

# Belarusian émigré and diaspora printed publications in the British Library collections

a brief overview

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This article had been researched and written mostly before August 2020, when Belarusian people became one of the world's major newsmakers by opposing a long-standing authoritarian regime in their country. As suggested by Buhr, Shadurski and Hoffman (2011, 425), Belarusian identity has been “demonstrating more civic aspects than ethnic ones”, and Belarusians’ incredibly creative struggle supports this conclusion nine years after it was made. The processes happening in Belarus today highlighted the role of the Belarusian media operating outside of the national state borders. The Telegram channel NEXTA took centre stage (Hurska 2020; Article 19, 23 October 2020), although there are fifty three online resources worldwide that have been archived so far by the University of California Berkeley (Belarus Crisis: Fall 2020). Such collections, on the one hand, continue the traditional trends of preserving émigré and diaspora publications and, on the other, provide a look at the material from a new angle, where approach to collecting becomes holistic and the place of publication loses its relevance.

At the same time, studies of historical print collections can both help researchers identify specific primary sources and contribute to our understanding of diaspora and migration process in general. As stated by Alexander (2017, 1553), “the field of diaspora studies is <...> in process, reflecting and shaping new forms of migration and settlement, emergent forms of belonging and the precarities of ongoing global inequalities, dislocation and violence”. Print and digital publishing activities of diasporas and émigré communities constitute an important part of their identities, even though they are very rarely examined by social scientists when theoretical frameworks of the relevant disciplines are debated. However, I would argue that reconstruction of cultural institutions in host countries, including the press, is one of the most important elements in the establishing and functioning of diasporas. Information professionals and historians regularly give their perspective on the subject of diaspora publications and collections of such publications. This overview is an attempt to link such efforts and suggest ways of incorporating observations and findings into a broader picture of social sciences disciplines.

Belarusian émigrés and diaspora formed in the XX-XXI centuries received some academic coverage, mainly in the works of researchers in Belarus and within the diaspora itself.

Despite the fact that a systematic and objective study of the problem began only at the end of the last century, a great deal has already been done. According to the researcher of the Belarusian Diaspora O.V. Koval, “the greatest contribution to the study of the trends of the Belarusian diaspora was made by modern Belarusian historians V. Snapkovsky [Snapkouski 1995] and G. Sergeeva [Sargeeva 1993]”, whose research “laid the foundation for the creation of the history of the Belarusian diaspora” [Koval 2010, 9]. In the last decade, Koval has published extensively on various aspects of the Belarusian diaspora, such as its connections with the Ukrainian Diaspora, chronology and characteristic features of different periods in the history of the Belarusian Diaspora, its relationship with the host countries and its place in them, as well as the diaspora’s homeland connections [Koval 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2012a, 2015]. Simultaneously, publications of the previously unknown printed and archival documents appeared in the series Biblioteka Bats’kaushchyny (Fatherland’s Library), initiated by the Belarusian Institute of Sciences and Arts, “which, in addition to books by Belarusian authors on the activities of Belarusians abroad, presents works of art, memoirs and popular science literature created by representatives of the Belarusian emigration” (Kal’ko 2012, 110): see, for example: Skobla, Mikhas’ (ed.) 2004; Rahulia 2006; IUrevich 2005 and IUrevich 2005a. This series, in turn, continues the tradition of studying culture of the diaspora, presented in the works published by the Belarusian Institute of Sciences and Arts in New York [e.g.: Maksimiuk 1994]. An interesting critique of professional historians within Belarusian diaspora was presented by Supruniuk (2015) and [Łatyszzonek](#) (2015). The Belarusian diaspora literature was thoroughly examined by McMillin (2002). Unique and important bibliographic work that had started by M. Pan’kou [1952] was continued by Vitaut and Zora Kipel’ [1993, 2003, 2006], and Garbiński (2009).

The British Library holds numerically significant and otherwise important collections on the cultures of various diasporas, settled in Britain as well as in other countries. Strengthening the historical European, Americas & Oceania Collections, diaspora publications remain a focus of the contemporary content strategy, as it is stated in the latest document *Enabling access for everyone: The British Library’s content strategy 2020-2023* (13-14). Identifying the gaps in the collections and studying these collections still remains an important task. The existing bibliographical publications and tools helped me to find in the British Library catalogue more than a hundred titles of books, brochures and periodicals produced by Belarusians abroad. The main objective of this work is to make Belarusian materials more accessible for researchers by improving and enhancing metadata for bibliographical and holding records. As it was recently stated by Kemp, Dean & Chodacki, John (2018, 208),

The audience raised two longstanding issues as key obstacles: legacy data and indexing. First, the recognition that legacy data is difficult for the community to address. There was an understanding that adding more and better metadata to new content going forward is possible, but that enriching existing metadata records can be difficult and time-consuming. By the same token, the more content producers provide, the more useful it is likely to be. Second, indexing is key to the discussion of metadata quality and librarianship. Indexing is the other side of the metadata coin and must be included in discussions of how to make improvements.

Despite the fact that bibliographical records for all printed publications have long been transferred from cards into electronic format, finding these records still presents a challenge.

Until 1975, all British Library catalogue cards for foreign publications were first, quite understandably, written by hand to be then transferred into a print catalogue published in multiple volumes (there was no general card catalogue in the British Library). Thus, there were always several catalogue volumes being edited for the next reprint. Publication titles and places were entered into the catalogue in the original languages and alphabets. The names of the authors, on the contrary, were transliterated according to the internal rules developed in the Library, which currently differs from the standard (for the Anglo-American library community) transliteration rules. For the Ukrainian and Belarusian languages, names were often Russified, but this was also not a standardized practice, so the same names may appear in different forms. Similarly, places of publication can be written in Belarusian (most often) and Russian or in English (to reflect the cataloguer's assumption, not supported by information on the title page). There are frequent cases of typos and errors in names that were made in the process of converting entries from print to digital form.

Moreover, periodical issues recorded on cards were not consistently transferred to the electronic catalogue either, which means that in order to enhance the records, all periodicals must be checked *de visu* before making changes to the catalogue. Ephemera publications, such as brochures, tracts and leaflets, were not catalogued separately and many of them might still be hiding under 'collection level' entries for several publications bound together, such as "a collection of postcards," "a collection of brochures," or "a collection of leaflets and posters." Thus, bibliographical information for all the publications found in the catalogue must be updated in accordance with modern standards which include full transliterated titles, added titles in the original languages and scripts, controlled names, added language and country codes, names of editors and contributors, checked and confirmed years of publication and, often complex and confusing, verified publication patterns for journals, magazines and series. In addition, it might be beneficial to unite these publications, so that they could be presented in one file or set of search results publications in order for researchers to be able to find an entire collection by single request. A subject index might help but will not solve the problem overall. Although the subject categories developed by the Library of Congress are quite flexible, this task presents a certain difficulty, since they did not initially imply a research request to identify all the diasporic publishing activities.

In the process of re-discovering diaspora publications, issues concerning the physical state of these materials may also be identified. Most of such publications were produced in the first half of the twentieth century on cheap paper, the quality of which left much to be desired. The format of many publication, such as brochures, leaflets, ephemera, newspapers and newsheets, also implied that they were short-lived and were not meant for collecting and safeguarding. Document preservation can take a long time, so the print materials in poor physical state need to be prioritized. As a result of re-discovery of diaspora publications, some Belarusian editions, such as for example the newspaper "Shlyakh Moladzi / Ślach Moładzi" (Vilnia: Belarusian Drukarnia im Fr. Skaryny, 1928-1939), have recently been restored and are now available to readers. In it also worth noting that some "Shlyakh Moladzi" issues bear stamps of the Polish post with the address: "England, Ukrainian Bureau, London". The links between the Ukrainian Bureau in London and the Library of the British Museum are still to be examined, although a detailed study of the Ukrainian Bureau in London has been published not so long ago

(Zięba 2010) and more documents concerning the activists behind this organisation have been found and examined (Prymak 2019).

If possible, findings of such research should be reflected in the catalogue records. Put together with the results of the projects that aim to unveil other ‘hidden’ diaspora publications collections, enhanced metadata based on research will help to incorporate studies on printing and media produced by émigrés and diasporas into mainstream diaspora and migration studies.

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