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Book Review

Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. 384 pp. Index. \$40.00 ISBN.O 300 09569 4 Pb.: \$20.00 ISBN 0 300 10586 X

In this ambitious and remarkable book Timothy Snyder attempts to address one of the big questions in modern historiography: how terms such as nations change their meaning over time. His chosen methodology is the use of narrative history and particular case studies. These, he argues, are indispensable to his task because they offer political perspective and at the same time undermine the myth-making of vested interests. His chronological starting point, 1569, marks the foundation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Lublin Union, and his book ends with the entry of Poland into NATO which, he claims, rewarded Poland's sensitive approach to relations with its neighbors, Lithuania and Ukraine. He admits that the choice of 1569 is an untraditional starting point but he chooses it because, in order to recognize change, "it is best to accept the unmistakable appearance of a single modern nation." In making this choice Snyder rejects the traditional approach of national histories which purport to show the continuous development of the nation from the medieval period to the present. Snyder is interested in how the early modern nation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, evolved into four nation states, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus, named after the nations of the Commonwealth, in which language defined communities. How, in short, did four modern national ideas arise from a single early modern one? One might question Snyder's use of the term "nation" in the context of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth even though contemporaries used the word. Better surely to substitute the word "state" (a non-national state as Miłosz prefers to call it) and leave nation to the post-Herderian world? Yet Snyder's approach at least shows how the content of the word "nation" evolved over centuries.

The book is divided into three sections. The first entitled "The Contested Lithuanian-Belarusian Fatherland" concentrates on the city of Vilnius and asks how the city became "Lithuanian in a modern national sense, in population and culture. Snyder shows how modern national ideas emerged in competition with the early modern version, and how the states of Lithuania and Poland were created after the First World War. But these were states in which the idea of the ethnic nation "were not yet hegemonic," that is to say they were not ethnically homogeneous. While this is obvious in regard to Poland, in Lithuania's case he means that the country would not have been homogeneous in the inter-war years if it had been able to incorporate the Vilnius region in the new state, which it passionately wished to do on grounds of tradition and history, though the ethnic and linguistic composition of its inhabitants was barely Lithuanian at all. The second section shows how ethnic cleansing, deportations, and genocide emptied multi-cultural cities (and countryside to a lesser extent) and cleared the way for modern nationalism. Here Snyder concentrates on the war and immediate post-war experience of Poles and Ukrainians and on their mutual ethnic cleansing. As he shows, these cleansings claimed more than 100,000 lives and forced 1.4 million resettlements.

The third section asks whether nation states can come to terms with such history. For example, after 1989-91 "every imaginable cause of national conflict could be found among the four states," among them contested frontiers, provocative minorities, revanchist claims, memories of brutality and aggression, and national myths. Why was there not a blood bath in the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as there was in the Balkans? Snyder's answer, which he has rehearsed in earlier articles, carries conviction. It is that Poland developed an eastern policy which was "aware of modern nationality" and was able to develop a "stable geopolitical order." Poland's mission was to accept existing frontiers, to make no territorial claims and to live in harmonious and constructive relations with its neighbors. This policy rejected the ideas of most Polish emigre circles abroad which longed for the reversal of Yalta and the reinstatement of the frontiers of the Treaty of Riga. Snyder makes the credible claim that the simplest evidence of Polish success is Western ignorance of the historical rivalries and wartime cleansings that his book describes.

Section One relies mainly on previous historiography, while the second section depends far more heavily on archival and other primary source research. The latter marks a major advance in English language historiography in describing and analyzing little-known events such as ethnic cleansing in Western Ukraine and Operation Vistula. For this reviewer, the

final section is the most fascinating in what is by any standards a stimulating and innovative piece of historical scholarship. Snyder argues quite forcefully that the Polish grand strategy between 1989 and 1991 of accepting Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus as nation states and confirming Soviet-era borders was prepared in emigration and was debated for fifteen years before 1989. Its authors were Jerzy Giedroyc, the editor of the Paris *Kultura*, and Juliusz Mieroszewski, one of the journal's major contributors. Giedroyc hailed from Minsk now in Belarus and once a major city in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and Mieroszewski spent his youth in Galicia, so both were familiar with the eastern borderlands of the old Commonwealth. Mieroszewski advanced the romantic, but nevertheless ultimately realist, idea that the Soviet Union would eventually collapse, and that Poland needed to develop an anticipatory eastern policy which respected existing borders. This, he argued, would be in Poland's national interest because it would win approval from eastern neighbors who might otherwise become antagonistic, and it would at the same time remove the old Polish-Russian competition in the region.

However, some readers will be skeptical of Snyder's insinuation that Mieroszewski's influence on the Polish opposition was clear in the 1970s. This falls into the fallacy of *post hoc, propter hoc*. PPN, the Polish Independence Compact, published a programme, he asserts, whose eastern policy followed *Kultura*. Similarly he claims that by 1980 "a consensus in favour of the *Kultura* programme was apparent among the Polish opposition intelligentsia who would play important roles in Solidarity." But he adds, and possibly fatally to this part of his thesis, that the *Kultura* programme could be reconciled with important trends in Polish politics, religion and scholarship. And, an even more telling admission, the Polish regime itself accepted that Poland's borders were where they belonged, and the Church, not least Pope John Paul II, were urging the need for reconciliation with Poland's eastern neighbors. Solidarity ensured that these ideas were incorporated in its resolutions, propagated the notion that Poland's eastern neighbors were its equals, and embedded this emerging strategy in a mass popular movement.

The question then remains, how great was the influence of *Kultura* in the shaping of Poland's eastern policy and to what extent was it the product of indigenous forces and currents? Snyder has made a valiant effort to enhance *Kultura's* influence but fails to offer totally convincing evidence in his support. Yet all historians and political scientists interested in the transition from the early modern to the modern world, in nations, nationalism and nation-building, in how a conscious state policy based on national interests can overcome damaging national myths and defuse centuries-old antagonisms, how in short internecine warfare can be avoided, will be in Timothy Snyder's debt for his stimulating, readable and thought-provoking book.

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