

# IN SEARCH OF TRANSCULTURAL MEMORY IN EUROPE

ISTME WORKING PAPER N.7/2014



## COMPETING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN BELARUSIAN TEXTBOOKS

Rune Brandt Larsen



## ABSTRACT

---

Based on history textbooks, the article is investigating the competing versions of the national history in Belarus after the independence in 1991. A basic assumption is that the past plays an important role in the present as a possible source of legitimacy for the nation and the state. The historical narratives presented in the textbooks can therefore be regarded as an element in a political agenda.

Three textbooks are analysed, published in 1992, 1993, and 1999, respectively. The focus is on the presentation of the late 14th and early 15th century – a period when Belarus was a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The analysis includes the description of the principal political events as well as identity-shaping factors such as nationality, religion, language, and social group.

Two competing approaches can be found in the textbooks. One of them is oriented towards the East Slavic area, while the other one is oriented towards the Baltic area (Lithuania and Poland). These approaches can easily be linked to the competing political agendas in the 1990's.

Keywords: Use of history, Belarus, textbooks.

---

Working papers are preliminary works in progress. The content are those of the authors and the CFE does not endorse, approve or guarantee its content. The CFE assumes no responsibility for, and expressly disclaims all liability for, any consequences resulting from the use of the information herein.

Centre for European Studies at Lund University  
Box 201: SE-221 00 LUND  
Phone +46 (0)46-222 88 19  
E-mail: CFE\_Books@cfe.lu.se

© 2014, Rune Brandt Larsen and CFE  
Layout: Marco La Rosa

---

# COMPETING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN BELARUSIAN TEXTBOOKS

---

RUNE BRANDT LARSEN, LUND UNIVERSITY  
rune.brandt\_larsen@slav.lu.se

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

The sudden emergence of the Belarusian nation state after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 cultivated the ground for a national Belarusian history. Not only was it possible to present another version of the past than the one dictated by the Soviet regime, it could also be regarded as necessary. Leaving aside the discussions about the ontological status of the nation, it can be stated that a nation-building process is striving to establish the (new or old) nation as the primary carrier of collective identity using, among other means, an idea of a (fictitious or real) national past. History is thus legitimising the nation, and the nation is in turn legitimising the state, since it is a mainstream opinion that each separate nation has a moral right to its own state. At the same time, there is also a more direct link between state and history: Just as a long common past can be legitimising for the nation, a long tradition of statehood can be legitimising for the state, simply because it is possible to point to how the things used to be. In short: When a state appears on the map and wants to secure its independent existence, one of the tools can be history.

Within memory studies, the focus is most often on the relatively recent historical periods, and in many cases surviving eye-witnesses play a significant part. I will argue, however, that the more distant past can also be highly important in a nation-building context. What I am investigating is therefore not “communicative memory” (transmitted via living people), but “cultural memory” (transmitted via texts, pictures etc.).<sup>1</sup> This concept can relate to events taking place several centuries ago, but remembered within the community. Important elements in the nation’s self-image can be found in a distant or “mythical” past – e.g. myths of origin or golden ages.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Following the distinction in J. Assmann: "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität", in: J. Assmann & T. Hölscher (ed.): *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt 1988, p. 125-133.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance S. Berger & C. Lorenz: "Introduction: National History Writing in Europe in a Global Age", in: S. Berger & C. Lorenz (ed.): *The Contested Nation – Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, Palgrave Macmillan 2008, s. 4.

Various different actors can in principle be involved in this commemoration of the national past, but most often it can be expected to be some kind of political elites. This can of course lead to conflicting versions of the past. More scholars have pointed to at least three distribution patterns of memories within a community: They can be either homogeneous (all members of the community share the same memory), complementary (people have different, but overlapping and compatible memories) or contested (there are two or more competing memories).<sup>3</sup> The actors involved are bound by cultural constraints understood as a *historically formed repertoire of cultural (mnemonic) forms and themes*, and these are complemented by cultural strategies, i.e. the choices made by the actors regarding which parts of the available repertoire they use and in which form they present them.<sup>4</sup> The point is that there exists a certain pool of available historical narratives within a given community. It is very difficult to invent something totally new or omit something evident without losing credibility, but within the existing boundaries the actors have a large degree of freedom to construct their version of the past.

## TEXTBOOKS IN THE SERVICE OF THE NATION

---

In this article, the efforts of establishing a Belarusian history throughout the 1990's are studied based on history textbooks for use in the mandatory classes. Textbooks are of course designed for use within an educational context, and education has often been pointed out as an efficient tool for socialising a population. Every child is exposed to it and is taught some basic authoritative "truths". Consequently, control of education is control of a crucial factor in shaping the future inhabitants' worldview. Consequently, history textbooks have been pointed out as a highly valuable source material for investigations of historical culture and national narratives.<sup>5</sup>

The function of the textbooks is twofold: They can be regarded as tools, which can be used to invent or modify historical narratives – as "an instrument for controlled remembering and forgetting".<sup>6</sup> This

---

<sup>3</sup> J. V. Wertsch: *Voices of Collective Remembering*, Cambridge 2004, s. 23f. A similar distinction has been proposed by M. Bernhard & J. Kubik: "A Theory of the Politics of Memory", in M. Bernhard & J. Kubik: *Twenty Years After Communism – The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, Oxford 2014, p. 24-28.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bernhard & J. Kubik: op. cit., p. 24-28.

<sup>5</sup> For example in H. Pääbo: *Potential of Collective Memory Based International Identity Conflicts in Post-Imperial Space. Comparisons of Russian Master Narrative with Estonian, Ukrainian and Georgian Master Narrative*, Tartu, 2011., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> A. Dutceac Segesten: *Myth, Identity and Conflict. A Comparative Analysis of Romanian and Serbian Textbooks*, Lexington Books 2011, p. 47.

is an active role, in which they change the world around them – several academic works are e.g. studying how antagonistic narratives can create favourable circumstances for conflicts. At the same time, however, they can be regarded as a passive reflection of narratives within the existing collective memory. In practice, virtually all textbooks fall somewhere in between these two ideal types, showing varying degrees of modification and construction, but based on some previously existing narratives, thereby exerting an active and a passive role at the same time. Or expressed metaphorically: A textbook is *both the mirror and the reflection*<sup>7</sup> or *both a cause and an effect*<sup>8</sup>. Textbook analysis has its limitations, without doubt. It does not allow us to conclude anything about the reception among the target audience, and it can also be difficult to determine to which degree the textbooks reflect already existing historical narratives. What we can conclude, however, is what the authors want to tell the young citizens. Therefore, the textbooks should be regarded as an active (if not necessarily efficient) weapon, and at the same time as a passive reflection of the intentions of the actors behind the weapon and their attempts to use the past in the service of a present agenda.

These observations gather additional importance when exposed to the dynamics of nation-building, because a nation-building period is a time of contrasts and restructuring. The socialising role of education is important for the nation builders who want to establish their own version of the past (and the present) as hegemonic, and consequently, the active, instrumental role of the textbooks is more outspoken. Therefore, a nation-building context provides a good opportunity to analyse some mechanisms, which may otherwise be less evident.

## IMPORTANT EVENTS AND PERSONS IN BELARUSIAN TEXTBOOKS

---

Based on the principles outlined above, three different Belarusian textbooks are analysed, from 1992, 1993 and 1999 respectively.<sup>9</sup> The goal is to establish similarities and differences between the various versions, and to explain these in relation to the role of the past in the present political context. The analysis is focused on the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Belarus was a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Although Lithuania was a pagan state until 1385, it controlled vast areas (including

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> J. Dietsch: *Making Sense of Suffering (Holocaust and Holodomor in Ukrainian Historical Culture)*, Lund 2006, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> This article is based on the research for a Ph.D. thesis. The thesis as a whole will include a larger number of textbooks from Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine.

present-day Belarus) which had earlier belonged to Kievan Rus and which were inhabited by orthodox Christians.

One of the most important political events at that time was the adoption of the Polish-Lithuanian union in Krewo in 1385. It was a personal union established by the marriage between the Lithuanian grand duke Jagiełło and the Polish queen Jadwiga, and one of the conditions in the agreement was that the hitherto pagan Lithuanians should adopt the Catholic faith. The textbook published in 1992 provides a quite negative evaluation of the union. The authors claim that Lithuania was simply incorporated into Poland, which caused widespread resistance due to several factors including forced conversion of Orthodox inhabitants into Catholicism. The union is described as an agreement between Jagiełło and the Polish feudal lords, while Jagiełło's cousin, Witold, is portrayed as the positive figure, who saved Lithuania's independence.<sup>10</sup> The 1993 textbook presents the union act more neutrally. It also mentions resistance in Lithuania, but only among the feudal lords. As for the religious and cultural consequences, the authors state that *the Belarusian and Ukrainian population for the largest part kept its Orthodox faith and national culture*. The union is described as an agreement between the Lithuanian princes (including Jagiełło as well as Witold) and Poland, and likewise it is claimed that Lithuania's independence was saved because of an agreement between Jagiełło and Witold.<sup>11</sup> The 1999 textbook gives much the same picture as the one from 1992: Because of Jagiełło, Lithuania was incorporated into Poland without accept from the local Belarusian population, which led to internal religious and national tensions.<sup>12</sup>

Another important political event was the victory over the Teutonic Knights in the battle of Grunwald in 1410. In the textbook from 1992 it is portrayed as a battle between Lithuania and the knights, and there is much focus on Witold's successful military command. The later textbooks also acknowledge Poland's contribution to the battle and even emphasise the multinational character of the army, which also included Tatar and Czech regiments. In the 1993 textbook it is added that Moscow refused to participate in the campaign. Concerning the outcome of the victory, all the authors point to the same

---

<sup>10</sup> М. П. Баранова, Э. М. Загарульскі & Н. Г. Паўлава: *Гісторыя Беларусі*, Minsk 1992, p. 54f. This book is essentially a late Soviet textbook, published for the first time in 1989 in Russian, translated into Belarusian in 1992, reprinted in 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Г. В. ШТЫХАЎ & У. К. ПЛЯШЭВІЧ: *ГІСТОРЫЯ БЕЛАРУСІ: СТАРАЖЫТНЫЯ ЧАСЫ І СЯРЭДНЕВЕЧЧА*, Minsk 1993, p. 202ff. This book was the first totally new textbook written after independence.

<sup>12</sup> Э. М. Загарульскі: *Гісторыя Беларусі: з сярэдзіны I тысячагоддзя да Люблінскай уніі 1569 г.*, Minsk 1999, p. 110f. This book can be regarded as a new version of the late Soviet one. Zagarul'ski was a co-author then, and parts of the text are virtually identical.

crucial point - namely that the German aggression was stopped. They add some further achievements, for example that the economic development was strengthened, and that Poland and Lithuania were recognised as great European states.<sup>13</sup>

The leading political figures at that time were the already mentioned Lithuanian princes Jagiełło and Witold. The general trend is that Jagiełło is evaluated negatively in all the textbooks, while Witold is evaluated positively. The charges against Jagiełło include secret agreements with the Teutonic Knights and dirty tricks in the power struggle with Witold. The latter is, on the other hand, remembered for saving Lithuania's independence and expanding the borders as far as the Black Sea. There are also differences between the textbooks, though, and here the one from 1999 is the most nuanced – Jagiełło's negative traits are balanced by an acknowledgement of his efforts for the sake of art and science, and at the same time Witold's glory is weakened by the fact that he also collaborated with the Teutonic Knights.<sup>14</sup>

The overall impression is that the Belarusian textbook authors agree on many points, but there are some evident differences regarding the relations to the neighbouring countries. The textbooks from 1992 and 1999 focus very much on the negative aspects of the Krowo union and the foreign faith (Catholicism) associated with it. The 1993 textbook gives a more harmonic picture, including the religious and cultural influence from the West. At the same time, it gives a more negative image of the Eastern neighbour, Moscow.

## IDENTITY MARKERS IN BELARUSIAN TEXTBOOKS

---

All the authors use the modern nationality names when referring to the medieval population. This is most outspoken in the 1993 textbook, which consistently refers to the local population as Belarusians. This term is also used in the 1992 textbook, but here the local population is often simply referred to as "East Slavs", and the common roots with the Russians and Ukrainians are emphasised. It also claims that Lithuania was a polyethnic state, and that the Belarusians as a separate nation emerged

---

<sup>13</sup> Баранова, Загарульскі & Паўлава: *op. cit.*, p. 56f.; Штыхаў & Пляшэвіч: *op. cit.*, p. 216f.; Загарульскі: *op. cit.*, p. 118ff.

<sup>14</sup> Баранова, Загарульскі & Паўлава: *op. cit.*, p. 54f.; Штыхаў & Пляшэвіч: *op. cit.*, p. 201ff.; Загарульскі: *op. cit.*, p. 106ff.

relatively late. In the 1999 textbook the author maintains this view of Belarusian nationality as an offspring of the old Russian one, and he uses the term “Western Rus” as synonymous to Belarus.<sup>15</sup>

The religious pluralism within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is addressed in all the textbooks, but their attitudes towards it vary. The one from 1993 focuses on religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence of Orthodox and Catholics, combined with a calming notion that the Orthodox Church still had a dominant position in the Belarusian rural areas. The two other textbooks focus on the problems caused by the religiously divided population, and their sympathy is unambiguously on the side of the Orthodox Church.<sup>16</sup>

Language is another identity marker mentioned in all the textbooks since the language of Lithuania’s state administration was a Slavic language, often called Chancery Slavonic. In the 1993 textbook this Slavic language is simply called “Belarusian”; in the one from 1992 it is called “Old Belarusian”, while in the one from 1999 it is called “Russian”.<sup>17</sup> Important connotations are lurking behind these seemingly subtle differences. If the ancient language is called Belarusian, there is an obvious link between the present and the past: The present nation can be extended backwards, and its present existence can be underpinned by a historical one. If the ancient language is called Old Belarusian, this connection is a bit more blurred, but still existing. When using the word Russian, the connection to the modern Belarusian nation fades away, since Russian is a catch-all name for all the East Slavic peoples.

Finally, social classes can also be used as identity markers. The 1992 textbook emphasises the feudal system and the conflicts between social classes. In the 1999 textbook this approach is maintained - for example the author explains the incorporation of Belarus into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a result of the feudal lords’ desire to rule over the peasant population.<sup>18</sup> The 1993 textbook also mentions feudal lords as a synonym for noblemen, but it does not emphasise social conflicts.

## THE SELF AND THE OTHERS IN BELARUSIAN TEXTBOOKS

---

All the analysed textbooks have the words “History of Belarus” in their title. However, in a medieval context no state by that name existed, so if such a history is to be told, “Belarus” must be represented

---

<sup>15</sup> Штыхаў & Пляшэвіч: *op. cit.*, p. 196; Баранава, Загарульскі & Паўлава: *op. cit.*, p. 3, p. 51; Загарульскі: *op. cit.*, p. 92ff.

<sup>16</sup> Штыхаў & Пляшэвіч: *op. cit.*, p. 196ff; Загарульскі: *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> Баранава, Загарульскі & Паўлава: *op. cit.*, p. 52; Штыхаў & Пляшэвіч: *op. cit.*, p. 211; Загарульскі: *op. cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> Баранава, Загарульскі & Паўлава: *op. cit.*, p. 3; Загарульскі: *op. cit.*, p. 99.

by something or somebody in the past. Therefore, it is crucial to define what or who represents Belarus in the different versions of the history – or in other words: With whom do the present Belarusians (or at least the present authors) identify in the past?

In the 1992 textbook the object of identification is first of all constituted by the East Slavic areas and populations. There is also some degree of identification with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania because of the Belarusian influence on culture and politics in this country, but they emphasise that it was not a national Belarusian state. They even put Lithuania in a position as an outer enemy by pointing to the power struggle between the Grand Duchy and the (Belarusian) Polack Duchy.<sup>19</sup> The same approach is maintained in the 1999 textbook.<sup>20</sup> A different approach is found in the 1993 textbook – here the object of identification is without doubt the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which is called a *Belarusian-Lithuanian state*. The authors also pay attention to the relationship between Polack and Lithuania, but they claim that Polack was absorbed into the Grand Duchy as a result of a voluntary agreement rather than conquest. Furthermore, they use the struggle narrative in a positive sense, talking about the *struggle to unite the Lithuanian and Belarusian areas around Navagrudak* (a town located in present-day Belarus). To make the connection even more outspoken, they pay special attention to the “pagonja” - the ancient Lithuanian coat of arms, which was also used by the Belarusian state in the early 1990’s.<sup>21</sup>

Concerning the qualitative self-image, all the authors more or less agree on what characterises the “Self” (understood as either the East Slavic areas or the Grand Duchy of Lithuania). The past representative of Belarus was characterised by economic and especially cultural superiority compared to the surrounding areas. In the 1992 textbook this is very much connected to the heritage from the old Kievan Rus, while the 1993 textbook is vaguer concerning the sources of the superiority.<sup>22</sup> The image of the other parts of the union differs somewhat between the textbooks. Lithuania has already been touched upon: According to the 1993 textbook it is an ally, whereas the other authors see the Lithuanians as culturally inferior oppressors.<sup>23</sup> Concerning Ukraine, the textbooks from 1992 and 1999 regard the Ukrainians as fellow East Slavs, whereas the 1993 textbook somewhat patronising states that *Ukraine got the possibility to develop economically, culturally and*

---

<sup>19</sup> Баранава, Загарульскі & Паўлава: op. cit., p. 50ff.

<sup>20</sup> Загарульскі: op. cit., p. 95ff.

<sup>21</sup> Штыхаў & Пляшэвіч: op. cit., p. 197ff.

<sup>22</sup> Баранава, Загарульскі & Паўлава: op. cit., p. 50; Загарульскі: op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> Загарульскі: op. cit., 93ff.

*politically* within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.<sup>24</sup> Poland is playing a relatively marginal role in all the textbooks, but gets a little more attention in the 1993 textbook as a union partner and ally against the Teutonic Order.<sup>25</sup>

The image of the “others” outside the union has some common features. All the textbooks agree that the principal outer enemy was the Teutonic Order. All of them even talk about the *German aggression* or the *aggression of the Teutonic Knights*. As Ostrovskaja points out, the word “aggression” is relatively seldom in textbooks, and it is first of all used in connection with Nazi Germany, so the Teutonic Order is here linked to some highly value-loaded connotations.<sup>26</sup> The image of Russia/Moscow is more mixed. In the 1992 textbook (originally written before the breakdown of the Soviet Union), Russia is a cultural relative and an ally.<sup>27</sup> This approach is modified in the later textbooks, most clearly in the one from 1993 where Moscow is nevertheless portrayed more as a rival than as an actual enemy. The 1999 textbook has a third approach: It also describes the competitive relationship between Moscow and Lithuania, but here it is less clear where the author’s loyalty belongs.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

---

The overall impression is that the authors of the 1993 textbook to a much higher degree than their predecessors focus on the Belarusians as a separate people with close ties to Lithuania. They identify with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and emphasise all the Belarusian elements in this state, including the state language and the identification of the local people as “Belarusians”. This textbook obviously emphasises the long traditions of the Belarusian nation and the Belarusian state. The textbook published six years later represents a return to identification with the East Slavic peoples in a broader meaning, although it does not embrace Russia to quite the same degree as the 1992 textbook.

The three textbooks are written in three different political contexts. The first one in late Soviet time; the second one in the early 1990’s – a period characterised by experiments with democratisation and orientation towards the Western world; and the third one in the late 1990’s after Lukashenko established his authoritarian rule characterised by a stronger geopolitical orientation towards Russia.

---

<sup>24</sup> Штыхаў & Пляшэвіч: op. cit., p. 215;

<sup>25</sup> Штыхаў & Пляшэвіч: op. cit., p. 204f, 216f.

<sup>26</sup> Т. Островская: Генеалогия исторической памяти белорусов в контексте образовательных практик, BISS 2010 (<http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/sa012010ru.pdf>), p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Баранава, Загарульскі & Паўлава: op. cit., p. 61.

Most of the differences between the textbooks can quite easily be explained as reflections of these political contexts. When the late Soviet textbook emphasises the good relations to the other East Slavic peoples, it is easy to see it as a reflection of the desired situation within the Soviet Union. The later focus on Belarus as a separate nation with close ties to Lithuania can in turn be explained as a reflection of the efforts to establish Belarus as an independent nation-state oriented towards the Western neighbours. In this line of argumentation, the textbook from 1999 represents a revival of the orientation towards Russia, in accordance with the dominating political ideals. The visions of the past can thus be seen as representative for the country's present civilizational orientation.

All these cases can be interpreted as examples of ideological use of history: The political elites strive to construct an image of the past, which gives meaning to the present ideological line. The result is a memory regime with contested historical narratives. The 1993 textbook is especially spectacular as a sharp break with the earlier narratives in order to underpin a new political reality – an effort to mobilise memory for change.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

**Баранова, М. П.; Э. М. Загарульскі & Н. Г. Паўлава:** *Гісторыя Беларусі* [Baranova, M. P.; Zagarul'ski, Ê. M. & Paŭlava, N. G.: *Gistoryâ Belarusi*], Minsk 1992.

**Загарульскі, Э. М.:** *Гісторыя Беларусі: з сярэдзіны I тысячагоддзя да Люблінскай уніі 1569 г.* [Zagarul'ski, Ê. M.: *Gistoryâ Belarusi: z sâródziny I tysâčagoddzâ da Lûblinskaj unii 1569*], Minsk 1999.

**ШТЫХАЎ, Г. В. & У. К. ПЛЯШЭВІЧ:** *ГІСТОРЫЯ БЕЛАРУСІ: СТАРАЖЫТНЫЯ ЧАСЫ І СЯРЭДНЕВЕЧЧА* [Štyhaŭ, G. V. & Plâševič, U. K.: *Gistoryâ Belarusi: Staražytnyâ časy i sâřednevečča*], Minsk 1993.

## SECONDARY LITERATURE:

**Assmann, J:** "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität", in: J. Assmann & T. Hölscher (ed.): *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt 1988.

**Berger, S. & C. Lorenz:** "Introduction: National History Writing in Europe in a Global Age", in: S. Berger & C. Lorenz (ed.): *The Contested Nation – Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, Palgrave Macmillan 2008.

- Bernhard, M. & J. Kubik:** "A Theory of the Politics of Memory", in M. Bernhard & J. Kubik: *Twenty Years After Communism – The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, Oxford 2014.
- Dietsch, J.:** *Making Sense of Suffering (Holocaust and Holodomor in Ukrainian Historical Culture)*, Lund 2006.
- Dutceac Segesten, A.:** *Myth, Identity and Conflict. A Comparative Analysis of Romanian and Serbian Textbooks*, Lexington Books 2011.
- Островская, Т.:** "Генеалогия исторической памяти белорусов в контексте образовательных практик" [**Ostrovská, T.:** "Genealogiâ istoričeskoj pamâti belorusov v kontekste obrazovatel'nyh praktik"], BISS 2010 (<http://www.belinstitute.eu/images/doc-pdf/sa012010ru.pdf>).
- Pääbo, H.:** *Potential of Collective Memory Based International Identity Conflicts in Post-Imperial Space. Comparisons of Russian Master Narrative with Estonian, Ukrainian and Georgian Master Narrative*, Tartu, 2011.
- Wertsch, J. V.:** *Voices of Collective Remembering*, Cambridge 2004.