

REVIEWS

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A LONG-EXPECTED AND TIMELY BOOK

Chomič, Siarhieĭ (2011). The Territory and State Borders of Belarus in the Twentieth Century: From Incomplete Ethnic Identity and Foreign Arbitrary Rule to the Modern Status Quo. Minsk: "Ekonompress," 416 pp.

Хомич, Сергей (2011). Территория и государственные границы Беларуси в XX веке: от незавершённой этнической самоидентификации и внешнеполитического произвола к современному status quo. Минск: "Экономпресс", 416 с.

THERE ARE MANY PUBLICATIONS DEDICATED to the problem of Belarusian state territory and boundaries but there has been an obvious lack of studies making general assessment of these questions and covering a wide range of subjects related to them before the monograph by Siarhieĭ Chomič appeared. It is indeed a long expected book as for two decades of independence the problem of rethinking the nature of state borders and the processes that led to changes of these borders gained much importance. Finally, a study analysing not just the vicissitudes of Belarusian state territory formation during the twentieth century but also tracing the origins of these problems to the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries during the formation of the Belarusian national movement is now available to Belarusian readers.

In fact, this book is an ultimate result of many years of research of the problem of Belarusian state borders and territory in the twentieth century. His previous publications already were important stages in the study of these questions (Chomič, 2000; Chomič, 2007).

The monograph is divided into seven chapters with the fourth chapter being the longest one in the book. The latter is dedicated to the problem of territorial enlargement of Soviet Belarus during the inter-war years. This chapter is based on a number of new sources. Chomič's book uses a large number of archival documents from Russia, Lithu-

ania and Belarus that were completely or mostly unknown to Belarusian researchers (p 17-18).

The author points to the gradual evolution of the Soviet approaches to international law and the concepts and definitions of state borders and territory (p. 5). He stresses that with time, these definitions became more similar to those in use outside the USSR when it accepted the rules of post-war international system by joining international agreements and organisations.

The book makes a point by stating that state and ethnic boundaries do not overlap however similar both terms seem to be (p. 6, 26). They are not identical and the case of Belarus makes it still more obvious. Chomič formulates as a fundamental Belarusian national interest the desire to see most of the territories populated predominantly by ethnic Belarusians incorporated into Belarusian nation-state during the first half of the twentieth century process of formation of borders and the state territory of Belarus. However, according to Chomič, significant economic and social factors were at play, too. Still, the author stresses the role of ethnography and ethnographic knowledge during the process of delimitation of state borders and formulation of national interests (Hirsch, 2005: 149-155).

Chomič throughout the book seeks to build a narrative that, on the one hand, does not turn a blind eye to the negative aspects of the Soviet social order and policies towards borders and territory of Belarus but, on the other, underlines that it was the Soviet era and the shaping of the Soviet model of statehood that played a crucial role in the process of their formation in the twentieth century. There are no harsh judgments about the nature of political regimes in Belarus during the last century and even more so, the author avoids moralising about their role and place. Thus, his approach is pragmatic.

One has to agree with Chomič when he writes that for Soviet leadership, Belarusian national interests were not a top priority. They were sacrificed for the sake of the other goals of the Soviet foreign policy. At times, Moscow pursued its policies pretending as if "*BSSR did not exist*" (p. 302-303).

It is necessary to elaborate a little on the issue of articulation of national interests and the question of agency concerning the problems of borders and territory of the Soviet Belarusian state. One cannot speak about any significant role of local politics, interests of the local popu-

lation and what one can term as "the local party cadre" or some regional interest groups within them in decisions made about Belarusian borders (Sahlins, 1989). The changes of boundaries and state territory of Belarus were largely dependent on modifications within the Soviet project itself and far less so on local interests.

Moreover, during the Soviet era the external borders of the USSR were viewed as isolating lines that excluded any kind of contacts between the Soviet citizens and their relatives abroad or other persons and organisations even from the countries of the so called "people's democracy" unauthorised by the Soviet party state structures. As contemporary research shows, in the Soviet case, there was a clear link between ideology and policies pursued by the regime and the nature of state borders and attitudes to them (Chandler, 1998: 3-41).

Chomič persuasively argues giving many examples that Belarusian national interests did not coincide with the plans of the Moscow leadership and describes the consequences of this. The Bolsheviks saw territorial enlargement as a key factor in turning Belarus into a fully-fledged state in order to use it as a trump card, for example, during the talks with Poland. During the Polish-Soviet talks in Minsk and Riga, the head of Soviet delegation Grigory Ioffe insisted that Belarusian Mahilioŭ and Homieł previously annexed by Russia in 1919 had to be returned "*so that one would get something more like a state*" (Borzęcki, 2008: 186).

One has to agree with the author when he writes that the new Economic Policy did not play any role in the process of return of east Belarusian territories (p. 213-214). The key role in this was played by the Soviet nationality policy. Following Terry Martin, Chomič distinguishes the "soft" and "hard" lines of the Soviet leadership's nationality policy (p. 216-217). The author analyses in detail the competition between various interest groups over east Belarusian territories. Employing the discourses of political programs and campaigns helped the party political elites to engage in the struggle for resources and positions and the eventual results of this struggle were always far from predetermined (Hirsch, 2005).

The 1920s saw an era when Belarusian national interests in the context of state borders and territory could be articulated and realised by local party political elites in stark contrast to the later decades.

The propaganda effect and the calculations of foreign policy were the key factors behind the Soviet decisions to cede the territories that had

previously been annexed by Soviet Russia to the Soviet Belarusian state. Otherwise, it would have been very hard for Belarusian Bolsheviks to argue in favour of territorial enlargement of the BSSR (p. 250-254, 256).

While speaking about the territories that became parts of the BSSR during the interwar years Khomich is careful with wording using such terms as "territorial expansion" and "incorporation", "solving of the territorial question" along with "return" which helps him to maintain a stressed impartiality towards his own narrative. However, Chomič states that the BSSR's leaders did not consider the territorial question solved even after the territorial gains of the second half of the 1920s. The inconsistent nature of Soviet policies towards Belarusian territorial enlargement undermined pro-Soviet sympathies among Belarusians abroad.

The case of transfer of the territories with the Lithuanian majority and Druskeniki from Soviet Belarus to Soviet Lithuania showed that Moscow just as in many previous cases was motivated only by the rationale of propaganda effect and a pretense demonstration that the decisions concerning the territorial disputes between the Soviet republics and the transfer of the territories between them in the USSR was allegedly carried out on the basis of consensus and compromise. In reality, however, the transfer of those territories from the BSSR to the LSSR was carried out on the basis of formal "proposal" from the BSSR government which, in its turn, was appointed by Moscow. These very people appointed by decisions made in Moscow could be appointed elsewhere in the USSR later (p. 323, 318-319).

The external borders of the USSR were very different in their significance and status from the ones between the Soviet republics (p. 346). The attitudes of the Soviet government to both these types of borders were also different (p. 325). The Soviet government viewed the borders between the Soviet republics as formal ones. Still, bearing this in mind, even the borders with countries of the so called "people's democracy" were viewed as strategically important, as elements of isolation from the countries of the West.

Difficult relations with Poland and the problem of border with it are given much attention to in the monograph, which is hardly surprising. The author, for example, points to delays in delimitation and demarcation of Belarusian sector of the Polish-Soviet border (p. 185-188). It is noteworthy that in contemporary Western literature of the subject this

problem is not treated with necessary degree of criticism it deserves (Borzęcki, 2008: 246-249).

Belarusian relations with Poland remained difficult even after it became a part of the Soviet bloc. When three times, in 1949, 1950 and 1955, Belarusian territories were transferred to the Polish People's Republic within the framework of what was officially known as the "correction of borders" (p. 334-336, 339), the Soviet Belarusian government could only register requests from the population during the preparation and implementation of these "corrections" and the facts of decreasing territory. There were no legal and political mechanisms of interaction between the local and central bodies of power concerning the changes of borders of the Soviet republics (p. 335-336).

The post-war era saw the finishing stage of the formation of the present day boundaries and the state territory of Belarus when in 1964 several villages from Smolensk region of the RSFSR were transferred to the BSSR. Nikita Khrushchev's concept of the coming of communism in the near future and the merging of all the Soviet nationalities into one single Soviet people underlay these steps (p. 352-353). Therefore, the process of the formation of state territories of the Soviet republics was considered complete by that time.

Nevertheless, one cannot view Soviet borders as immutable and not subject to regulation by laws. Soviet laws and the law of 1982, i. a., recognised that international agreements along with the decisions of the Soviet supreme state bodies regulating the question of borders. The USSR was a party to the Helsinki accords of 1 August 1975 and that meant the recognition of the territorial status-quo in post-war Europe. This was an important international agreement that eventually proved to be conducive to establishing of stable and undisputed state borders of post-Soviet republics (p. 354). Thus, the inviolability and stability of state borders in the former Soviet Union was ensured.

Nevertheless, the immutability of borders between the Soviet republics still became to be disputed during the last years of existence of the USSR. Territory was viewed as a kind of political Trojan horse. Uladzimir Siamionaŭ, a representative of Soviet party political elite, the first secretary of Hrodna regional committee of CPB (Communist Party of Belarus) threatened BSSR would have demanded the return of the territories with predominantly ethnic Belarusian population which were ceded to Lithuania in 1939-1940 would it try to exit the USSR (p. 358-362).

This step, however, was in no way Siamionau's own decision and Belarusian interests did not motivate it. However, it was motivated by the interests of the "Moscow Centre" (Jowitt, 1987). This "Centre" was not represented by Gorbachev alone. By that stage, there were other more conservative forces in Moscow which were partially allied with no less conservative party political leadership of the BSSR.

Some insignificant cases of incorrect spelling of some geographical names and mistakes with dates notwithstanding, one has to praise Chomič's monograph as an example of excellent scholarship as all the facts given in this review, new source materials and analysis of the key problems of the formation of state boundaries and the territory of Belarus throughout the twentieth century persuasively attest. Moreover, the author is not to be blamed for these mistakes.

It is hardly possible to underestimate the significance of the book by Siarhiej Chomič. His monograph is critically important for comprehending the processes and consistent patterns of policies that shaped modern Belarusian statehood, its geographical shape and boundaries. This book is highly recommended for those who seriously study Belarusian history and politics of the previous century.

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