S. Shupa (Vilnius-New York-Minsk-Prague, 1998), p. V.

everything was'. As a result, we have the book 'The Belarusian People's Republic, 1918–1920. The Basis of Belarusian Statehood'².

An introduction, seven chapters, a final word, and also such attributes as summaries in foreign languages, a bibliography of the researched theme, indices, maps and photographs, so necessary for an academic work, form the technical structure of the book. In the first chapter, the author introduces Belarus and its people in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The second chapter describes in detail the activities of political groups in Belarusian lands on the eve of the First World War. The third chapter highlights the genesis and development of Belarusian statehood in the years 1914 to 1917. The fourth chapter is devoted to the declaration of the BPR in 1918, the conception of its borders, and national symbols. In the fifth chapter, the scholar presents and describes in detail the activities of the first three BPR governments under the conditions of the German occupation in 1918. The sixth and seventh chapters are devoted to the activities of the fourth BPR government, led by Anton Luckevic from the end of 1918 to the beginning of 1920, and the development of the BPR in this period. The sixth chapter discusses the events while Luckevic was still in Belarus and immediately after his departure abroad at the beginning of 1919. The seventh chapter is essentially devoted to the efforts of Belarusian political figures to gain diplomatic recognition. As can be seen from this brief description of the book's contents, specific discussion of the object of research, i.e. BPR, starts only in the fourth chapter. We can regard the first three chapters of the work as introductory in the true sense of the word. So naturally, the question arises of the expediency of such a broad introduction. The author herself provides an answer, acknowledging that her original plan was to continue the research not until the beginning of 1920 (the collapse of Luckevic's government), but at least until March 1921 (the Treaty of Riga between Soviet Russia and Poland). Only during her work, the author, apparently put off by the abundance of the researched aspects conditioning the rapidly growing volume of the book, simply decided to shorten the period of exploration. Her motives for choosing the beginning of 1920 as the caesura are not very convincing. The border from which began the clear orientation of distinctly separate Belarusian groups to neighbouring countries and the opportunity to achieve national independence through diplomatic channels was lost: after all, the orientation towards the neighbours was already visible in the initial period of the genesis of the BPR, and the options for a diplomatic solution remained significant at least until 1923. The scholar's selected caesura is significant only in that at the turn of 1919 and 1920, for the first time, the Belarusian political divisions were so clearly revealed.

² D. Michaluk, *Białoruska Republika Ludowa 1918–1920. U podstaw białoruskiej państwowości* (Toruń, 2010), p. 597.

The author constructs her own historical narrative in not a quite traditional manner, which is enabled by the very broad boundaries of her subject, into which many components may fit. We could call the first three chapters of the book, conditionally, a history of processes; the narrative style is characterised by a slow but consistent and accelerating dynamism (in this case, leading to the modern Belarusian nation-state), but with plenty of static narrative inclusions, when Michaluk considers it necessary to present in greater detail some ideological movement, party, organisation, formation, and so on. The fourth chapter is unusual, in that it is composed of sections with quite different storylines. Here, the history of institutions, i.e. the emerging government structures, symbols of the BPR government, dominates, conveyed in a static narrative style. The last chapters of the book clearly have a dynamic form of historical narrative (history of events), which is naturally understandable, because the history of Belarus and the entire surrounding region from 1918 to 1920 was marked by a particularly rapid change of events. However, even in the last, and essential, chapters we will not find a solid, consistent chronological history of events. Seeking completeness, the author at times interrupts the main story by going back chronologically, including a secondary storyline. For example, in presenting the beginning of the delegation of Luckevic to the Paris Peace Conference, Michaluk decides to familiarise the reader with the work by professor M. Dovnar-Zapolski 'The basis of Belarusian Statehood' as the source of the delegation's ideology³.

The last two sections of the fourth chapter (presenting the borders of the BPR and its state symbols) are the results of original research by Michaluk, and by this they stand out from the general synthesis constructed in the book. They represent a significant part of the originality of the book. The author of this review has in the past pointed out specific cases and shortages on the theme of the historiography of the BPR.⁴ One such essential topic was the obscurity of the role of Roman Skirmunt's political group in the general development of the BPR. So we have to rejoice that the Polish historian, on the basis of archival material, was the first to manage, finally, in a convincing and argumentative manner, 'to place the dots' in this section of the development of the BPR in 1918. However, the greatest value of Michaluk's book, perhaps, would be its completeness, comparable to an encyclopedia. We would not exaggerate if we call this book simply a BPR encyclopedia. In it, the reader will find not only descriptions of BPR institutions and structures, of the parties and groups that were active in the Belarusian lands, of the major events and processes, but also characterisations of the primary BPR players, and even informa-

³ M. Downar-Zapolski, *Podstawy państwowości Białorusi* (Grodno, 1919).

⁴ E. Gimžauskas, *Baltarusių veiksnys formuojantis Lietuvos valstybei 1915–1923 m.* (Vilnius, 2003), pp. 9–12.

tion about the marginal but attractive phenomena associated with the development of the BPR, what you can hardly find in any other historical exploration, or even an encyclopedia, for example, about the activities of K. Godycki-Cwirko or A. Bachanowich.

How can Michaluk's book be interesting and relevant to the Lithuanian reader? The historian's chosen topic implies some interest. After all, there is no question that the relations between Lithuanians and Belarusians as immediate neighbours, both in the period of the restoration of statehood in 1918 and its prehistory, were closely intertwined and related in various ways. Thus, any study of the development of the BPR inevitably touches upon Belarusian relations with Lithuania. Indeed, these ties appear in more than one section of Michaluk's research. For example, in the third section of the second chapter, the author presents, in a concise manner, a brief history of the Lithuanian national movement (pp. 100–102); in the second section of the third chapter, she discusses Belarusian and Lithuanian relations during the German occupation in the First World War (pp. 140–148); in the third section of the fourth chapter, relations at the turn of 1917 and 1918, i.e. at the time of the declaration of independence (pp. 226–229); in the second section of the sixth chapter, Lithuanian provisions on the issue of Belarusian statehood at the end of 1918 (pp. 339–340); and the whole third section of the same chapter is dedicated to the agreement between Lithuania's government and the Belarusian Rada of Vilnius in November 1918 (pp. 348–358). The book also more than once looks at various aspects of relations at the time when Luckevic was the prime minister.

However, we must conclude that relations between Belarusians and Lithuanians remain probably the weakest link in the research by Michaluk. As is known, these relations were much more special and complicated than relations between the Belarusians and their other neighbours, which, unfortunately, the Polish scholar, in designing her study, did not take into account. When the goals of national statehood arose, the question of defining and demarcating territory became most pressing. However, in Michaluk's work, we cannot find a more comprehensive presentation of the Lithuanian territorial distribution programme. Instead, in the book, in more than one place, without any argumentation, the statement about Lithuanian claims to the Vilnius region 'breaks through', as if there was no basis for them. In part, the phrase (p. 101), that at the turn of the 19th and 20th century in the Vilnius region 'among Belarusian speakers and Polish speakers Lithuanians comprised a minority of the population' explains the author's attitude. Thus, for the researcher, the language criterion was the determining factor. This, we would think, is too simplistic, especially in dealing with the situation of the borderlands of Belarusians and Lithuanians. On the question of the organisation of the research, a small mystery remains about the author's knowledge of the Lithuanian language, because in the list of literature used she refers to several works which are especially important to the

study by the author of this review published in the Lithuanian language,⁵ but beyond the bounds of the research there remains a lot of Lithuanian historiography in which relations between Lithuanians and Belarusians in one way or another are touched on. It would have been especially useful for the researcher to become familiar with the collective works of the authors of 'Studies on the History of the Lithuanian Revival' (first of all, the book by R. Lopata), in which she would have found comprehensive coverage of the Lithuanian territorial programme⁶. A brief overview of the presentation of the 'four provinces' territorial programme is given in a work by the author of these lines⁷, which, as mentioned, Michaluk has declared she used, but for some reason in her research she silently went around this extremely significant moment that could have helped her to cover the problem from the Lithuanian side in a much more argumentative manner. Now, while reading the work, the impression is formed that the Lithuanians, at least until 1917, explicitly called for a revival of the GDL, and only in that year, for conjuncture reasons, without deeper discussions, suddenly demanded a separate nation-state, and thus betrayed their loyal comrades the Belarusians, and even started to claim part of their ethnic territory. The work does not mention anywhere the role of the Lithuanian politician Petras Klimas in presenting in detail the Lithuanian territorial programme during the First World War⁸, although it is difficult to believe that the author has not heard about it. After a deeper study of the conception of her research, the suspicion even arises that Michaluk deliberately concealed the theory backed by Klimas of the Lithuanian identity of Belarusian Catholics, because a discussion of it could have raised doubts about the validity of the very axioms of her research. Because without the Belarusian Catholics the whole object of the research becomes blurred, it may seem that Belarus as a natural political unity does not exist at all. Thus, the researcher would do better to stick closer to the position of Belarusian centrism, which promises a simpler approach to the problem, but not necessarily the most valuable for a scholar. Espousing Belarusian centrism, the author elaborates on the concept of parity, if not superiority, regarding Vilnius, of the political centre in Minsk, the validity of which again raises doubts.

⁵ E. Gimžauskas, *Baltarusių veiksnys*; idem, 'Kai kurios 1918 m. lapkričio 27 d. lietuvių ir gudų politinio susitarimo aplinkybės (Lietuvių ir gudų santykių raida 1917–1918 m.)', *Lituanistica*, 1999, No. 4, pp. 3–31.

⁶ R. Lopata, *Lietuvos valstybingumo raida 1914–1918 metais* (Vilnius, 1996), R. Miknys, *Lietuvos demokratų partija 1902–1915 metais* (Vilnius, 1995); E. Motieka, *Didysis Vilniaus Seimas* (Vilnius, 1996), and others.

⁷ Gimžauskas, *Baltarusių veiksnys*, pp. 43–46.

⁸ K. Werbelis (P. Klimas), *Russisch-Litauen. Statistisch-etnographische Betrachtungen* (Stuttgart, 1916); P. Klimas, *Lietuva, jos gyventojai ir sienos* (Vilnius, 1917).

A weak knowledge of the Lithuanian side is shown by several factual errors in the book. For example, on p. 158, the famous German politician and member of the Reichstag M. Erzberger is called a Lithuanian representative in the Prussian parliament, and on p. 351, there appears a statement hardly fitting within reasonable limits, describing the situation in the autumn of 1918, that ‘some Lithuanian politicians with regional convictions accepted the abandonment of the idea of the restitution of the GDL with difficulty’. The research also does not sufficiently highlight the role of the Germans in the formation of the Vilnius Belarusian centre, the impression is that this centre evolved spontaneously, ‘from below’, while, for example, the mentioned research by Lopata has revealed the permanent interactions of the local political centres with the policies of the great states, occurring under circumstances of constant tension and confrontation. This would merely show what reserves of exploration, at least the ‘western’ oriented work of Michaluk could still have.

However, errors and shortcomings as a whole do not obscure the value of Michaluk’s work. We can state confidently that future research work on Belarusian statehood will have a model of completeness and informativeness, with which they will be required to align themselves.

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