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Wisent – Poaching and World Heritage. Review

Thomas M. Bohn, Aliaksandr Dalhouski, Markus Krzoska *Wisent-Wildnis und Welterbe. Geschichte des polnisch-weißrussischen Nationalparks von Białowieża*, Vienne–Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2017, 401 p.

The present border between Poland and Belarus is a region that encompasses the Białowieża National Park. This is the only place where one can still find wisent (European bison), the largest European land mammal. The western part of this area was decreed a national park by Poland as early as in 1932. In 1945, Poland had to give its eastern territories to the Soviet Union. The eastern part of the region was recognised as the Belarusian National Park in 1992, which later merged with the Polish National Park. There was not a single wisent seen here for nearly a hundred years; however, in the 1950s single specimens were released in this area which started to successfully reproduce in the wilderness.

The publication presented here is the result of a long-term research project undertaken by a group of historians specialising in Eastern Europe: Professor Thomas H. Bohn, and Aliaksandr Dalhouski, PhD, and Markus Krzosko, PhD Hab. It was funded by the German Research Foundation at the Institute of History of the University of Giessen.

The book discussed here is an extensive publication and a detailed historical report with numerous comments, extremely rich source material and bibliography, and a detailed record of people and places. It additionally contains maps and several tables; these are further supplemented with

abundant photos (the percentage contribution of the respective authors has not been provided).

The book starts with a short introduction that briefly presents the contents of the publication. It further unfolds in the subsequent seven chapters that follow the historical chronology of events. Providing extensive detail and supported with ample source material, the publication discusses the highly diversified (and marked by frequent conflicts) political development of the region, in particular the relations of power and the hunting and forestry policy, as well as local socio-economic conditions in this area. It also presents the living conditions of the local people, their ethnic and cultural diversity, evolution and conflicts.

In the historical past, hunting was reserved mostly for monarchs and nobility, while local people who also engaged in it did so illegally. Another important aspect of the local life was the wood industry. After the third partition, the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth fell under the rule of the tsar. It was Tsar Alexander I who introduced the first forms of protection of European bison. Its number in the region increased from approximately 200 in 1802 to nearly 1900 animals in 1857. At the beginning of the First World War, the number fell to approximately 700 animals. Although under the German occupation, the bison were initially protected (but also often confused with aurochs), in the chaotic times of the war they would soon become nearly extinct.

With Poland regaining its independence and the foundation of the State Council for Nature Conservation in late 1919, the Białowieża Forest District 'Reserve' was created (in 1921). In 1992, it was transformed into the Białowieża National Park. While the necessary exploitation of wood was allowed, it hindered the creation and further development of the Park. Nevertheless, several bison were transported from zoos to the Park in 1929–30, where they were placed in free enclosures.

After the German invasion of Poland and the Hitler-Stalin Pact from 1939, the area remained under the Soviet occupation until 1941. It was transformed into a biosphere reserve where hunting was prohibited but the use of wood was allowed. With the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the rapid progress of German troops, the German occupation developed a complex network of structures and competences, partially opposing the interests of the involved stakeholders. As a result of these actions, bison were released into the wilderness. To summarise, the Second

World War proved to be the most dramatic period in the 20th century for the local inhabitants, with the governments changing three times.

After the fighting subdued, a violent dispute began over this border area leading to partial displacement of groups of people. Problems continued until a new border was agreed between Poland and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, first acts of poaching were soon reported along with wood stealing and illegal use of the Polish part of the forest on a larger scale.

In the meantime, natural science in Poland developed into a professional and diversified discipline. The growing phenomenon of tourism in National Parks led to a debate on mass tourism and environmental protection. After the Second World War, several bison still lived in fenced enclaves, with their numbers growing significantly due to breeding. In the 1950s, the animals started to be released into their natural habitat. In the eastern part of the Park (in Belarus), the reserve was put under the supervision of the Ministry of Forestry (marked by conflicting interests) and ultimately used by politicians currently in power as a hunting ground – just like in the times of the Tsars.

The release of wisent in the 1950s proved to be a success. Their numbers increased, largely due to the introduction of a hunting ban. In 1960–61, a total of 34 bisons were recorded in the Polish forest area and a further 28 in the territory of Belarus. In 1990–91, their numbers increased to 272 and 315 in Poland and Belarus, respectively. In 1979, the main zone of the Polish National Park was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and in 1992 the Belarusian part of the Park was named the Belarusian National Park. In 2014, the UNESCO World Heritage Site was extended over the entire Białowieża Forest. With European bison as its trademark, the Forest is nowadays home to approximately 900 of them, which accounts for a quarter of the wisent population in the world. Nevertheless, the decision issued by UNESCO has not solved all the problems. In particular, major conflict is generated by the use/logging of wood which is still used as firewood by most local people. The present Polish government has additionally given the green light to the continuation of intense works by the wood industry. Environmental activists also raise the issue of intensified tourism, but they also note that it constitutes a source of income for the local people.

To conclude, the book is a noteworthy historical study on one of the most important European regions that encompasses the National Park whose concept of landscape continues to be rather marginalised. The title

of the book 'Wisent – Wilderness and World Heritage' is misleading. In contrast to excellent publications on other animal species, such as those by Fred Kurt (1977 and 1991), the study presented here does not focus only on the behaviour and the living conditions of these large animals. As for the wisent and 'forest wilderness' discussed here, the publication is an example which shows that dreams can come true.

References

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