

УДК 327:141[(=172):(=161.3)]

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**LITHUANIAN AND BELARUSIAN NATIONAL NARRATIVES. G. B. VICO'S
«RETROSPECTIVE»¹**

National narratives are subjective, one-sided and conflicting. This problem has been noticed among European thinkers since the 19th c. An Italian thinker G. B. Vico has no direct relation to the modern problem of national narratives or to Lithuanian or Belarusian historical interpretations. But he appeared to be one of the most influential thinkers of modern times who made an extraordinary impact on humanities of the 20th c. Vico formulated three stages of evolution of peoples: epoch of the Gods, period of heroes, and age of people. The same stages are essentially repeated in the structure of national narratives of the 20th and even of the 21st c. This is long-standing mental paradigms that have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. They can be traced in Belarusian and Lithuanian histories as well. Two national narratives have been engaged in many decades lasting conflict being unable to share heroes of the common past, especially of the 13–15th c., such as Mindaugas, Gediminas, Algirdas, and Vytautas. Vico concludes that subjectivity is unavoidable in the narrations composed by humans. Contradictory interpretations of the common past created by Belarusians and Lithuanians are more natural than the creation of one «perfectly true» vision of the past.

Key words: G. B. Vico, historical narratives, Belarus, Lithuania

The Problem. The cognition of truth has never been the most important goal of national narratives. One of the most renowned nationalist and national identity researchers, Ernest Renan, even back in 1882, noticed that forgetfulness and even historical mistakes are essential factors in creating a nation and stories about it [12]. His ideas have been supported by the early 21st c. historians: «national narratives try to link the past, the present, and the future, making the nation a protagonist. In such narratives, the stories that are told and the way they are told are becoming as important as the stories that have to be forgotten» [8, p. 154]. Historians create stories of nations, construct «imaginary communities» [1], thus, «nationalizing the past» [4] or «robbing it» by launching the stories into the world that justify oppression or celebrate freedom, rehabilitate debauchery or heal wounds, promote insurrections and revolutions, and educate patriots or traitors.

¹ Стаття була підготовлена для міжнародної наукової конференції «Соціальні та політичні трансформації у Центральній та Східній Європі (1917–2017 рр.): чинники, досягнення, проблеми» (28–29 червня 2017 року, ОНУ імені І. І. Мечникова, Одеса, Україна).

The past is the object of history science. The same past is the object of national narratives, collective or individual memories. In none of these cases the past is completely reconstructed [11]. The only difference is that, in the case of the science of history, this is recognized and *doubts* never disappear, while in all the other cases, the claims for the absolute truth remain. In general, all this means that historians and nationalists are far from mutually convenient partners. National narratives are incompatible with the critical scientific history. A prominent British historian, Anthony F. Upton [14, p. 164], has precisely formulated the essence of the conflict. According to the professor, the historical myth and fiction differ from the critical approach in that the conclusions of scientists are always temporary and, in principle, always remain open to review. Unfortunately, such a story is unacceptable for the development of national identities that require a «true» past, which can ensure the maintenance of the nation's image. The function of a national historian is to create and maintain an icon. However, a critical historian, by nature, is an iconoclast, and his responsibility is to question any truth. A. F. Upton is rhetorically asking whether national and critical historians should be split in a friendly way and takes their own ways? The *true* scientist has no homeland. He believes that all societies are essentially the same, and the differences are determined by the contingencies rather than the innate characteristics of the people that make up those societies. The national historian believes that each society is unique and the environment little affects the national character, but on the contrary, they themselves change and influence the environment. A. Upton summarizes that a critical historian is a barrier to the creation and maintenance of a national identity, and, at the same time, a national narrative.

National narratives distort the history, encourage conflicts among nations, and often hinder the development of professional history. We see that in principle they can neither be objective nor scientifically substantiated. Actually, isolated facts, events, or processes, that are often described in those narratives, are critically substantiated, but the whole (and the whole is the most important element in the narrative of the nation), and the claim to the only truth are very problematic. However, as long as there are states and nations, it is unlikely that national narratives may be anything to change. No full-fledged nation can neither create nor survive without its historical narrative. He supports a collective identity that creates solidarity ties [13]. Historical narrative gives meaning to the events, processes and epochs of the past, which otherwise would remain only abstract and unnamed in the past or would simply be forgotten [2]. The denationalization of history is completely unthinkable in the near future. By reinforcing this perspective one can reiterate that a democratic world without states, nations, communities, which have their own identity, past, and vision is hardly imaginable. Only totalitarianism has no diversity. Probably, the existence of one another overlapping and conflicting national narratives is encoded in the very nature of human beings and in the logic of the life of free communities.

G. B. Vico's «Retrospective». It has been observed that national narratives have characteristic features that can be formulated in three simple para-

graphs [8, p. 157]: *Romanticism*. All national narratives are romantic; in the sense that they provide that nations have existed at all times and contain the characteristics of eternity. Each national narrative seeks to describe the beginning by moving it to the next possible times. The past is mythologized. It immediately encodes a number of problems: the nations whose history has not yet existed in those ancient times (the present modern nation is a phenomenon of the 19th and 20th centuries), on the other hand, the deeper the narrative goes into the past, especially prehistoric, the less reliable the sources are, and this leads to a flicker of interpretations, distortions, and misunderstandings. Such historians' aspiration to «discover» the origins was called by M. Bloch as one of the greatest temptations and scarcities of the science of history with which the architects of national histories are particularly confronted [6]. *Heroes*. National narratives are full of heroes and heroic motives. The transformation of real-life personalities (rulers, warriors, fighters, revolutionaries) into heroes is also one of the most important features of national narratives. It is important to understand here that they mostly were not the heroes in their own times, but they became ones because were created by the generations of other times that they did not personally know. *The struggle for freedom, justice, and identity*. There is a tendency towards positive aspects to always be associated with «we», and negative — with the «other». This contradiction often encodes hostility to other nations, and this often leads to the perception that we have been attacked by external enemies for centuries, contributing to xenophobic education, coercion, wars, ethnic cleansing, and genocide [9; 3]. The common theme of national stories, especially for Europe, is the struggle for freedom, democracy, or for a certain area. To structure the struggle, the events and interpretations of the struggle are selected or even newly constructed. This creates the «great battles», the most important «historical dates» that taught from the primary school years, and the «correct» interpretations of the most important events and past phenomena. It has been observed, that national narratives are «tied» not to the former territories (there are no boundaries of political structures that have never been changed for centuries), but to the lands of the present, currently existing states. This is related to the B. Croce's and R. G. Collingwood's idea expressed at the early 20th century that «the whole story is the story of the present.» Here we have in mind that the past is described from the today's perspective with regard to the existing cultural and political realities. The historian cannot disassociate himself from his cultural, political, and social environment, so he «adapts» the past to today: he is raising topics, raising questions, selecting facts and creating interpretations that are relevant to the present.

The above three groups of features of national narratives offer a comparison with the stages of the development of the history of nations formulated by Vico at the beginning of the 18th c. [15]. This thinker is considered to be the first representative of the philosophy of classical history. Unlike his rational contemporaries I. Kant, J. Locke, D. Hume and a whole host of educators he doubted that the methods of exact sciences could be applied to the knowledge of human activity. The cosmos was created by God, so it can only be known

to him, and human matters (i.e., social and humanitarian, including history) have been created by human beings, thus, he himself can know them. The nature of man is not static and unchanging. Attempts to know the world in which they live and endeavour to adapt constantly change the world and the people themselves. Vico was one of the first culture comparators. Analyzing the ancient Egyptian, Greek, Babylonian, and even Chinese cultures, he believed that all cultures are individual and possess unique features that overwhelm them in the fields of society, economics, politics, and culture. On the other hand, they all have similar stages of development, and all human activity is regulated by «providence», without which there would be neither science nor virtues. He also suggested that myths, stories, songs, customs, and rituals can be the sources of reconstructing and explaining the past, but to understand them, you need to get into the minds of people on that time. Such enthusiasm for the mentality of other cultures, for the infinite number of attitudes and life styles, is possible only owing to *fantasia*, i.e. imagination. Vico's style is baroque, non-disciplined, and dark. According to I. Berlin, the «New Science» is a blend of clever things and total nonsense, a set of missed ideas. Some of them are charming and impressive, while others are shapeless, dark, and naive. Strong innovative thoughts are accompanied by trivial fragments of outdated scholarly traditions. All of this is chaotically incorporated in an unbelievably fruitful work, which, despite everything, is brilliant [5, p. 3, 67–68]. Vico made a tremendous influence on the 19th — 20th c. thinkers who have transformed the science of history: the giant of the French romantic historical traditions Michelet, the German historian Dilthey, the Italian thinker Croce, and the British philosopher Collingwood.

Vico formulated three stages of evolution of peoples following the ancient Egyptians [15, p. 395]. The same stages are essentially repeated in the structure of national narratives of the 20th century, and therein how the evaluations of each of these three epochs differ. Thus, what is meant by this is long-standing mental paradigms that have remained unchanged for hundreds of years.

Vico argued that the first stage in the development of the nations was «The Epoch of the Gods.» Nations are then created, and this process is based on the myths with encoded meanings. Religions are born here, and feelings and emotions rather than rational minds predominate among people. This period is definitely a reflection of the *Romanticism* group, and is associated with the oldest history of Lithuania and Belarus until Mindaugas.

Attention should be drawn to a number of innovative and thought-provoking ideas. First of all, the fact that Vico gave significance to the Gods is quite praiseworthy. Religion is important for every national narrative. There is no national narrative with no confessional affiliation, or its influence on culture, statehood, and conflicts caused by it. Secondly, Vico argued that «people tend to exaggerate what they do not understand or do not know», that is precisely why many nations «considered their past more magnificent than it really was» [15, p. 42–43]. Perhaps, by making the first people «Gods», Vico himself fell into these «traps»; however, this is also characteristic to national narratives

of our time. Narrative stories aim at describing the beginning by moving it to the possibly most distant time. This immediately encodes a number of problems: it describes the beginning of modern nations in prehistoric times, although they did not exist at that time; on the other hand, talking about a very distant past that left no written and verbal sources but only relatively few archaeological sources is very problematic. Prehistoric times, which are so little known about and so alien to our minds, are often named and described as «the times of the beginning of the nation», and, thus, are too much emphasized, romanticized, and mythologized in national narratives. Thus, in the history of Lithuania, the «ancestral Baltic lands» that appeared today, which lasted from Berlin to Moscow in the 2nd millennium BC. In turn, the Belarusians, «bypassing» the Kiev Russia state, emphasize the independence of the Polotsk state at the very dawn of the statehood.

According to Vico, the second period of the development of the nations is the «Epoch of Heroes». For those times, the pursuit of honour, power and immortality, often at all costs, is common. It is a time when fragmentation into the caste system, increasing opposition, and exclusion from the society is taking place. Wars are based on religion rather than reason and rationality, and, therefore, are extremely ferocious. This could correspond to the 10th — 15th c., to the times when fundamental changes took place in the cultural and, especially, political areas, and when the majority of the most important historical heroes of Lithuania and Belarus were «born».

The rulers of the «Heroic Era» — Mindaugas, Gediminas, Algirdas, Kęstutis, and Vytautas — obviously «turned into heroes». Vytautas is the only «great» prince, and Jogaila is the most famous «anti hero» (in the Lithuanian narrative this is obviously apparent, but not in the Belarusian, since the conflict with the Poles in the 20th c. was much less relevant to them than to the Lithuanians). This process began in the 19th century, along with the birth of national narratives, and especially intensified in the 20th c. The Lithuanian national narrative never had «bigger» heroes than these, and the Belarusian is not much behind.

It was exactly these people who created and supported the greatness of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, fought in the most significant battles, and their lives and works were covered with legends. Due to the reckless «appropriation», the symptomatic equivocal has emerged today: the Lithuanians know exactly when King Mindaugas was crowned (July 6, 1253), because it has been the state's celebration for almost last three decades, but they have no idea where it happened. Meanwhile, the Belarusians know «exactly» where it happened: in Naugardukas, which has become one of the most important historical points of attraction in the state, however, they have no idea when it happened, because they do not use the date «found» by the Lithuanians [10].

Similar to Vico, national stories portray «heroic times» as a period of violent and uncompromising wars, with all the most dramatic tensions associated with religion. Public culture, law, and everyday life were connected to the struggle against neighbours Slavs, with the Germans in the West, and with the Mongol-Tartars in the East. In terms of Vico, the state was the property

of the aristocrats, the Gediminas dynasty, and although they went into compromises with the local nobility, they ruled incomparably more rigorously and authoritatively than the «Age of People» in democracy. The dynasty regarded the state as belonging to their own and their parents' property, fought for their own, and at the same time, the freedom of the country, while the ordinary population was just subordinate, far from having such rights as the ruling elite.

After all, it remains to agree with Vico that the «heroic times» gave rise to the most important symbols of the statehood, all of which were related to the war and the ruling dynasty. In its own way, the knight is used by both the Lithuanians and the Belarussians. The Gediminas pillars and the double cross of the Jagiellonians are also the works of the same period. If the first one is used by both contemporary Belarusians and Lithuanians, then the second symbol, as a symbol of Catholicism, is hardly well-established in Belarus, which is, to a large extent, Orthodox — here it is «replaced» by the St. Euphrosynia Cross. The white-red-white flag used by the Belarusian national movement is also associated with the «Hero Times».

The third period is called the «People's Epoch». It is a transition to the period of relative tranquillity, rule of law, rationality, science, and culture. Heroes, such as in the previous era, do not and cannot exist in this period. During this period, many of the currently existing provisions, such as the «own» territory, «enemies and friends» and others, were formed up. In the epoch of people, the present-day peoples with their own defined territories, languages and cultures, with printed literature, were actively forming. Starting from nowadays, much more reasonably than in the epochs of the heroes or gods, one can speak of the beginning of the history of the present nations. On the one hand, the societies became more civilized, educated, more cultured, but at the same time much calmer, less energetic in a militaristic sense. More and more population was involved in the political and cultural life of the state.

The features of the «People's Epoch», described by Vico, are amazingly consistent with those described in the 16th — 18th c. of the Lithuanian and Belarusian history. One of the most important symbols is the promotion of the Lithuanian Statute, which both nations «share» in a rather friendly way. The first one (1529) was «appropriated» throughout the 20th c. by the Lithuanians, and the third one by the Belarusians. Although the latter, created in 1588, and valid until 1842 has been the most perfect and probably the most significant intellectual work of the Lithuanian civilization of all times, but due to its cultural and linguistic traditions, it has not even translated into the Lithuanian language. Other state symbols were similarly «shared»: the 17th — 18th centuries' Palace of the Grand Dukes in Vilnius is pompously restored as a reference symbol of the current Republic of Lithuania, while the Radvila Palace in Nesvyžius, belonging to the same period and the same state, is a sign of the current identity of Lukashenko's Belarus.

Conclusions. One of the main reasons why national narratives are confront- ed is related to the hero. Historical figures can be viewed radically on the contrary, such as Jogaila and Vytautas in Lithuanian and Polish narratives. Even

more often, the heroes are simply «hard to share». Absurdly narrow-mindedly it is believed that a person who existed in the past 19th — 20th centuries and was exalted to the hero by the historians can belong to only one community. Long dead people are once again becoming material bodies, which become like the dolls of jealous «patriots» of the 20th — 21st c. who worship them as idols. The conflicts of this kind are clearly visible in the relations between the Lithuanians and the Belarusians when we talk about Mindaugas, Gediminas, Algirdas, Vytautas, and a whole host of other public and, in particular, political characters. However, this is by no means the only phenomenon in our region. For example, there was a similar argument regarding King Frank Chlodwig I between the French and the Germans.

One of the important goals that Vico raised for himself was finding the truth. Due to long-term searches, he concluded that the Divine and the Human Truths are different. Drawing parallels with the works of art, he argued that the first one was like a sculpture, a three-dimensional one, and the second one was a two-dimensional drawing [7]. Unfortunately, a human is unable of understanding the Divine truth, because he only monitors its projection on the plane. For this reason, his knowledge will inevitably be limited. The human truth is inevitably the product of the imagination, it is created by intelligence. On the other hand, there is a metaphysical truth in every man-made truth projection. This truth is not easily perceived. Certain abilities are necessary understand it, just as it is necessary to have certain abilities to understand the works of art of Vico's times on the juncture of the 17th — 18th c. Looking from the perspective of philosophy and history, these Vico's thoughts are very modern and offer comments.

First, the division of the nation's history into three periods — the Gods, the Heroes, and the People — is only the construction of human intelligence, which has a clear and very important function to help understand the history. In the same way, you can «discover» 4, 5 or 20 periods and display according to them the history of any chosen nation. Nearly every book on history, or even a school textbook, uses more or less different chronology. On the other hand, the history of the nation does not necessarily have to begin in prehistoric times. It is easy to create and offer a different layout for Vico's proposed periods. One of the options is to concentrate the history of one and another nation along the 19th — 20th centuries respectively. This offer, which has often been heard in one or another country in the last 100 years, is related to the image of the transition from a political nation (the tradition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) to a linguistic nation (the 20th c. tradition). This means that the «Age of Gods» was on the eve of the 19th c., the «Age of Heroes» in the 19th and early 20th c. (the rebellions of 1831 and 1863, personalities: M. Valančius, V. Kudirka, J. Basanavičius, and etc.; in the history of Belarus, revolutionaries of the second half of the 19th c., the «first» historian A. Lastoŭski, the creation of the Belarusian People's Republic, and etc.), and the «Age of People», in this case, could have begun since the end of the First World War. We will notice that such a story is much less conflict because the main themes (ethnographic area, national language, creation of own states,

and etc.) and the heroes are completely different. However, it makes the Lithuanians alien and calls the Belarusians towards Russia. It greatly enhances the role of the Russians as the creators of the Belarusians and the Belarusian state. These stories «constructed» the Byelorussians as the part their own rather than the part of the Western world. Following the logic of Western «Rusism», in the time of the GDL, the Poles and the Lithuanians only wanted to destroy the true Belarusian Orthodox identity, polonizing and translating them into Catholics. Naturally, such a story can and has a right to exist, but if the geopolitical and cultural reorientation of Belarus is to be desired, it would probably be necessary to think carefully about its meaning.

Secondly, it can be asserted that different interpretations of the same story are like different two-dimensional projections of the same three-dimensional sculpture. Drawing further parallels between Vico and the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania reveals that no man, no historian can reproduce the full truth, but can offer a more or less reasoned attitude. Naturally, these attitudes can vary and differ from one another, but following Vico, each of them will be a greater or a lesser part of the metaphysical truth. Even more, although man is not destined to become God, he can approach divinity by learning and understanding the variety of two-dimensional projections of the same sculpture. In short, a person who knows and understands the interpretation of the Lithuanian and the Belarusian history of the GDL is closer to the truth than the one who knows only one of these variants. Vico compared a historian with a painter who, on a large canvas, highlights those shapes and those elements that seem to him to be the most important, thus creating his own narrative. When painting the same scenes different masters will highlight different accents [7].

At the end of the 19th century one of the most famous philosophers of our time a German F. Nietzsche claimed that «belief in one normal god, beside which there are only pseudo-gods» is «the greatest threat to which mankind has so far encountered» [12, p. 192]. He was supported by the 20th c. French historian Le Goff, who at the end of the book «History and Memory» warned in the last paragraphs that though historic knowledge is essential for the human knowledge and the functioning of societies, but they cannot in any way turn into religion and limitations. You cannot allow the creation of the «cult of history» [11, p. 215]. The Belarusian and the Lithuanian interpretations of the past are clearly in conflict, thus, the excessive significance of history and turning it into an instrument of domestic or foreign policy can lead to confrontation. Unfortunately it is extremely problematic to indicate where the threshold for over-emphasized or exaggerated public affairs. Therefore, in order to remain with the national past stories and history altogether but to avoid disasters, there is only way: to understand and admit that history can be told very differently, and that the variety of critical interpretations does not distort but extends its understanding.

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Стаття надійшла до редакції 15.09.2017

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ЛИТОВСКИЕ И БЕЛОРУССКИЕ НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ НАРРАТИВЫ. «РЕТРОСПЕКТИВА» ДЖ. Б. ВИКО

Аннотация

Национальные нарративы субъективны, односторонни и конфликтны. Эта проблема была замечена европейскими мыслителями с XIX века. Итальянский философ Дж. Б. Вико не имеет прямого отношения к современной проблеме национальных нарративов, а также к белорусским или литовским интерпретациям истории. Однако он стал одним из самых влиятельных мыслителей современности, оказавшим большое влияние на гуманитарные науки XX в. Вико сформулировал три этапа эволюции народов: эпоху богов, период героев и время людей. Те же этапы, по существу, повторяются в структуре национальных описаний XX и даже XXI ст. Давние психические парадигмы не изменились в течение сотен лет. Их можно проследить и в исторических интерпретациях в сегодняшних Беларуси и Литве. Особенно это видно в «период героев». Эти две национальные истории в течение последних десятилетий находятся в конфликте, не в состоянии поделиться героями общего прошлого, особенно XIII–XV вв., такими как Миндаугас, Гедиминас, Альгирдас и Витаутас. Вико сделал вывод, что субъективность неизбежна в повествованиях, составленных людьми. Противоречивые интерпретации общего прошлого, созданного белорусами и литовцами, более естественны, чем создание единого «истинного» видения прошлого.

Ключевые слова: Дж. Б. Вико, национальные нарративы, Литва, Беларусь.

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«РЕТРОСПЕКТИВА» ДЖ. Б. ВІКО**

Анотація

Національні нарративи є суб'єктивними, однобічними та конфліктними. Ця проблема була помічена європейськими мислителями з ХІХ ст. Італійський філософ Дж. Б. Віко не має прямого відношення до сучасної проблеми національних нарративів, а також до білоруських або литовських інтерпретацій історії. Однак він став одним з найбільш впливових мислителів сучасності, який мав великий вплив на гуманітарні науки ХХ ст. Віко сформулював три етапи еволюції народів: епоху богів, період героїв та час людей. Ті ж етапи, по суті, повторюються у структурі національних описів ХХ та навіть ХХІ ст. Давні психічні парадигми не змінились протягом сотень років. Їх можна прослідкувати і в історичних інтерпретаціях у сучасних Білорусі та Литві. Особливо це видно в «період героїв». Ці дві національні історії протягом останніх десятиліть знаходяться у конфлікті, не в змозі поділитися героями спільного минулого, особливо ХІІІ–ХV ст., такими як Міндаугас, Гедімінас, Альгірдас та Вітаутас. Віко зробив висновок, що суб'єктивність є неминучою у нарративах, залишених людьми. Протиріччя інтерпретацій спільного минулого, створених білорусами та литовцями, є природнішими, аніж створення єдиного «істинного» бачення минулого.

Ключові слова: Дж. Б. Віко, національні нарративи, Литва, Білорусь.