

INTRODUCTION

The Byelorussians are one of the three nations that make up the East Slavonic ethnic group. Although they have never received, even from specialists, the same degree of attention that has been paid to the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, their language and culture are of great intrinsic interest and fully deserve to be made known to a wider public. In an age of increasing uniformity, especially in the sphere of material civilization, individual national cultures have an important role to play as exponents of the infinite variety of the human spirit, and the *Journal of Byelorussian Studies* is to be welcomed as a source of information for non-specialist readers about one little-known East European people and its contribution to civilization.

Byelorussian is today one of the twelve Slavonic languages which have attained stabilized and generally accepted written forms and are used for literary and administrative purposes as well as in the speech of every day. Closely akin to Russian and Ukrainian it is nevertheless clearly distinct from them. Although the Byelorussian literary language has been established in its present form within the last century, it can look back on a long history, marked by many and complex vicissitudes. Even in some thirteenth-century texts, preserved from the East Slavonic area, scholars can detect some features that point to the Byelorussian language as we know it. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Chancery language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, though an amalgam of different linguistic elements, nevertheless showed many Byelorussian features. Thus when in the early nineteenth century, the Byelorussians began to be conscious of their own nationality, in common with so many other peoples of Eastern Europe, they could look back on a certain national linguistic tradition — and language is the basis of national culture.

The pages of this issue of the *Journal* bear witness to the variety and liveliness of the Byelorussian cultural achievement. It will be read with interest by all who have more than a superficial interest in Eastern Europe.

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