

Academician Ja. F. Karski (1861-1931)

BY

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There can be no-one involved in Byelorussian affairs and, indeed, few scholars in the Slavonic field as a whole unfamiliar with at least the name of Jaūfim Fiodaravič Karski who, championing the study of Byelorussia in the field of language, dialectology, literature, ethnography and palaeography, achieved more than all his predecessors and perhaps also all his successors put together. Although Karski's life was devoted principally to the study of his native Byelorussia, his scholarly interests were wide, enabling him to produce, among other things, a Grammar of Old Church Slavonic that was well ahead of its time and ran into nineteen editions,¹ an important study of Russian dialectology² and another of Cyrillic palaeography that is still of practical value and use today,³ as well as numerous articles on various other Slavonic languages. Karski's works number more than six hundred, thus permitting mention of only a few of the most important, but, from the humblest review article to the great monograph *Belorusy*, they show a precise approach within narrow terms of reference combined with a broad perspective of the field as a whole. Despite the unusually great extent of his scientific background Karski — unlike many of his contemporaries — was at pains to avoid generalisations and broad theories, confining himself to the discovery and accurate exposition of primary material. For example, in the introduction to his *Западнорусские переводы Псалтыри в 15-17 веках*⁴ he enumerates many almost untouched fields of research, such as the influence of Polish and Old Church Slavonic on Byelorussian, its relation to Ukrainian or its syntactical peculiarities, but stresses the importance of approaching the general from the particular, and thus justifies his own preference for the detailed study of individual monuments of literary history like the *Perevody*. And indeed, it is this reluctance to cut corners and seek quick gains that makes Karski's work such a valuable cornerstone for modern Byelorussian linguistic scholarship.

¹) *Грамматика древнего церковнославянского языка сравнительно с русским*, Vilna, 1888.

²) *Русская диалектология. Очерк литературного русского произношения и народной речи великорусской (южновеликорусских и северновеликорусских говоров), белорусской и малорусской (украинского языка)*, Leningrad, 1924.

³) *Славянская кирилловская палеография*, Leningrad, 1928.

⁴) Warsaw, 1896.

Karski was born on the 1st of January, 1861 (20th of December, 1860 by the Old Calendar); his father was a poor schoolteacher in the village of Łaša in the former Hrodna region, whence the family moved soon after Karski's birth to the Navahrudak district of the Minsk region. One of eight, he attended the local church school and then the seminary in Minsk, after which he was fortunate enough to be able to enter the celebrated Prince Bezborodko Historical-Philological Institute in Nežin where he stayed until 1885. There he specialized in Russian and General Slavonic philology under Professor Brandt and made full use of the good library available; already he had gained the reputation of a hard worker, rising, we are told, at five in the morning and continuing his studies late into the night, rapidly forming a broad basis of scholarship by learning all the Slavonic languages in addition to Ancient Greek, Latin and Sanscrit. After this he spent seven years teaching in a grammar school in Vilna, and it was not until 1893 that his academic career really started when he was invited to lecture in Russian at Warsaw university, only a years later being made a professor, after defending his thesis for Master's degree in Kiev. For this he presented his *Обзор звуков и форм белорусской речи* of 1884 and his *К истории звуков и форм белорусской речи* which had been published in the *Русский филологический вестник* between 1890 and 1893; it is interesting to note that this was the first time a Byelorussian subject had been chosen for an academic thesis. From this point on his career was spectacular: from 1902 to 1904 he served as dean of the Historical-Philological Faculty and then for the next five years as rector of the university. The first freely elected rector at Warsaw, Karski received sixty eight of the seventy votes cast, which gives an indication of the great personal popularity he had earned by his unstinting help and advice given to colleagues and students alike. Although officially retiring in 1910 he continued to deliver lectures at the university and in 1915 was evacuated with the faculty to Rostov-on-Don; thence, on being elected to the Russian Academy of Sciences he travelled to Moscow and later Petrograd where he accepted a professorial post at the university. In the years after the October Revolution Karski's work was principally concerned with Russian documents and philological problems although the last book of *Belorusy* was published in Petrograd in 1922. The circumstances of his last years are not altogether clear and it is surprising to read in the latter book his opinion that Byelorussians should use Russian for all their creative and official writing since, he explains, Russian contains many elements of Byelorussian and other dialects, particularly from the earlier period. A strange comment, surely, from one who had devoted a large part of his life to the demonstration of Byelorussia's vitality and life as a nation. The sentiments hardly coincide with those implied in the epigraph to *Belorusy* taken from Skaryna's translation of *The Book of Judith* of 1517: »Понеже от прирочения звери, ходящие в пустыни, знают ямы своя; птицы, летающие по въздуху, ведають гнезда своя; рыбы плывающие по морю и в реках, чуютъ виры своя; пчелы и тым подобный боронятъ ульев своих, — тако ж и

люди, игде зродилися и ускормлены суть по бозе, к тому месту великую ласку имеют».

Karski was a great traveller, always searching for new material and information; as a teacher in Nežin and later professor in Warsaw he made trips each summer to different regions of Byelorussia collecting ethnographical and linguistic data, whilst visits to the great Slavonic libraries of Europe took him further afield: to Poland, Russia, the Ukraine, Serbia, Bulgaria, Turkey and, later, Czechoslovakia. Although truly patriotic, with a deep love for his native Byelorussia, Karski was cosmopolitan in outlook and published contributions to Western as well as East European journals; well known and admired in Europe, he was, towards the end of his life, elected a member of the Czech Academy of Sciences. He died in Leningrad on the 29th of April, 1931.

When in 1901 Karski was proposed for admission to the Russian Academy of Sciences, Š achmatov, Sobolevskij, Peretc and Kotljarevskij, in a note to the governing board, described him as "the founder of Byelorussian philology", and this constitutes the major and dominating part of his work, particularly before the change in circumstances brought about by the October Revolution of 1917. His first step was the publication in 1880 of some folk songs from his native village,⁵ and one immediately perceives a contrast with the work of his predecessors, mostly, like Federowski⁶ and Dobrovolskij,⁷ ethnographers from the provincial intelligentsia: Karski produced the songs not so much for any interest there might be in their content but as examples of local speech accurately recorded for linguistic analysis. His chief criticism of the work of ethnographical collectors like Romanov⁸ and Š ejn⁹ was that they paid insufficient attention to accuracy in their recording of material. Karski, with characteristic generosity, helped and advised Š ejn in these matters so that he was able to improve the quality of his work in this respect. He also gave assistance in mundane tasks like proof-reading, and after Š ejn's death edited and published the third volume of his friend's *Materiaily*.¹⁰ Karski himself did no recording of actual folk material after this early start, but turned to the recording of 'pure' linguistic data, which he used in conjunction with material from the old literary monuments — the ancient forms helped in the analysis of the contem-

⁵) «Белорусские песни села Берёзовца Новогрудского уезда Минской губернии», *Русский филологический вестник*, XII, 1884, 124-35.

⁶) Michał Federowski, *Lud białoruski na Rusi Litewskiej. Materiyaly do etnografii słowianskiej, zgrupowane w latach 1877-1891*, Kraków, 1897-1935.

⁷) В. Н. Добровольский, *Смоленский этнографический сборник*, СПб, 1891-1903; *Смоленский областной словарь*, Smolensk, 1914.

⁸) Е. Р. Романов, *Белорусский сборник*, Киев, 1885-91. Е. Ф. Карский, *Разбор историко-этнографических трудов Е. Р. Романова по Северо-Западному краю, вышедших я течение 1898-1901 годов*, St. Petersburg, 1904.

⁹) П. В. Шейн, *Материалы для изучения быта и языка русского населения Северо-Западного края*, СПб, 1887-1902. Е. Ф. Карский, *Разбор этнографического труда П. В. Шейна* St. Petersburg, 1899; see also; *Журнал министерства народного просвещения*, 1887, октябрь, 320-330; *ЖМНП*, 1890, ноябрь, 175-190; *ЖМНП*, 1894, апрель, 434-450.

¹⁰) П. В. Шейн, *Материалы*, III, St. Petersburg, 1902.

porary and dialectal ones, and vice versa, a rewarding technique, known as the comparative-historical method and widely accepted and practised nowadays, but which was very much the exception rather than the rule in the nineteenth century. Already armed with a formidable amount of material, he produced between 1884 and 1886 the first of the tv/o studies of Byelorussian phonology and morphology that were offered in Kiev some ten years later for his Master's degree. This was not absolutely the first study since slightly earlier Appel¹¹ and Nedjoš ev¹² had written articles attempting to outline the main distinguishing features of Byelorussian, but which, being based on inadequate and, to some extent, inaccurate material, had left much to be desired. In the forward to *Обзор звуков и форм белорусской речи*¹³ Karski describes the scientific study of Byelorussian as non-existent; too many people approached the subject with preconceived notions or unreliable material: even Nasovič¹⁴ and Mikucki,¹⁵ who were natives, did relatively little, Mikucki being principally concerned with Lithuanian and Nasovič dealing with vocabulary rather than grammar. Although we know that Karski found much to criticise in Nasovič's dictionary for scholarly reasons,¹⁶ his comments on the latter's work do show his relatively small interest in lexicology. Perhaps he thought that in an almost completely undiscovered field other disciplines should take first priority, for even in his earliest work he stresses that his efforts are an attempt to, as it were, clear the ground or smoothe the path of future scholars. Karski's work, based as it was on his own first-hand researches, often into unpublished material, was the real foundation stone for future Byelorussian linguistic scholarship.

For his Doctor's dissertation, defended in Moscow and published in Warsaw in 1896, he took and analysed a series of old literary monuments, the *Западнорусские переводы Псалтыри в XV-XVII веках*. Already in this work he displays those qualities that render his later, extensive work on old documents, both Byelorussian and Russian, so valuable: the strictest accuracy combined with the ability to consider a given literary monument in all its aspects: palaeographic, orthographic, phonological, morphological and syntactical. So many different points of approach helped him to make accurate analyses of the origins and unusual features of the documents. Karski's *opus magnum*, which appeared between 1903 and 1922 was simply called *Belorusy*. Once again the vast majority of it is based on the author's original researches, and, in three volumes, seven parts and over three thousand pages it is comparable in scope and importance perhaps only to Gebauer's work on the history of Czech.¹⁷ It sets out to present

¹¹) К. Аппель, «0 белорусском наречии», РФВ, III, 1880, 197.

¹²) И. Недёшев, «Исторический обзор важнейших звуковых и морфологических особенностей белорусских говоров», РФВ, 1884, 427.

¹³) Moscow, 1885.

¹⁴) И. И. Носович, *Словарь белорусского наречия*, St. Petersburg, 1870.

¹⁵) С. Микуцкий, «Белорусские слова. Сборнике, *Известия Императорской Академии наук по Отделению русского языка и словесности*, III, 1854, 176-92.

¹⁶) *Обзор звуков и форм ...*, p. 8.

¹⁷) Jan Gebauer, *Historická mluvnice jazyka českého*, Prague, 1894-1929.

a picture of the present and past state of the language and literature of Byelorussia. The first volume¹⁸ is in the nature of an introduction to the work as a whole, and is written in a style comprehensible to the intelligent layman. In it he expounds the theory of how the Byelorussian people find their origins in the Drjagaviči, Radzimiči and Kryviči tribes, outlines the ethnography and archaeology of the country, discusses the main features of the language and principal dialects (as well as the degree to which they have been studied), and, finally, makes a survey of the old documents and the copies made from them, together with available collections of folk material. In addition there is a dialectal map; Karski calls it ethnographical, but one should bear in mind that for him ethnography was basically a question of language and dialect. The map, like so much of Karski's work, was the first of its kind for Byelorussia; indeed, it had only two predecessors in the Slavonic field as a whole: one for Russian and one for Czech, both produced in 1877. The research on which the map was based was carried out by Karski personally during the year 1903. Previously, in the sixties, Erkert and Rittich had produced maps attempting to define the Polish-Byelorussian ethnographic border, but these were superceded by Karski's work although the new map was not entirely satisfactory, excluding as it did from Byelorussia's ethnographic boundaries Pinsk, Brest and much of the South Hrodna region, whilst including patently Russian towns like Kursk and Orjol, for example. Nonetheless, it temporarily filled a large gap in the field of Byelorussian studies.

The second volume of *Belorusy*, which consists of three parts, is basically devoted to the language: part one¹⁹ contains a palaeographic description of the principal old literary monuments like the *Вкладная Ивана Никоновича* of the fourteenth or the *Западнорусская псалтырь* of the sixteenth centuries, together with a comprehensive history of the Byelorussian phonological and stress systems. Part two²⁰ is a study of morphology and word formation, whilst the third part of volume two²¹ deals most thoroughly with syntax: perhaps this is the most significant and important part of *Belorusy*, since hitherto there had been some work, albeit inadequate, on phonology and morphology, whilst the field of syntax had remained untouched.

Volume three is also in three parts. The first of these is an exceptionally full catalogue of Byelorussian folk poetry;²² Karski's was the first attempt to systematise the different genres and he stresses that his work is preliminary, aimed at clearing the way for future investigators. Unfortunately the latter have all too often been content to

¹⁸) *Белорусы, т. I. Введение в изучение языка и народной словесности*, Warsaw, 1903.

¹⁹) *Белорусы, т. II. Язык белорусского племени. 1. Исторический очерк звуков белорусского наречия*, Warsaw, 1908.

²⁰) *Белорусы, т. II. Язык белорусского племени. 2. Исторический очерк словообразования и словоизменения в белорусском наречии*, Warsaw, 1911.

²¹) *Белорусы, т. II. Язык белорусского племени. 3. Очерки синтаксиса белорусского наречия. Дополнения и поправки*, Warsaw, 1912.

²²) *Белорусы, т. III. Очерки словесности белорусского племени. 1. Народная поэзия*, Moscow, 1916.

merely repeat his work and to present his conclusions as their own. The second part,²³ is perhaps even more valuable; it is a systematic account of the literature up to the end of the eighteenth century, showing, *inter alia*, how from the thirteenth century onwards the East Slavonic monuments show signs of the local, vernacular language intruding into and 'corrupting' the Church Slavonic texts. The third and final part of this great work is a review of Byelorussian literature from the beginning of the nineteenth century to 1921.²⁴ Karski makes little or no subjective assessment of the writers' individual worth, but attempts to collect and classify as much information as possible, and it is partly for this reason that his work is of such extreme interest and value today, although, as with the folk songs, he is reproached by present day critics for approaching the literature from the point of view of its cultural and historical interest rather than its significance in the class struggle. For the modern scholar, however, it is precisely this thoroughness and lack of tendentiousness that make his work indispensable, particularly when one compares it with other attempts at the same tasks, for example that by Maksim Harecki,²⁵ to mention only the best. It is a matter for deep regret that the first and third volumes of *Belorussia* have been allowed to become bibliographical rarities; volume two alone was reprinted in 1955. Completing this great work the author, with characteristic modesty, emphasised that he had no illusions about having exhausted the subject, and outlined some of the main gaps, in particular lexicological, remaining to be filled; many of them still remain, although since the Second World War an ever increasing amount of work has been undertaken in the field.

Dialectology was not one of Karski's specialities, compared, for example, with palaeography or syntax, and the majority of his work takes the form of reviewing and discussing the investigations of others, but it is nonetheless clear that by the 1890s he was considered the greatest expert in his field, since the Academy of Sciences selected him to prepare a programme for the systematic study of the Byelorussian dialects: this he completed in 1897, and himself undertook much of the work of classifying the material collected as a result of the programme. He was the first to make the basic division of the dialects into the North-East/South-West types, a division that is still generally accepted today; and using the dialectal material for comparison with Russian and Ukrainian he proved in the face of contemporary opinion that the Byelorussian language was an original linguistic entity formed many centuries earlier, and not just a dialect or corruption.

One may mention briefly Karski's other work, outside the field of Byelorussian. He produced a number of studies dealing with ancient Russian documents, for example that on the syntax of the Lavrent'jev

²³) *Белорусы, т. III. Очерки словесности белорусского племени. 2. Старая западнорусская словесность*, Petrograd, 1921.

²⁴) *Белорусы, т. III. Очерки словесности белорусского племени. 3. Художественная литература на народном языке*, Petrograd, 1928.

²⁵) М. Гарэцкі, *Гісторыя беларускае літаратуры*, Vilna, 1919; Выдацьне чацьвертае пераробленае, Minsk, 1926.

Chronicle,²⁶ many of which are still of use to students and scholars today. In the field of literature he delivered speeches at occasions marking the anniversaries of Lomonosov,²⁷ Lermontov,²⁸ Pushkin²⁹ and Gogol,³⁰ producing some strikingly original ideas about these writers' importance for the Russian language as well as literature that aroused considerable discussion at the time. He was keenly interested in all aspects of philology and followed the spelling reform debate very closely,³¹ as well as waging a campaign against the unnecessary or barbarous use of foreign words in Russian.³² In addition to Russian, he wrote about Ukrainian, Slovene and, of course, Old Church Slavonic, towards the end of his life taking an especially great interest in comparative studies. Like many other scholars of the time, including Brandt, he supplemented Miklošič's famous hexaglot lexicon³³ and at the same time embarked on a project to compare the development of and relations between the various Slavonic languages on the basis of their lexical resources; unfortunately this project was cut short by Karski's sudden illness and death.

Finally there is his work as an editor, firstly of the *Русский филологический вестник* from 1904 to 1918, and later of the *Известия отделения русского языка и словесности Академии Наук* from 1920 to 1930. He took over the *Русский филологический вестник* from Smirnov, and in a short time almost doubled its size, at the same time bringing about great improvements in style and content, particularly in the bibliography section. Wishing the latter to be as comprehensive as possible, Karski himself would review any book not dealt with by his colleagues — another instance of his characteristic willingness to take onto his own shoulders what would normally be a huge collective burden. In 1913 alone he published seventy such reviews. In general they were descriptive and informative rather than critical, with Karski, like other scholars, always trying to stress the valuable aspects of any new work, without, at the same time, sacrificing critical standards. This was typical of a man whose

²⁶) »Наблюдения в области синтаксиса Лаврентьевского списка летописи«, *ИОРЯС*, II, кн. 1, Leningrad, 1921, 1-75.

²⁷) *Значение М. В. Ломоносова в развитии русского литературного языка*, Warsaw, 1912.

²⁸) *Памяти М. Ю. Лермонтова. Речь сказанная на годовичном акте Виленских Первой и Второй гимназий, 22 сегобря 1891 года, преподавателем Е. Ф. Карским*, Vilna, 1891.

²⁹) »О влиянии поэтической деятельности А. С. Пушкина на развитие русского литературного языка«, *РФВ*, XLII, 1899, 195-230.

³⁰) «Значение Н. В. Гоголя в истории русского литературного языка», *РФВ*, LXI, 1909, 205-222.

³¹) See, for example: E. Ф. К., »Ж вопросу о реформе русской орфографии«, *РФВ*, LII, 1909, 154-74.

³²) »О так называемых барбаризмах в русском языке. Речь произнесенная на акте 21 августа 1886 года«, *Краткий отчет о состоянии Виленской 2-й гимназии за 1885/6 учебный год*, Vilna, 1886, 33-45. *К вопросу об употреблении иностранных слов в русском языке. Речь при открытии в Варшаве летних курсов для учителей и учительниц начальных и городских училищ*, Warsaw, 1910. *Et al.*

³³) Ф. Миклошич, *Краткий словарь шести славянских языков*, St. Petersburg, 1885. Also: F. Miklosich, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der slawischen Sprachen*, Vienna, 1886.

aim was not to condemn but to encourage others for the general good of Byelorussian and linguistic studies as a whole. These reviews, dealing with the widest possible variety of subjects, show as well as anything the immense range of Karski's knowledge and interests.

The few personal scraps of information we have about him point to a man of great modesty and sensitivity, always ready to help students and colleagues alike. Lacking in academic pride Karski willingly popularised some of his most important works, for example volumes two and three of *Belorusy*,^{34 35} to make them available to a wider audience, whilst some of his other works were adapted for use in textbooks. The content of his writings ranges from the principles of teaching methods to the intricacies of historical syntax, but all his works share the vital common factors of clarity and practicality: his *Славянская кирилловская палеография*³⁶ contains, in addition to a theoretical discussion of the subject, over a hundred photocopies of the texts, since, the author notes in his forward, they are both difficult to obtain and expensive for students.

Karski was a man of many sides, combining a deep and original intellect with humanity and practicality. It would be too much to compare him to a Leonardo-like figure such as Skaryna, but nonetheless Byelorussia may be proud to have produced such a rare talent, and deeply grateful to him: both for his inspiring example and for doing in one lifetime what might otherwise have taken several generations to achieve.

³⁴) *Белорусская речь. Очерки народного языка с историческим освещением*, Petrograd, 1918.

³⁵) *Geschichte der weissrussischen Volksdichtung und Literatur — Grundriss der slawischen Philologie und Kulturgeschichte*, Berlin and Leipzig, 1926.

³⁶) Leningrad, 1928.