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THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST BELARUSIAN TOPONYMIC DICTIONARY

Abstract: This short note is dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the first Belarusian toponymic dictionary, written by the Doctor of Geographical Sciences, Professor Vadzim Andrejavič Žučkievič. A Short Toponymic Dictionary of Bielorusiya, published in Minsk in 1974, has played a crucial role in developing toponymics as a field of study and has served as an essential source of information for researchers in geography, history, linguistics, anthropology, and the various fields of cognate social sciences. This short note includes information about the author of the dictionary, one of the leading geographers in Soviet Byelorussia, former Chair of the Belarusian Geographical Society, Vadzim Andrejavič Žučkievič, and his role in developing the field of toponymics in Belarus and the Soviet Union. The paper discusses some general features of this book and its role in promoting the geographical stream of toponymic studies in Soviet Byelorussia, other parts of the USSR, and later, in the post-Soviet realm.

Key words: Belarus, Vadzim Andrejavič Žučkievič, toponymics, toponymic dictionary

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Introduction

This short note is dedicated to the anniversary of the first Belarusian toponymic dictionary, written by Professor Vadzim Andrejavič Žučkievič (1915 – 1985). This book has played a crucial role in developing interest in toponymics as a field of study for the public in Belarus and has served as an essential source of information for researchers. Our brief communication includes short information about the dictionary's author, Professor Žučkievič, considers some general features of the volume, and discusses this book's role in toponymic studies in Belarus and the post-Soviet realm.

Vadzim Andrejavič Žučkievič (Fig. 1) was born in small town of Lojeŭ in Homiel' Region of Bielorusiia. Very soon, the family returned to Minsk at the place of residence of his mother's parents. In 1935, he entered the Geographical faculty of the Maksim Gorky Minsk Pedagogical Institute, from which he graduated with honors in 1939. During the 1939-1940 academic year, he worked as a teacher of geography and Russian at a secondary school in East Kazakhstan. In 1940, Žučkievič was accepted into the Lomonosov Moscow State University Graduate School to pursue a degree in physical geography. However, WWII prevented his plans. From 1941 to 1943, he worked as the director of the secondary school in the Altay Region in Russia. Since January 1944, he was a topographer-gunner in the 48th Heavy Artillery Brigade on several frontlines. For his service, he was awarded medals *For Bravery*, *For the capture of Berlin*, *For the Victory Over Germany in the Great Patriotic War*, and others (Yelovicheva, 2016).

After the war, Vadzim Žučkievič worked as an inspector and head of the school sector in Minsk and later as a head of the department in the Ministry of Higher, Secondary Special, and Vocational Education of the Soviet Byelorussia. Since 1964, Žučkievič's life and work have been tied with the Geographical Faculty of Belarusian State University, where he rose to professor and chair of the department and achieved enormous professional success. He defended his Candidate of Sciences in Geography thesis in 1954, his Doctor of Sciences in Geography thesis in 1970, and received the title of Professor in 1972. Among the other notable activities were being Chair of the Department of Physical Geography of the World at the Geography Faculty of the Belarusian State University (1976–1985) and the Chair of the Belarusian Geographical Society (1974 –1983).

V. A. Žučkievič's scientific interests included toponymics, methods of teaching geography, and physical geography. His academic influence was far-reaching, as his works greatly affected the development of geographical thought and research in Belarus. Professor Žučkievič was characterized by massive productivity: he was the author of over 350 academic publications, including 40 books. Most of the works were written without collaborators. Some of the Žučkievič's books were published posthumously.

Notably, Professor V. A. Žučkievič had done a lot for school geography. He was a co-author (1960-1969, 10 editions) and then the author (1970-1985, 15 editions) of a textbook on the geography of Belarus for secondary schools. His books on methods of teaching geography in school became foundational reference books for teachers and students.



Fig. 1. Professor V. A. Žučkievič.

Remarkably, V.A. Žučkievič was one of the toponymists-“pioneers” among geographers in the Soviet Union. He was the founder of the scientific school of geographical toponymics in Belarus. Since 1946, for over 30 years, the Belarusian researcher meticulously collected toponymic data and studied the toponymic aspects of the country and the world. In his toponymic works, Professor Žučkievič provided impressive methodological innovations based on fundamental empirics, gave etymological explanations for the geographical names of settlements and physiographic objects, analyzed toponymic stratigraphy, used cartography as a tool of toponymic research, applied statistical and mathematical approaches, explored the toponymic streetscapes of Minsk, and conducted regional toponymic zoning. Significantly, he developed several theoretical concepts widely accepted by Soviet and post-Soviet toponymists (see Basik, 2022: p. 5). Among them, one of the key theoretical concepts in toponymic studies, the concept of toponymic landscape, which was defined as “an objective for the specific territory historically evolved complex of place names,” “an object of toponymic research” (Žučkievič, 1968: p. 68).

Among Žučkievič's 57 toponymic publications, there were several significant, now classic monographs on toponymics, including *The Origin of Geographical Names (Toponymics) of Byelorussiya* (Žučkievič, 1961), *Toponymics. A Short Geographical Essay* (Žučkievič, 1965), *Toponymics of Byelorussiya* (Žučkievič, 1968b), *General Toponymics* (Žučkievič, 1968a, 1980), *A Short Toponymic Dictionary of Byelorussiya* (Žučkievič, 1974). There also were some other stimulating interests to toponymy readings, such as *Why is It Named Like That* (Žučkievič, 1969) or *Streets Remember: History, Events, and People in The Names of Streets and Squares of the Hero City of Minsk* (Žučkievič, 1979).

V. A. Žučkievič was one of the initiators and organizers of *The First Belarusian Toponymic Conference* in 1967 (Biryła et al., 1970). Furthermore, in 1971, for the first time for the Soviet geographical faculties at universities, toponymics, as an academic discipline, was included in the curriculum of the Geography Faculty at Belarusian State University. Lastly, his Doctor of Science dissertation topic, *General and regional geographical patterns of toponymics* (Žučkievič, 1970), was devoted to the advanced theoretical problems in toponymics. This was the first toponymic dissertation in Belarus defended by a geographer. Inevitably, the name of V. A. Žučkievič became well-known far beyond the borders of Soviet Byelorussia, and Professor Žučkievič, together with two Russian academicians, Eduard Makarovich Murzayev and Evgeniy Mikhaylovich Pospelov, comprised the trio of the brightest geographers-toponymists in the Soviet Union.

The dictionary

As mentioned earlier, the exceptional legacy of V.A. Žučkievič included several seminal works. Among them is *A Short Toponymic Dictionary of Bielorusiya*, published in 1974 (Fig. 2).

Writing the dictionary has always been arduous for researchers as it takes much attention to detail, mainly working with various sources, and requires much knowledge, patience, and determination. Reading the book, the author seemed overly modest when he called this dictionary "short." The volume includes information regarding about 6000 place names, including the names of all cities, other urban-type settlements, almost all rural settlements that were the centers of village councils or collective farms, and other settlements that are noteworthy in some respect (for example, as historical toponymic artifacts). The hydronyms discussed in the dictionary are those related to rivers with a length of over 30 km and lakes with an area of more than one sq. km. The names of some of the most interesting local features were also included.

The dictionary entries are organized according to the following structure: Russian and Belarusian spelling, both indicating stress; location of the object (*oblast'* for the cities and towns and the *rayon* for the villages); etymology and its variants; literature and sources. Importantly, the dictionary was built using a "nested" method: the repeated names or toponyms originating from one root are considered in one article. For instance, all villages named Navasiolki (about 70 in Belarus) or the names derived from such terms as *hara* (hill) or *dub* (oak) were included in one article. Such an approach drastically reduced the amount of material.

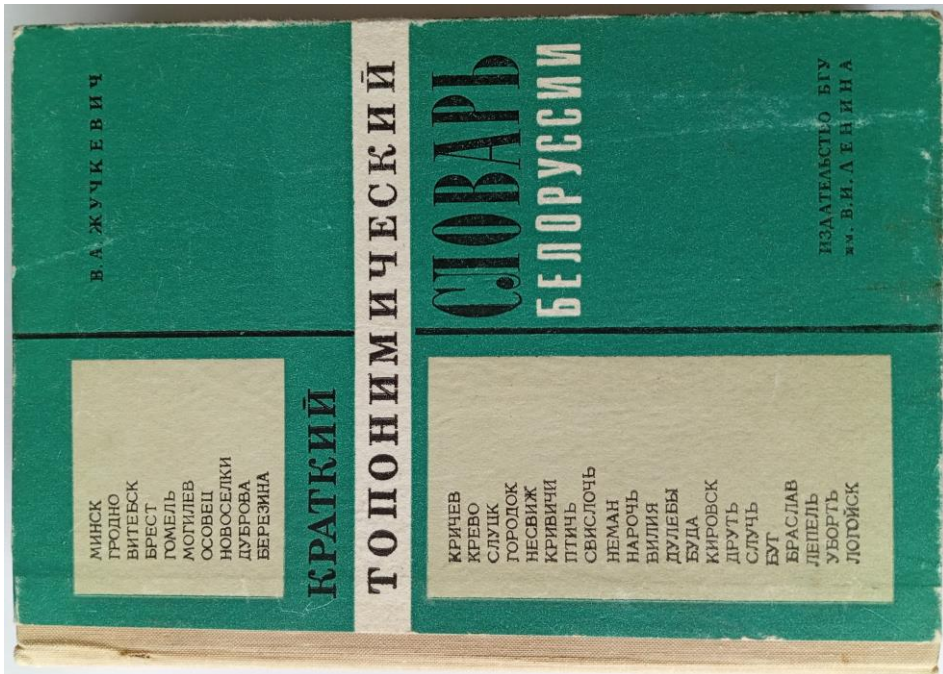


Fig. 2. *A Short Toponymic Dictionary of Byelorussia by Vadzim A. Žučkievič (1974).*

The undoubted merit of Professor Žučkievič is that he could revise and clarify several etymologies previously mentioned in some very authoritative works that were not convincing enough. First of all, this is related to the well-known hydronyms, such as Dniapro (the Russian form is Dnepr) and Nioman (the Russian form is Neman), or the settlements, whose names originated from local geographical terms such as Asavec/Asaŭcy.

Important political toponymic information can be found in the addendum to vocabulary where V. A. Žučkievič provided a list of 450 place names renamed during the Soviet era from 1918 to 1972 in Belarus (Žučkievič, 1974, addendum: p. 439–447). As the author writes, the purpose of publishing this list is to show the scale and general nature of the changes taking place in the toponymic system of the BSSR. Undeniably, it could be difficult to criticize these renaming in the USSR in 1974. However, Professor Žučkievič stated that the renaming was not always successful and often made against the norms of the Belarusian language (Žučkievič, 1974: p. 6). Analyzing this list, the scale of toponymic cleansing in Belarus could be clearly seen (see Basik, 2020).

One more exciting feature of the vocabulary is the 17 maps. The author shows the spatial distribution of various place names originating from physiographical or socio-economic terms, ethnonyms, and one hydronym.

The book was written in Russian, but the Belarusian form of the toponyms was also provided. At that time, the standardization question was as tricky as today due to several complicated factors that affected the Belarusian toponymic system. Importantly, V. A. Žučkievič contended that the Russian spelling should be as close as possible to the most successful expression of the Belarusian toponymic system, and the Belarusian spelling

should not only correspond to the norms of the Belarusian language but convey the local pronunciation as accurately as possible (Žučkievič, 1974: p. 7).

The dictionary received various reviews, in particular, from linguists and historians. Among the shortcomings, they mentioned that the author “ignored” the facts from local dialects, did not make references to the works of some lexicographers and Belarusian dialectologists, and, even, when etymologizing toponymic names, “made hasty conclusions” (see Šur, 1998: pp. 116 - 118). For instance, the origin of the toponym Braslaŭ from the Baltic *brasta* – “ford” was especially questioned. However, in vocabulary, we can find both versions, the Baltic and the Slavic (Žučkievič, 1974: pp. 35 – 36), and the author explained his Baltic preference in detail. Importantly, all dictionary entries are supported by references to historical sources, dictionaries, academic publications, and other documents. It also would be difficult to find examples of “hasty” conclusions in a work where the author had thirty years to collect, study, and analyze the materials. That is why it was so difficult for the critical reviewers to believe that Vadzim Andrejavič Žučkievič was able to check from 30 % to 90 % of the toponyms in situ in Belarus (e.g., Šur, 1998: p. 117).

Indeed, it is unavoidable for such immense work to have some pebbles. However, it should be admitted that the vocabulary reflected the level of development of toponymic studies in 1970th and was a cutting-edge work at that time. Moreover, there were no attempts from other researchers, including the linguists-onomasticians and historians, to start working on something similar in that period and later. Indeed, it is understandable that “vocabulary cannot last forever” (Žučkievič, 1974: p. 5) due to changes in toponymic systems and the emergence of new etymologies because of discoveries. Nevertheless, the first Belarusian toponymic dictionary still serves as a starting point for any social science researcher involved with Belarusian toponymy, both in Belarus and outside it.

Concluding remarks

Professor Žučkievič’s outstanding research had a significant impact on the field of toponymics. Importantly, fifty years after its publication, this book is still the only complex toponymic dictionary with etymologies of place names that covers all of Belarus. The Žučkievič’s dictionary greatly influenced hundreds of toponymic works in the USSR and the post-Soviet states. Undoubtedly, there are many reasons to celebrate the remarkable component of Professor Vadzim Andrejavič Žučkievič’s toponymic legacy, *A Short Toponymic Dictionary of Bielorusiija*.

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