

LUBOV BAZAN

A HISTORY OF BELARUS



A NON-LITERARY ESSAY THAT EXPLAINS
THE ETHNOGENESIS OF THE BELARUSIANS

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GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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THE ETHNOGENESIS OF THE BELARUSIANS

by Lubov Bazan

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FOREWORD

ON 8 DECEMBER 1991 THE PRESIDENT OF THE RUSSIAN Federation Boris Yeltsin, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic Stanislav Shushkevich and the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk signed a treaty in Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park in Belarus on the withdrawal of their countries from the USSR and formed a new political union of three independent states with its capital in Minsk. Thus, at the stroke of a pen, the Soviet Union as a geopolitical entity and a subject of international law ceased to exist, making way for new post-communist states. The Republic of Belarus became a sovereign nation in the heart of Europe with its territory covering 207,000 square kilometres and a population of 9.5 million people.

But clearly this does not mean that the history of Belarus only began after this treaty had been signed in 1991. As a fixed historical territory, populated by a largely ethnically homogenous people, Belarus in fact has its origins in the 9th century, with the Principality of Polotsk, one of the first state entities in Europe.

Due to its geopolitical position, in its early history Belarus found itself on the juncture of two worlds, two great cultures and ideologies, becoming a region of mutual interaction between Byzantine Orthodox and Roman Catholic civilisations. This contributed to the peculiar political and cultural development that defined the country's historic role in Europe. In spite of some dramatic historical periods caused by opposition and conflicts between these two powers, the Belarusian people preserved their distinctive ethnic and cultural traits that stayed with them for centuries to come. During periods of active

Polonisation of Belarus, Orthodoxy was an important resistant force that maintained Belarusian language and culture, and in the 19th and 20th centuries, during Russian assimilation, Belarusians managed to preserve their own language and culture as a result of their particular past and resplendence accumulated from centuries old traditions.

Over the course of its history Belarus has been part of various state entities:

- Kievan Rus (9th-13th centuries),
- The Grand Principality of Lithuania (13th-16th centuries),
- The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (16th-18th centuries),
- The Russian Empire (1795-1917),
- The Soviet Union (1917-1991).

A History of Belarus covers major periods of Belarusian history and attempts to reconstruct some peculiarities in detail. Moreover, readers can expect to encounter prominent historical figures throughout the book – princes, generals, politicians and luminaries – to serve as an introduction to the political history, military victories and defeats, and cultural achievements of the Belarusians, starting with material on the existence of Balts and Slavs on Belarusian lands, and ending with the formation of the independent Republic of Belarus in 1991. The factual material in this book is presented systematically and in chronological order. In case of disputable theoretical issues such as the ethnogenesis of the Belarusians, the emergence of the Belarusian language, the Belarusian identity and national consciousness, the problems of the Union between the Orthodox and Catholic churches, the author has chosen to outline all of the prevailing ideas in the field without giving preference to any particular slant.

PART I

HOW IT ALL BEGAN: PREHISTORY AND THE ETHNOGENESIS OF THE BELARUSIANS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS REVEALED THAT STARTING with very depths of antiquity, Belarus had been a popular site with the first settlement dating approximately 40,000 years ago, during the Palaeolithic Era (Stone Age). Characteristic of this period tools were found at archaeological excavations in the southern provinces of Belarus. It was during this period that people – still Palaeoanthropi with Neanderthals among them – mastered fire-making and produced their first stone tools – arrowheads, knives, scrapers – the most primitive implements known to man. The arctic climate at the time – as Belarus was in the preglacial zone – sustained rather poor vegetation and animal life.

Two of the oldest Palaeolithic human sites are located in Belarus and thought to be 25,000 to 30,000 years old: one on the banks of the Pripyat River near the village of Yurovichi and the other near the village of Berdyzh (1). Only 50 to 60 prehistoric humans would have lived on these sites. Archaeological findings have shown that a tribal community structure existed at the time, and consumption of hunting and fishing produce was collective, with complete equality

among members of the community. Several communities would come to be united in a clan, consisting of all of the relatives on the maternal side. Such a clan would occupy a specific territory, operate a common economy and share common property. The total population on Belarusian soil in the late Palaeolithic was no more than several hundred (2).

During the Mesolithic, which for all of Eastern Europe lasted from 9,000 to 5,000 BC, settlements were spreading actively in the territory of Belarus, especially in the Neman, Western Dvina and Dnieper river basins with extensive and rich supplies of fish and waterfowl. After the retreat of the glacier towards the north and the significant temperature increase that occurred in 9,000 to 8,000 BC, Belarus became quite attractive for the rapid settlement of the land. Vast forestation and diverse fauna were more conducive to life. Belarus' settlement during this period primarily came from three directions –from the Russian Plains to the north-east, from the Balkans and the Black Sea to the south along the Dnieper, and from Western Europe through Poland. The people arriving from these areas belonged to different ethnic groups, and so in ethnic terms there has never been a homogenous Belarus.

On the shores of the Dnieper, Neman, Pripjat and Western Dvina archaeologists have found more than 100 Mesolithic sites, each inhabited by 20 to 30 people. The population of Belarus at the time was approximately between 5,000 and 6,000 people whose life style was characterized by the primitive communal system. Based on the obtained data, it'd be safe to conclude that specimens from the same clan used identical methods to process materials, manufacture tools, hunt and fish, and built identical housing structures.

The Neolithic era of human civilisation (the last period of the Stone Age) began at the end of the 5th millennium BC and lasted for more than two thousand years. Society demonstrated a certain ability to adapt to the surrounding environment and put to good use various resources available to humans of that era. The main methods used previously to obtain food, for example, were hunting, fishing

and gathering, but in the Neolithic those same methods received what we would call today ‘an upgrade’. For example, they learnt to fish using nets, and trained dogs for hunting purposes. Improved means of securing provisions ensured rapid growth of the population. Roughly 600 Neolithic settlements were found in what is now Belarus, accounting for a total population of about 27,000 to 30,000 people. These settlements were still mainly spread in river basins, with the majority in the Pripyat basin and along the Dnieper, but settlements were also found around the many Belarusian lakes formed after the retreat of the glacier.

The most interesting evidence of the late Neolithic era are settlements in the Syanno and Beshankovichy regions of the Vitebsk Province as archaeologists have found not only tools and household utensils there, but also the first small works of art: depictions of birds and animals, and even a small wooden figure of a man. At the same time, archaeological findings have revealed fortified settlements suggesting possible clashes between tribes. These settlements were reinforced by defensive earthen ramparts around them.

So far scientists have been unable to determine the exact ethnicity of Belarus’ ancient population during the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. However, archaeological data and studies in historical linguistics, in particular hydronymy (the study of ancient names for rivers and lakes), make it possible to devise an ethnic lineage for some communities living in the Late Stone Age. It’s being hypothesized that already in the Bronze Age, at around 2,000 BC, there were Finno-Ugric tribes living along the Western Dvina and Dnieper, and Indo-European tribes along the Pripyat.

Major demographic changes were taking place in Europe at the dawn of the Bronze Age between 3,000 and 2,000 BC: tribes of nomadic herders from the Indo-European ethno-linguistic group were quickly occupying new lands from the Rhine in the west to the Volga in the east, and from the Black Sea in the south to the Scandinavian islands in the north. Slavs as a distinct indigenous ethnic group were

part of this Indo-European migration which included Germanic, Baltic, Romanic, Celtic, Iranian and Indian groups.

With Indo-Europeans settling in Eastern Europe, a new era was marked in the development of the region and inevitably changes to the ethnic make-up of Belarus followed. New people brought with them new practices and ideas, and influenced the pre-existing social fabric. More effective bronze tools replaced less effective stone tools, the development of plough farming and animal husbandry created conditions conducive to the amassing of wealth by individual families, which caused envy among others. Such social vices (by today's standards) as robbery and burglary came to be a form of enrichment. As a result, a fortified settlement enclosed by walls behind a deep ditch or earthen ramparts becomes the new, smarter way of protection. More than 1,000 of these settlements have so far been found in Belarus. Archaeologists maintain that between 50 and 75 people would have lived in one of these types of villages, meaning that the total population of Belarus in the Bronze Age may have been between 75,000-100,000 people.

The situation remained relatively stable for a relatively long period of time until the Great Migration between the 3rd and 7th centuries AD following the fall of the Roman Empire. Migration and mobility of Slavs was largely determined by migration of other tribes in the region. The Slavs' homeland was between the Oder and the Dnieper and was named the Prague Archaeological Culture, which by now has been extensively studied by Czech, Polish and Belarusian scientists. During the Great Migration Slavic tribes moved away from their homeland to lands which later became the starting points of their recorded history, and where they still live to this day.

In the 6th and 7th centuries AD some Slavs settled in the south, populating the Balkans in what is modern-day Bulgaria and parts of Greece, and some groups went as far as Spain, Sicily and North Africa. Southern Slavs were formed during the process of assimilating the Thracian population and today these include Bulgarians, Serbs, Croats and Macedonians.

Another stream of Slavs moved during the 6th and 7th centuries from their homeland in the east and settled in the basin of the Dnieper and the Pripyat, having driven away or assimilated the Baltic and Finno-Ugric tribes. Here a new branch of the Slavs was formed and became known as the Eastern Slavs. They stayed in this area until the 8th and 9th centuries, and then moved further afield to settle vast expanses up to the Don, Oka, and Upper Volga. These groups are the modern-day Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians.

As for the Western Slavs (Poles, Czechs, Slovaks), they stayed in their homelands and there was no migration or mixing. For centuries they lived on their ancestral lands, and their ethnic history does not offer historians as much in the way of disputable material for discussion as the ethnic history of the Belarusians.

Slavs came to Belarusian territory, inhabited by Baltic tribes, in the 6-7th centuries AD. The Slavs moved along the rivers abundant in this area and built fortified settlements as they went, later expanding them into fully-fledged cities. Armed groups always led the way, followed by the agricultural population. The Slavs settled densely in single villages, and the type of housing used at the time was the mud hut. In numerous tombs from this period along the Dnieper, Pripyat and Berezina rivers archaeologists have found items such as typically Slavic pottery and tools, which indicates that the Slavs had already fully settled in this area by the 7-8th century.

In terms of their development, the Slavs were significantly more advanced than the Baltic tribes; they were superior in their social and military organisation and had more advanced forms of economy, in particular agriculture, which the Balts did not know. We do not know how peaceful the coexistence of the two ethnic groups was initially in the Belarusian lands inhabited by the Slavs. Traces of fires have been found at some Baltic settlements from the 7th and 8th centuries AD, which is suggestive of military conflicts.

By colonising the land along the Western Dvina, the Slavs absorbed the cultural and ethnographic features of aboriginal Balts and assimilated them. A portion of the Baltic tribes retreated to the

north-west, where they laid the foundations for the formation of the Lithuanian, Yotvingian, Prussian and Lettish ethnic groups. But most of the Balts continued to live where they had lived on what is now Belarus, and their assimilation into the Slavs continued for several centuries until the 12th and 13th centuries, and possibly even later. Thus, the region along the Neman and Western Dvina rivers remained a mixed Baltic-Slavic area. As a result of this blending, a new ethnic group came into being – the direct ancestors of the Belarusians who spoke in Slavic dialects (3). These Slavic tribes – Krivichs and Dregovichs – are often mentioned in medieval historical sources: the writings of the Bavarian Geographer (9th century), the historian Constantine Porphyrogenitus (10th century) and the first Russian chronicle *The Tales of Bygone Years* (12th century). In their culture and language the Slavic and Baltic elements became intertwined, with Slavic features dominating, including language. Information from archaeology and written sources indicate that by the 8th century the Dregovichs and Krivichs had already moved away from a primitive tribal system towards a class-based society. Division of labour had already taken place and political governance – in the form of elected princes – had been established.

Thus, indigenous Baltic tribes became a substrate in the formation of the Belarusian ethnic group. As a result of the Slavicisation of the Baltic population and its merging with the Slavic population a portion of the Slavic people split off into a separate group of Dregovichs and Krivichs, and through their historical and cultural development this led to the emergence of the Belarusian language and the Belarusian people.

This theory on the ethnogenesis of Belarusians appeared in historical academic circles in the 1960s, and was based on extensive material accumulated from archaeological and linguistic research (4). It was called the *Baltic Theory*, but was entirely suppressed by the official Soviet scientific authorities. Until this time, another theory had prevailed as the only existing hypothesis, both when Belarus became

part of the Russian Empire and during the Soviet era. It was called the *Belarusian Theory* and was based on the following principles.

The Eastern Slavs came to modern-day Belarus, Ukraine and Western Russia in the 6th and 7th centuries. The appearance of the Slavs in these lands gradually came to be of great importance to the subsequent historical development of the region as it led to a rapid overruling of many primitive societal institutions and facilitated the emergence of cities and the development of feudal relations. It is almost as if the region witnessed, on a small scale, what had happened several centuries before on the borders of the Roman Empire and Byzantium where the arrival of barbarians contributed to the abolition of former societal relations and supported the adoption of new systems. The pace of economic and social development among the Slavs was far more intensive than that of the native tribes, and so the Slavs assimilated them.

In the late 9th and early 10th centuries the processes eradicating the ethnocultural differences between Eastern Slavic tribes intensified. This was due to economic (the development of feudal and trade relations), political (the need to protect themselves from common enemies in the form of nomadic tribes) and cultural (especially after the adoption of Christianity in the 10th century) integration. As a result of the mixing of different tribes – the Krivichs, Dregovichs, Polans, Radimichs, Drevlyans and others – in the 9th and 10th centuries a united Russian people formed in the Middle Overdnieper, with its centre consolidated in the city of Kiev. Its geographical position had many advantages: the city was at the very centre of the Eastern Slavic lands, and was therefore inaccessible to external enemies – the aggressive nomadic tribes. Situated on the banks of the deep Dnieper river, which connected the northern lands with the wealth of Byzantium, Kiev flourished as an important trading centre. The new Russian people started to unite around Kiev, and by the end of the 10th century in the lands surrounding Kiev it was consolidated and assumed its common name – Rus.

According to this theory Ancient Rus, with its centre at Kiev, served to unify the Eastern Slavic tribes in a single community and protect its borders from external enemies – the many thousands of Varangian tribes to the north, and Khazars and Cumans to the south. This state had a common Slavic language and common cultural trends. Then, in the 12th century, as a result of the fall of this first Russian state, the first unified Russian people separated and splintered. On its foundations, during the further course of history, three related peoples came into being: Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians.

Soviet history officially recognised this version of events, the *Great Russian* theory, in spite of the fact that since the 19th century it had faced considerable opposition. The term “a united ancient Russian people” only appeared in the 1950s, after the publication of Stalin’s “scientific” work *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, and it soon came to be widely accepted (5). This theory was clearly politically motivated, as it supported the idea of an “elder Russian brother” from which young Belarusians and Ukrainians had descended, and since they were younger then, consequently, their historical choices should always be guided by this principle.

Opponents of the *Great Russian* theory argue that Ancient Rus was not a state made up of Russian people because such a people did not yet exist in the 10-12th centuries; there were various Eastern Slavic tribes each with their own ethnic and cultural characteristics. These characteristics were defined, developed and intensified according to which autochthonous populations these tribes assimilated. Accordingly, the Russian ethnic group was formed on the basis of the Finno-Ugric substrate, the Ukrainian on the Turkic, and the Belarusian through assimilation of the Balts. The Kievan Rus state only united these peoples for a time, but it was not by chance that when this state collapsed in the 13th century it ruptured along the same lines as the initial tribal territories with all of their ethnographic and cultural features. These features were the basis for the ethnogenesis of these three future peoples – Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians.

There is also a *Great Polish* theory on the descent of the Belarusian people. It denies the existence of an independent Belarusian ethnic group and argues that Belarusians are a Polish people who speak a dialect of Polish formed under the influence and dissemination of Russian. This theory arose in the 18th century in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and was, of course, politically motivated in order to more successfully implement Poland's hegemonic policy towards Belarus. No scientific evidence stands in support of this theory. Modern linguistic research has convincingly shown that the Belarusian language, in terms of its lexicon, syntax, phonetics and morphology, is an independent Eastern Slavic language.

As for modern Belarusian history, both the *Belarusian* and the *Great Russian* theories continue to exist, but the debate, unlike during the Soviet period, is free and makes use of the very latest historical, archaeological and ethnographic material.



The settlement of the Eastern Slavs on Belarusian lands in the 6-9th centuries coincided with the disintegration of primitive social systems. In the economic life of the agricultural community more and more elements characteristic of individual farms started to appear (6). During this period the socio-political structure was beginning to change and Slavs moved over to a class-based society with the start of an era of military democracies. Class demarcation contributed to the emergence of the first and earliest feudal Slavic states. The first of such states in central Europe were the Bulgarian Empire, the Great Moravian Empire (7), the Serbian Empire and, in what is now Belarus, the Principality of Polotsk.

PART 2

BELARUSIAN LANDS IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

(9-13th centuries)

CHAPTER I.

The Principality of Polotsk and Kievan Rus

THERE ARE VARIOUS WAYS TO DIVIDE HISTORY INTO DIFFERENT periods; some researchers are guided by socio-economic criteria, whereas others look to politics, statehood or culture. As Belarus has repeatedly changed its allegiance over the course of its history we will elect for the principle of statehood. Based on the political, social and cultural life of the Belarusian people, chronologically the history of Belarus can be divided into 5 periods: Polotsk, Belarusian-Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and its entry into the USSR.



The first early feudal principalities on Eastern Slavic territory started to form in the 9th century, the foundations for which were created by the former tribal communities. The Slavs' need to defend themselves from hostile nomadic Pecheneg, Cuman and Khazar tribes which regularly carried out devastating attacks on the Slavic settlements contributed to the establishment of military detachments and the appearance of well-fortified cities, the first of which were Novgorod, Kiev and Polotsk.

In the 9th century the northern principalities of the Eastern Slavs headed by Novgorod united with the southern principalities and created a single major power with its capital in Kiev, which historians have named Ancient or Kievan Rus. Based on its social and political

system this state was a military monarchy ruled over by the Grand Prince of Kiev. Under the Grand Prince was the state council, the Duma (from the Russian verb *dumat*, ‘to think’), which included noblemen – for the most part relatives of the prince and military leaders – called Boyars. The Grand Prince governed the numerous executive bodies, the officials responsible for collecting *dani*, or tributes (from the verb *davat*, ‘to give’), court affairs, and the recruitment of soldiers to the prince’s detachment. In the lands under the Grand Prince’s control the state was run by appointed governors – *posadniki* – (from the verb *posadit*, ‘to seat’ or ‘to implant’) and their assistants *tysyachniki* (from *tysyacha*, ‘thousand’), which was the name given to the militia during military action.

The lands of the Dregovichs, Krivichs and Radimichs – now Belarus – were incorporated into this Slavic state.

The issue surrounding the origin of the word *Rus*, from which the notion *Rusyn* was also descended, and later *Russian*, as well as the future name of the state *Rusya* and Russia (*Rossiya*), has caused and continues to spark lively academic debate, with numerous different hypotheses being put forward. In Western European historical sources from the 10-12th centuries, such as the *Annals of Magdeburg*, the term *Rusyn* is used only to refer to the Northern and North-Western groups of Ancient Rus. But with the growth of Rus’ territory and population and its increasingly active role in the historical arena of Eastern and Northern Europe, the name gradually spread to cover all Eastern Slavic lands. Thus, the word *Rusyn* was used by neighbouring Western nations to denote all foreigners living to the east, and it existed together with the cognates *Rusy*, *Ruskiya*, *Russkie*, and *Rusichi* which were widely used in Rus itself.

The most popular theory of the origins of the first Russian state and the name Rus is the *Norman Theory*. Normanists trace the emergence of Ancient Rus to the intervention of the Normans and argue that the word *Rus* was initially the name for one of the Varangian tribal unions which subsequently gave its name to the Slavic lands that they came to rule and control.

Rare materials on Belarus are a potential treasure trove for the English language reader. A blank spot on the map for many, Belarus is an undiscovered mystery in the heart of Europe – undiscovered, because little has been published on the country's history and current affairs, and the origin of the ethnic group that calls itself 'Belarusians'. Author Lubov Bazan attempts to uplift the veil of secrecy surrounding Belarus and answer an important question of the ethnogenesis of the Belarusians.

Unique in its ongoing struggle for independence, throughout its history Belarus has been deprived of this luxury by being continuously included in various state formations such as Kievan Rus', the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Kingdom of Poland, the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. *A History of Belarus* is a thorough chronological narrative that covers major milestones of Belarus's journey into the 21st century.

Lubov Bazan gives her readers plenty of leeway to form their own conclusions about the historical material presented. By incorporating different theoretical viewpoints on fundamental issues such as the ethnic background of the Belarusian people and formation of their national identity, the origins of the language, and the historically complex religious composition of the country, Bazan offers a platform for discussion.



Lubov Bazan, a historian, art analyst and translator, was born in Belarus where she worked as a research associate at the Vitebsk Historical Museum, professor of the History of Art at the Institute of Technology, director of Marc Chagall Museum and a TV hostess of an art show.

Since 1997 Lubov Bazan has been living in the Netherlands where she lectures on the history of Russian art and iconography. She authored multiple articles about history, culture and art, and in 2011 translated into Russian the book *Pyotr's Borscht* by Dutch novelist José Hennekam.

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