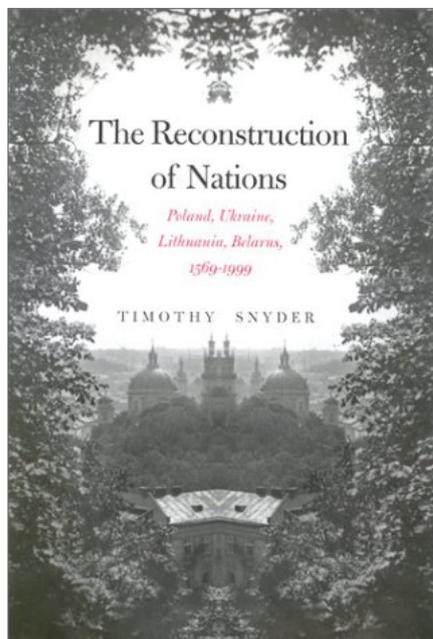


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***The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus (1569 – 1999)*, by Timothy Snyder (2003), 367 pages.**



This is a superb scholarly work by Timothy Snyder of Yale University. As one of his colleagues at Harvard states, "it is a fascinating analysis of the subtleties, complexities, and paradoxes of the evolution of nations in Eastern Europe." Seventy pages of important Notes attest to the author's erudition and command of multilingual sources, including a rare knowledge of Polish among English writers. Perhaps the main characteristic is its pioneering composition: the concept of the history of these four nations will not be found in conventional texts. Equally original is his selection of crucial dates. He begins with the 1569 Treaty of Lublin (Unia Lubelska) when, in his view, the modern era began for this part of Europe, rather than 1492, adopted as the end of medieval times in the West, or 1450, when the first printed book was published in Mainz.

The author moves step by step through various stages of these nations' development. We learn that ancient and powerful Lithuania used Early Slavic for its documents but showed enough national energy not only to govern Belarus lands but also to reach the distant shores of the Black Sea. As several very innovative maps illustrate, the territory of Poland at the time of the first Jagiellon (1386) was far smaller. But important changes began to take place, leading Snyder to some startling conclusions. Primarily, one cannot escape from the sad fact that the Lublin Union was not the success

that the Polish nobles intended it to be. Here was a chance for unique federation of states, all of which would be granting complete civic rights to all of its citizens, a model of a bulwark against barbarism. But while the brew had fine ingredients, the cooks did not know how to make even a simple soup. There was no willingness on the part of Poles to give up some privileges. Disasters of the Swedish invasions, terrible errors committed at the Sejm, and the catastrophe of the Partitions doomed this ideal concept. The channel of historic events was thus inevitably changed.

The new course of the history fascinates Snyder. He selects the year 1863 as another crucial date. All nations here discussed began to face an entirely new reality: a flourishing national literature, the abolishment of serfdom everywhere, rapid communications, a diminishing illiteracy, and a challenge to the Tsarist regime (at that time all four of them were under Moscow's rule). The late 1990s brought political independence to each of them. How Poland (of particular interest to the writer) is dealing with this new opportunity is subject of intensive investigation in the last part of the book and here, judging by current events, we should be optimistic. For the first time in many years, relations with all her neighbors are good and future plans constructive. This is equally true of formal government policies as of social attitudes. Snyder endorses the views of the late Jerzy Giedroyc, chief editor of the Polish Literary Institute in Paris, and his London associate Juliusz Mieroszewski, both of whom were true visionaries; interestingly enough, he does not cite any other émigré politicians.

Of course, we do not have a magic lamp, which would assure us that the future on this front is bright. Old prejudices that tend to disappear once transplanted to the New World, still surface, for memories are more difficult to erase in the Old World. Such problems still exist, but time demands change. Perhaps Poles who have lived in Lithuania for generations should learn local language or Ukrainians should allow Poles to restore their sentimental 1918 cemetery in Lwów. One would want to see millions of people who live in the former Borderlands (Kresy) to be winners, not losers.

***George Suboczewski***