

Dimitri Romanowski, *Belarus und Weimar-Deutschland, wirtschaftliche, wissenschaftlich-technische und kulturelle Beziehungen*. Hamburg: disserta Verlag, 2015. 247 pp.

Dimitri Romanowski's book takes its readers back to the 1920s, focusing on the economic, scientific, and cultural relations between Soviet Belarus and Weimar Germany. Even though this topic has been previously addressed by a number of Belarusian historians, including Romanowski himself, it is rather new in the Western historiography of Belarus. Conceptualized as an innovative study, the book under review aims to explore the motives and main directions of the German–Belarusian contacts in the 1920s. It appeared in the disserta Verlag, specializing in publishing dissertations, and is in essence an unchanged version of Romanowski's doctoral thesis, defended at the Ruhr University Bochum. Therefore, it targets primarily academic audiences, assuming some familiarity with the field of Belarusian studies.

The book is organized around three main chapters, focusing on the relations between Soviet Belarus and Weimar Germany during 1922–32. Romanowski argues that the major avenues of cooperation focused on economic contacts and trade, followed by cultural encounters, scientific contacts, and academic exchange. The study is framed around the establishment of the Belarusian statehood both in its national and Soviet versions (the BNR and BSSR respectively), the evolving New Economic Policy (NEP) of the USSR, and the international context of the Rapallo treaty. Acknowledging that the pace and intensity of the German–Belarusian cooperation in this period depended on the Soviet government in Moscow, which prioritized construction of a socialist society, the author nevertheless takes it as given that the NEP and the national policy of the 1920s made it possible for the Belarusian Soviet government to enjoy a limited amount of freedom from the center and to pursue its own international agenda within these confines. In particular, these activities concerned international trade contacts (18).

Romanowski's study explores how the BSSR established, maintained, and developed its international trade through the monopolist state agency known as “Gostorgbel” (or transliterated

from Belarusian: Dżarzhhandal’bel, literally: Belarusian State Trade, or the State Export-Import Trade Bureau). The core chapters of the study, Chapters 3 and 4, represent a case study of “Gostorgbel,” addressing its role in the development of international contacts and trade between Soviet Belarus and Weimar Germany up until 1932. Romanowski argues that throughout the 1920s, the role of Germany in the capacity of trade partner consistently grew, peaking during 1925–26. Raw materials, flax, fur, leather, and medical plants made up the major exports from Belarus in this period, while imports were more diversified and ranged from food to industrial products.

Several themes in Romanowski’s study are truly innovative and fresh. For instance, he touches on a very interesting topic of smuggling during the 1920s, since Gostorgbel prioritized industrial and agricultural needs, ignoring the popular demand. Another interesting aspect are the so-called “exports of historical values” (145), although in this context Romanowski rather means the state-sanctioned plundering of valuable antiquities and art objects, taken out of Belarusian museums or churches on orders from Moscow and later sold abroad. However, despite being based on archival examples, the treatment of these themes is rather cursory and could be developed further.

However, this is a minor caveat in comparison to the flawed methodological framing of the study, which impacts its entire concept and structure. Romanowski does not provide a sufficient explanation of his decision to treat together such aspects as the economy, international trade, culture, and national politics. He limits the description of his methodology to two pages (46–47), merely defining such terms as “international relations,” “actors,” and “interests,” yet failing to elaborate which theories of international relations might be applicable to his study. Some of the methods remain obscure, as the author does not explain in what way these might be relevant for his research. For instance, this refers to “the method of periodization” or the “method of historical reenactment” (46). Romanowski likewise does not define what he means by the “Belarusian national liberation movement” (10), “national ideology” (157), or “national movement” (163) which leads

him to ambiguous statements, such as the following: “in the late 1920s, Belarussification turned into a certain type of national movement” (163). However, this bold thesis is not developed further and is not backed up with any specific examples.

Romanowski should be commended for using a wide selection of primary sources from the National Archive of Belarus and the regional archive in Viciebsk, which make up the most interesting parts of the book (such as the section on smuggling, see 99–106). Already in his introduction, Romanowski stresses his intentions to rely on Belarusian historiography, in order to introduce it into the Western academic debate. The value and contributions of Belarusian historians to the research of Belarusian–German relations certainly merit attention, but exclusive reliance on these studies diminishes the quality of the book under review. In this respect, the author could have also referred to the recent discussions in the Western historiography on the national politics in the USSR, thus presenting the readers with a full picture of the academic debates in this field.

In terms of style, lengthy direct citations from secondary sources appear superfluous and make the book sound detached, descriptive, and generalized. Moreover, a number of references raise questions, especially when page numbers are omitted (57), direct citations are taken from Wikipedia without proper formatting (114), or names are misspelled in different ways (186–88). The author also does not explain his approach to transliteration and it is unclear on what principle the decision has been taken to transliterate names from Belarusian or Russian; this is done in a seemingly inconsistent manner here. Finally, the widespread typos indicate insufficient proofreading.

This study brings to light a wide selection of primary sources from the Belarusian archives, posing some new questions both about the Belarusian–German relations and the peculiarities of the national policies in the USSR in the 1920s. By highlighting the state-sanctioned plundering on one hand and smuggling as a survival strategy in Belarus on the other, it indicates possible research directions for historians of this period. However, a rather uncritical engagement with the sources, a heavy reliance on secondary litera-

ture, and last but not least, flawed methodology outweigh the novelty of the questions addressed by this book, creating the impression of a work in progress, rather than a finished and polished project.

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Iryna Kashtalian, *The Repressive Factors of the USSR's Internal Policy and Everyday Life of the Belarusian Society (1944–1953)* (Historische Belarus-Studien, Bd. 5). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016. 345 pp.

and

Rayk Einax, *Entstalinisierung auf Weißrussisch. Krisenbewältigung, sozioökonomische Dynamik und öffentliche Mobilisierung in der Belorussischen Sowjetrepublik 1953–1965* (Historische Belarus-Studien, Bd. 2). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014. 443 pp.

For several years now, based at Germany's University of Gießen and edited by Thomas M. Bohn, the "Historische Belarus Studien" series has been dedicated to exploring the post-World War II history of Belarus in all its social, political, and economic complexity. In this review, I discuss two recent titles published as part of the series, by Iryna Kashtalian and Rayk Einax.

Researchers working on twentieth-century Belarusian history have to grapple with serious political challenges, and the story of Belarusian historian Iryna Kashtalian is a case in point. For her doctoral thesis at the University of Minsk, Kashtalian researched the topic of how the population of the Belarusian Socialist Soviet Republic (BSSR) experienced the terror during the late Stalinist period. For political reasons, however, she was not awarded a doctoral degree for the work, which was criticized by the responsible state commission as "slandering" the Soviet past. Years later, a revised and expanded version of her study was published in Germany as the fifth volume of the "Historische Belarus Studien."