



Memory in Belarusian policies towards Germany and Poland

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Executive Summary

The role of history and memory in Belarus has largely played a political one, rather than one related to strengthening an independent Belarusian identity. Belarusian memory policies did not really take any serious form since Belarus became an independent state in 1991. Early attempts at pursuing a Belarusian historiography were quickly concluded once Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994.

In this paper, our authors explore the current state of Belarusian historical and memory policies and the role that they play especially in the last several years, including in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The research finds that the current Belarusian historical memory policy is fragmented, incoherent and aimed at supporting the regime. At the same time, Russian influence on Belarusian historical policy has gained significant momentum since 2020 and especially since 2022 – imposing its imperial view of history on Belarus.

The year 2020 is especially seen as a breakthrough in the politics of memory, as the clash of historical narratives and symbols played a significant role both on the governmental side and on the side of the opposition. Since then, the Belarusian model of historical memory can be considered neo-Soviet. The Soviet past has been re-assimilated and reorganized, also partly due to Russian influence and intervention. Hence, this study reveals that the **aim of the current Belarusian historical policy is to control the process of formation of the national consciousness of the Belarusian society. The narratives used now by the regime are based on the Russian narrative of history which is also in opposition to the West.** In this regard, the memory policy is also an instrument in anti-West propaganda.

A lot of attention is paid particularly to Belarus's neighbor: Poland. Since Poland is considered an active supporter of Belarusian opposition and democratic activists, the regime's policies have targeted Poland as one of the "historical aggressors" against the Belarusian people. Despite some previous advances in understanding a more Belarusian-centered approach to history, the regime – together with Russian experts – have crafted a distorted narrative that aligns with their political agendas and propagates a biased view of the past.

Germany to a lesser extent is present in Belarusian historical policies, yet the role of Nazi Germany in the Second World War is the context of most narratives, pinning anyone against the regime as a Nazi support or sympathizer, much like Russia's narrative in its war against Ukraine.

Unfortunately, there is not much room for optimism in today's context. As this paper notes, the academic and unbiased approaches to Belarusian history has become one of the "victims" of the political events in Belarus in 2020. The Russian invasion in 2022 has sealed that fate, at least for the near future.

Introduction

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The history of the Second World War has always been an important source of legitimization of political rule in Belarus. The violent deaths of two million people on a territory of some ten million inhabitants under German rule, as well as the preceding deportations of tens of thousands of Polish citizens from the Soviet-occupied east of the Polish Republic to Siberia and Kazakhstan, were drastic events that changed the face of Belarus forever.

The protests that took place in Belarus in the late summer of 2020, which saw the emergence of the Belarusian society as a political force, will go down in history as a significant turning point since modern Belarus's founding in 1991. Despite facing repeated waves of repressions these protests marked a critical moment, demonstrating the resilience and determination of the Belarusian people. Through their self-empowerment, they bravely confronted the electoral frauds of August 2020 and defied the oppressive tactics of the state apparatus. This collective action, accompanied by a spirited sense of unity and solidarity, profoundly rattled Alyaksandr Lukashenka's self-perception.

The regime reacted to the obvious loss of political legitimacy in three ways: first, by the brutal, physical, symbolic and legal destruction of all civic spaces in which Belarusian society had previously constituted itself as a subject. Second, through the persecution of entire professional groups, who were driven into exile, behind bars or forced into internal migration under pressure from the public prosecutor's office and the police. And third, by a **radical reinterpretation of the Second World War as an attack by a "collective West" on the traditional Slavic world, in which Russia and Belarus stand shoulder to shoulder.**

The new state doctrine of the genocide of the Belarusian people is directed at the same time against the Federal Republic of Germany – as the legal successor of the German Reich – and against Poland, as well as Lithuania, which are insinuated to have been collective collaborators in the German occupation of the Soviet Union in the same way. This narrative of alleged intrinsic collaborationism, however, is only formally directed outward, for the real thrust is the country's own citizens, who were protesting in the late summer of 2020. They are accused by state propaganda of placing themselves in the tradition of historical collaboration by flying the white-red-white flag.

Almost everything in this narrative is false. The genocide which was carried out by nazi-Germans in Belarus in 1941-1943 completely annihilated the Jewish population living on Belarusian territory. The Polish government in exile, as a state, had forbidden collaboration with the German occupiers, including on the territory of modern-day Belarus, under the threat of death. And the direct collaboration with the Wehrmacht, SS, Gestapo and Security Services was typically carried out by certain individuals or specific social groups, rather than entire populations.

Yet there is also a core of the new state narrative that contains a truth that has not yet fully arrived, at least in Germany. German occupation policy had an increasingly genocidal character towards Belarusians, Poles, Ukrainians and also Russians from 1942 onwards. In Hrodna in 1942 and 1943, there were collective hostage shootings directed against the elite of the remaining Polish urban society. On the whole territory of Belarus, especially in summer and autumn 1943, entire villages were destroyed – again and again along with the entire population.

Since February 2022, Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine has overshadowed the challenge of finding a response to the Belarusian state propaganda, which would strengthen the rights of citizens and address the intricacies of the past. As a result, the focus and attention have shifted away from this issue. And yet, the question which remains to be answered relates to what an analytical distinction might look like between propaganda of a Belarusian- and Russian-led war against the “collective West”. Further research needs to be carried out into the history of German occupation violence.

Part of the answer lies in the **clear distinction of levels between state memory policies, cultural forms of social memory and scientific practices of knowledge production about the past**. In this regard, scholarly research does not take place in an ideological or political vacuum, as evidenced by the prosecution of Belarusian publishers for publishing texts about the Second World War. What we research and how we do it makes a difference – even in times of war.

For **Germany**, this means the need to recognize the racist legacy of anti-Slavism in its historical manifestations as the ideological basis of colonial projects during the First and Second World Wars. In this context it is evident today that the Holocaust has cast a shadow over the social memory of the German occupation of Eastern Europe for a long time. Today, there is very little room for the memory of Belarusian victims. In Germany, there is hardly any lasting visual image of the extermination of entire villages together with their Slavic population.

For **Poland**, the question is to what extent the master narrative of the “Cursed Soldiers”¹, promoted since 2016, radicalized internal conflicts in Belarus over the inter-

¹ The “cursed soldiers” were an undefined resistance group of underground Polish soldiers who continued hiding from the communist regime after the end of the Second World War.

pretation of the role of the “Home Army”.² The decision now to honor soldiers who had refused the Home Army's order to give up the armed struggle and continued to fight underground against Soviet agencies reinforced previously laid out fault lines by directly applying this new state memory policy to the Polish minority in Belarus.

And in **Belarus**, historians might ask themselves whether they want to leave the question of collaboration to state propaganda alone. Currently, access to archives in Belarus is severely limited, but it would still be possible to explore more systematically the various modes of interaction between the occupying society and the occupiers in order to counter the woodcut propaganda with a complex picture. This would have to include the story of how the former auxiliary policemen, soldiers and administrators came west before the front and arrived as displaced people in the Allied camps.

On a theoretical level, the question remains as to **which crimes against the non-Jewish population in Belarus can be understood as genocide**. After important new contributions to the study of the Holocaust against the Roma, further research is still pending here.

While these intellectual operations refer to the idea that there is a dynamic relationship between research and memory culture, the political level remains. On this level, it would be important, especially in Germany, to develop a greater awareness regarding the formation of the concept of the “collective West”, and with whom many actors in Belarus believe themselves to be in a war. This is not only directed against the Belarusian democratic movement – and thus against its own citizens – but also against the way of life of people in Poland, Lithuania and Germany.

² The Polish Home Army, *Armia Krajowa*, was the underground resistance fighters of German and Soviet occupation during the Second World War.

PART I

Polish and German dimensions in the Belarusian politics of memory: Between the Belarusian Revolution and the outbreak of the Russian war

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The year 2020 marked a significant change in Belarusian politics when the presidential elections held on August 9th sparked mass protests against the falsification of the results and a sixth presidential term for Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The suppression of the protests also led to massive repression towards the opposition, resulting in the most significant wave of political emigration from the country since 1991. The year 2020 is also a breakthrough in the politics of memory, as the clash of historical narratives and symbols played a significant role both on the governmental side and on the side of the opposition. Scholars and analysts of Belarusian politics often refer to the Belarusian model of the policy on memory and history as incoherent and inconsistent. Even after 25 years of the authoritarian regime, it has failed to form an articulated image of particular historical periods and figures. The discussion during and after the 2020 protests illustrates that the clash of narratives formed at the beginning of the independence of the Belarusian state is still vibrant. This clash was one of the factors that has led to the official announcement of the year 2022 being the year of historical memory in Belarus.

Before 2020: three waves in the Belarusian politics of memory

Before 2020 we can distinguish three periods in the development of the Belarusian politics of memory in the Republic of Belarus.

First wave

The first wave dates back to the late USSR period when perestroika launched the process of de-ideologization and de-politicization of historiography. This was boosted at the beginning of 1990 which helped open the path to the declaration of independent Belarus in 1991. During that time, the historical narrative shifted from the Soviet canon – which saw the history of Belarus as a separate unit starting

from the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the formation of the Soviet Republic of Belarus – to a history canon based on ethnic grounds, including the medieval roots of Belarusian statehood and nationhood. This referred to the traditions and legacy of the statehood of the Belarusian People's Republic declared in 1918 (which until today is in exile, preferring the adjective Democratic Republic).

Second wave

The next stage in development marked the first presidential election in Belarus in 1994, which brought Lukashenka to power for the first time. In the politics of memory Lukashenka's Belarus based itself on the restitution of Soviet state emblems after the manipulated referendum in 1995. The limited westernization and the ethnicization of Belarusian historical narratives ceased and a specific neo-Soviet vision of history started to develop, with the well-known victory in the "Great Patriotic War" (the Soviet/Russian term for the Second World War) as a critical figure of memory, usually associated with the myth of Belarus as a "Partisan Republic". This situation clearly allowed for two very different and often conflicting memory models fostered in bipolar discourses of the state and the opposition.

The Soviet narrative nevertheless dominated the interpretations of the Belarusian history in the 20th century. The main objective was to strengthen the state's sovereignty in response to the failed integration into the Russian Federation. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the president has considered Belarusian politics (especially its foreign dimension) as multi-vector. This also reflects in the politics of memory, which brings together different traditions, different generations and sometimes different narratives.

By the mid- to late-2010s, the Belarusian authorities tried to position the country as a bridge between the East and West, where people of different nationalities, mainly of the two major Christian religions, live together peacefully and where two official languages – Belarusian and Russian – are spoken. Significant changes were implemented after the Russian military intervention in Ukraine in 2014. The Belarusian authorities visibly extended the national component in memory policy especially to elements linked to the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (13th-18th centuries).

Third wave

The beginning of the 2020s, until today, represents the third wave. Now, the Belarusian model of historical memory can be considered as neo-Soviet. The Soviet past has been re-assimilated and reorganized. Yet, the first years of independence and the changes in 1991-1994 did not allow for a direct restitution of the Soviet narrative, as the national project implemented during that time left a slight, but noticeable, trace.

The above-mentioned changes were very slow and fragmentary. The strong ideologization stressed by the state needed a more coherent approach and juggled the images and conflicting facts to pursue unclear goals. The conflicting images resulting from the multi-vector Belarusian politics can be seen in the public space where several contradictory layers coexist. In western Belarus, for example, there has been various epochs traditionally discussed (Polish, Soviet and independent). The re-

gional identity differences in Belarus are still clearly visible in the cultural-historical landscape, even if the previous border between Poland and the Soviet Union, existing between 1921 and 1939, has been gradually disappearing.

The role of 2020

The above-described fragmented approach allowed the authorities to come to the conclusion that a more intense engagement of state institutions in history was needed. In 2019 the article "On the question of the politics of history" was published by the state magazine *Belaruskaja Dumka*. The text outlined the framework for an official vision of history which pointed to the leading "methods of distorting the historical past of the Belarusian people."³ However, it did not make the official narrative more coherent at any point, but rather linked Belarusian politics of memory to the revisionist Russian model developed under Vladimir Putin's regime (see Part II below). On the other hand, the regime's main argument for greater state involvement in historical memory was linked to the fact that neighboring states like Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine established their own state institutions to deal with national remembrance and history.

These new state activities on memory (as well as opposing ones by civil society) occurred during the protests after the presidential election in August 2020. On the wave of repressions against citizens who contested electoral fraud, Lukashenka broke off dialogue with the West while reinforcing pro-Russian rhetoric. An important strategic direction of the state policy on memory was to accuse opponents of the regime by identifying them with collaborators in the Second World War. Symbolically, this is related to the practice of using the white-red-white flag during the Nazi occupation. The first attempts to move to the theme of the Great Patriotic War already took place during the 2020 protests when Soviet wartime songs were switched on by the authorities in public places, and it seemed that the primary goal of the security forces was not to preserve the political order, but to defend the historical memory from the "traitors".

Nevertheless, the main aim of the authorities was to mobilize the supporters of the authorities against the opposition, showing the political struggle in the well-known historical context of the struggle against Nazism. In the politics of memory, this translated into the depreciation and combating by the authorities of the historical symbolism of white-red-white and the "Pahonia" coat of arms commonly used by demonstrators, declaring them as "Nazi" and "collaborationist" symbols.

The German dimension

The Belarusian historical discourse towards Germany exists exclusively in the context of the Second World War, with very little attention paid to the German occupation and its politics during the First World War. The latter was exclusively the

³ A. Kovalenya, V. Danilovich, V. Archakov, A. Bankovsky: "On the question of historical politics", *Беларуская думка (Belarusian Thought)* 2019, nr 8, pp. 6-7. (In Russian)

subject of historiography and not of the public history and is limited to the fact that the politicians of the Belarusian National Republic wrongly sought support from the German Kaiser Wilhelm II.

The abovementioned article on the politics of history published in the state magazine *Belaruskaja Dumka* mentions Germany only once, arguing that “equating the political regimes of the USSR and Nazi Germany is completely unfounded from an academic point of view [and is done so] in order to shift the blame for the outbreak of the Second World War from the West to the Soviet Union”.

This topic was primarily used for the local audience, however it occurred several times in the international context. Lukashenka recalled the events of the Great Patriotic War when the European Union introduced sanctions against Belarus on the 80th anniversary of the German attack against the Soviet Union on June 22nd 2021. Addressing the then German foreign minister Heiko Maas, Lukashenka said: “Mr Maas, who are you? A repentant German yesterday, or a Nazi heir? ... You should not just repent, you should kneel before the Belarusian people for another hundred years and pray that you could be born after that war. You must do everything to heal the wounds from this war in our hearts and souls. You must not strangle us, you must carry us in your arms: Germans, Poles, the so-called European Union. Because we saved you from the brown plague.”⁴

The regime's approach towards the case of Kurapaty is similar. Kurapaty is the site of mass murder in Belarus committed by the Soviet regime during the period of Great Terror (1936-38). Its discovery played an essential role in the national revival during the late 1980s, though has not yet been commemorated during the Lukashenka regime. As evidence from the Katyń massacre emerged, Kurapaty was finally recognized as a place of extermination of Belarusian people. However, the responsibility for these events was blamed on the Germans, making its way into the official discourse.

The Polish dimension

The official Belarusian Soviet historiography nurtured a negative image of Poland which has been imagined as a colonizer of the Belarusian people. The narrative argues that the first Belarusian statehoods, principalities developed on the territory of modern Belarus, were first colonized by Lithuanians, creating the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which then was colonized by Poland, and finally were returned to the Eastern Slavic family after the divisions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The public image of 20th-century Poland is limited to the Polish-Soviet war in 1920, which lead not to the division of Belarus between Poles and Soviets, but to the occupation of the western part of Belarus by Poland. Polish rule in western Belarus is characterized as repressive and the Belarusian people treated as if under a colonial regime.

⁴Speech by Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 23 June 2021: <https://www.sb.by/articles/my-rodnyyu-zemlyu-ne-zavisimost-i-suverenitet-nikomu-ne-otdadim.html> (Accessed 13 January 2023).

The fall of the Polish state in 1939, which led to the “reunification” of Belarus on September 17th, is presented by the state as an act of historical justice. However, that historical narrative was reserved for historiography and textbooks and was relatively rarely used in public history. Hence, the attitude towards the Polish heritage of western Belarus was usually ambivalent. At the same time, it was fragmented and treated differently in various regions of Belarus.

Poland and the Day of National Unity

Following the protests of 2020, the year 2021 was officially announced as the “Year of National Unity”. Lukashenka claimed: “We do not have time to go back and to tread this path once again. We will create the Belarus of the future, and it will be better than it is now.”⁵ The unity was again grounded in the Soviet period as the day was settled for September 17th, marking the Unification of Belarus in 1939. Moreover, in June 2021 the new commemorative “the Day of National Unity” was introduced on September 17th.

The national unity, originally directed towards the future, was actually based on the event which signifies Soviet and Nazi cooperation, once again showing the paradoxes and incoherency of the state narrative. In 2020 and beyond, the choice of this date by the authorities had an exclusively anti-Polish dimension, positioning it first in the contemporary conflict with the West, with Poland being its outpost in support of western ideas in Belarus. All that was topped up with the broad support for the Belarusian opposition and Belarusian Poles as the fifth column in the country. The anti-Polish narrative was evident during the celebrations. The society largely ignored the new holiday, but the discourse in the official press aimed to create Poles and Poland as a collective enemy of the Belarusian nation.

Germany and the genocide of the Belarusian Nation

After the introduction of the Year of National Unity in 2021, the year 2022 was announced as “the year of historical memory”. However, like 2021, it is difficult to see any particular content of the memory. According to this declaration, the Belarusian authorities want to draw attention to the need for in-depth historical studies, emphasize the importance of commemorating important historical events and introduce changes in the “patriotic education of children and youth”. As Lukashenka noted, “Today, this type of work is one of the key elements of ensuring the state's national security.”⁶

The year of historical memory (2022) also saw the adoption of a new law “On the Genocide of the Belarusian People”, which Lukashenka signed on 5 January 2022.

⁵ Speech by Alyaksandr Lukashenka. “Year of National Unity” <https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/year-of-peoples-unity> (Accessed 23 January 2023).

⁶ *Belta.by*: “Lukashenka: Year of historical memory will be held under the sign of preserving heroic heritage and truth” 06 January 2022: <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-god-istoricheskoy-pamyati-projdet-pod-znakom-sohraneniya-geroicheskogo-naslediya-i-pravdy-478281-2022/> (Accessed 23 January 2023).

The document was broadly discussed and criticized by both lawyers and historians. The term "genocide of the Belarusian nation" is understood as crimes committed by the Nazis, their allies and anti-Soviet "nationalist formations" which took place on the territory of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic between June 22nd 1941 and December 31st 1951. The term "Belarusian nation" is used extensively in this context. It applies to all citizens of the Soviet Union who stayed on the territory of Soviet Belarus during the "Great Patriotic War", including former Polish citizens who, in 1939, arbitrarily received Belarusian citizenship. The law provides criminal liability for the denial of the so-called genocide.

The unclear definitions of the terms used in the law allow for a broad interpretation. The principal institution responsible for implementing the law is the state's prosecutor. Professional historians were removed from the investigation process and the law limits the already small possibilities for researching historical topics.

Conclusion

The year 2020 and the protests after the presidential elections in August not only had a crucial impact on the development of Belarusian politics and society but had a substantial impact on the state's politics of memory. The narrative used by the authorities settled the current political conflict in the historical context of the Second World War as it used historical categories of Nazism and fighting it as the method of the consolidation of Belarusian society.

During this period, the process of the diversification Belarusian historical narratives came to a close. Over the past two decades, and particularly since 2014, there had been a gradual inclusion of historical figures beyond the Soviet and pro-Russian canon into the official narrative. Moreover, the classic Russian imperial version of the history of Belarusian lands, developed in the 19th century and preserved during the Soviet times, came back to the fore. Significantly, there was a notable shift in official state discourse, with the politics of memory and historical memory being extensively utilized. This marked the first instance where the necessity for increased state involvement in the realm of historical memory was emphasized. Poland, as a symbol of the so-called collective West and who depicted as trying to destruct the stability of Belarusian society, became a key figure in this state narrative. The image of Poland, however, was not based on the Soviet or Belarusian historiography, but rather on the Soviet image developed in early Soviet times for political reasons.

PART II

Russian influence on the Belarusian historical policies between 2014 and 2022

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Over the past decade, and especially after the events related to the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas, the presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020 and Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Russia has actively intervened in the development of Belarusian historical studies, in particular, and the formation of the Belarusian view of national history and state ideology in general. Its aim is, among other things, to control the process of formation of the national consciousness of the Belarusian society and position itself towards Russia (and against the West). This section will consider some examples of how modern Russian academic publications, representatives of the political establishment, as well as online publications use various aspects of the historical past of Belarus in order to impose their Russian imperial view of the Belarusian history.

An ideological offensive from the East

Historical science plays an important role in the formation of the national consciousness of the people. In this sense, Belarus is in a rather difficult situation. During the Soviet times, aspects of Belarusian history were viewed from the Marxist-Leninist positions. After Belarus gained independence in 1991, a short period characterized by an academically-based approach towards the national history began, however Belarusian researchers had very little time to develop a national concept of historiography and specialists did not have time to bring this work to its logical end (see Part I above).

After 1994, Soviet approaches to the consideration of key aspects of national history began to spread again in Belarusian historical science. This situation continues today and is actively used and promoted by the eastern neighbor of Belarus – Russia. Russian ideologists (most of whom are certified historians) have played an important role in this process by exploiting the weakness of the Belarusian state ideology, manipulating historical facts and using them to influence the Belarusian society, which, basically, knows little about the history of their country.

One of the centers of Russian influence in the historical sphere in Belarus is the Foundation called “Historical memory” (Историческая память). This organization was founded in 2008 and since the beginning of its existence has been actively interven-

ing in the process of forming Belarusian historiography. Declaring support for “conducting research on current pages of Russian and Eastern European history”,⁷ this organization supports the development of Belarusian historical science which match the Kremlin’s interests. This is especially true for the publication of collections of archival documents such as “The Murderers of Khatyn: the 118th Ukrainian Battalion of the Security Police in Belarus” (2018)⁸ and “NKVD in Western Belarus” (2019)⁹. The former book focuses on the fact that the Belarusian village was burned by Ukrainians. This, of course, was done taking into account the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Donbas in which Belarus (in the political sphere) tried to maintain a neutral position.

“Day of unity” that does not unite

On September 18th 2014, Vsevolod Shimov, an adherent of the “Russian world” in Belarus and a columnist with the official presidential publication SB-Belarus Segodnya said that September 17th (the date when the Soviet Union invaded Poland in 1939) should be seen as “a kind of ‘Belarusian Crimea’; an act of returning millions of Belarusians to their home.”¹⁰ Other pro-Russian figures provided a similar view and pressure was applied by the Kremlin for Belarus to recognize September 17th as a national holiday. However, at that time Minsk still desired to maintain good relations with Poland and not to provoke it using ambiguous historical threads. In the same year, Russia actively began to use the term “Belarusian community” for those “residents” of Belarus who were demanding the introduction of a “commemoration date of September 17th” to the list of the state holidays.

In July 2016, an important event for the preservation of the common Belarusian-Polish historical memory took place in Belarus. The National Historical Museum of Belarus, with the support of the embassy of the Republic of Poland, opened an exhibition titled “Belarusians in the Polish Army 1939-1945 from the private archive of Ihar Melnikau” (author of this text) which for the first time presented to the Belarusian society a different side of history which not only examined the service of Belarusians in the Polish Armed Forces during the Second World War, but also the events of September 17th 1939¹¹. The exhibition was visited by a Polish delegation including Ryszard Terlecki, the deputy speaker of the Polish Sejm. In December 2016 Minsk was visited by an official delegation of the Polish parliament. On December 5th 2016, at a meeting with the Speaker of the Polish Senate Stanisław Karczewski, Lukashen-

⁷ *Историческая память* [Historical Memory Foundation], see: <http://historyfoundation.ru/>

⁸ Russian Academy of Sciences, Historical Memory Foundation, Eds: I.A. Valakhanovich, et al: *Убийцы Хатыни. 118-й украинский батальон охранной полиции в Белоруссии, 1943-1944 гг.* [Killers of Khatyn. 118th Ukrainian security police battalion in Belarus, 1943-1944]: <http://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/182457-ubiytsy-hatyni-118-y-ukrainskiy-batalon-ohrannoy-politsii-v-belorussii-1943-1944-gg>.

⁹ Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia: *НКВД-МВД СССР в борьбе с бандитизмом и вооруженным националистическим подпольем на Западной Украине, в Западной Белоруссии и Прибалтике (1939-1956)* [NKVD-MVD of the USSR in the fight against banditry and armed nationalist underground in Western Ukraine, Western Belarus and the Baltic States (1939-1956)]: <http://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/170228-nkvd-mvd-sssr-v-borbe-s-banditizmom-i-vooruzhennym-natsionalisticheskim-podpoliem-na-zapadnoy-ukraine-v-zapadnoy-belorussii-i-pribaltike-1939-1956>

¹⁰ *Regnum.ru*: “В Беларуси продвигается польский взгляд на историю” [The Polish view of history is being promoted in Belarus], <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1849095.html>, 18 Sept 2014 (Accessed 15 May 2023).

¹¹ “Historia Pobach” Channel, “Belarusians in the Polish Army 1939-1945” (in Belarusian): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aFtgaiCw8w>

ka called the visit a “beginning of the most active dialogue between countries that share a close and often common history”.

This event, however, was characterized in Russia as follows: “Notorious ‘Belarusization’, nationalism and Russophobia, which in recent years have seen numerous internal political movements of the former BSRR, have become an important reason for the warming of relations between Minsk and Warsaw”¹². Another Russian publication noted: “Over the past year in Belarus there are more and more signs that a new state ideology with an anti-Russian orientation with clear signs of ethnic nationalism is still being built in the country. Nationalism, which was previously the domain of a small group of pro-Western opposition, has been gradually introduced by the authorities into the mass consciousness through the media, the education system and culture for several years. [...] There is no doubt that the spread of nationalism in Belarus by moderate methods is aimed at the same deployment of anti-Russian nationalist consciousness as in Ukraine”¹³.

In 2016, Russian publications actively began to describe the topic of “the Union of Belarusian authorities and Belarusian nationalists” against Russia. At the same time, the story of September 17th 1939 became one of the key arguments of the pro-Russian forces in Belarus. At the end of 2016 a “citizens campaign” called “Committee of September 17” was launched. Its members discussed the possibilities of expanding their activities in the public space.

In 2018 on the Russian website Lenta.ru an article titled “The Nazis of Batka” (Батькины нацисты)¹⁴ was published in which Moscow openly accused Minsk in its turn to the West. “The views of the Belarusian ruling class have increasingly turned towards nationalism. [...] The real tide of nationalist sentiment came quickly after the reunification of Crimea with Russia. The Belarusian authorities have decided that the Crimean scenario can be applied to them, and the spread of nationalist and Russophobic ideas in [Belarusian] society has been recognized as a sign of this [thinking among the authorities].”¹⁵

80th Anniversary of the outbreak of Second World War

In 2019, the world commemorated the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. Yet, it was also the same for September 17th 1939, and Minsk approached this date cautiously. The newspaper of the presidential administration SB-Belarus Today organized a “roundtable” dedicated to the events of September

¹² News-front.info: “«Жертвы империи»: Белоруссия активизирует сотрудничество с Польшей» [“Victims of Empire”: Belarus intensifies cooperation with Poland] 09 December 2016. <https://news-front.info/2016/12/09/zhertvy-imperii-belorussiya-aktiviziruet-sotrudnichestvo-s-polshej/> (Accessed 13 June 2023).

¹³ A. Grigoriev: “Этнический национализм по украинскому образцу: куда идёт Беларусь” (Ethnic nationalism on the Ukrainian model: where Belarus is going), *Eadaily*, 25 January 2016. <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2016/01/25/etnicheskiy-nacionalizm-po-ukrainskomu-obrazcu-kuda-idet-belorussiya> (Accessed 03 June 2023).

¹⁴ The term *Batka* is a direct reference to a nickname for Lukashenka as “father”.

¹⁵ V. Zotov: “Батькины нацисты. Белорусские правые зачищают страну от России. Лукашенко не против” (The Nazis of Batka. The Belarusian right-wingers are cleaning the country from Russia. Lukashenka is not against) *Lenta.ru*, 03 April 2018. <https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/04/03/belonazi/> (Accessed 03 June 2023).

17th. And here the important point was that a “guest” from Russia was invited to the seemingly purely Belarusian event. It should be mentioned that some Belarusian participants of this meeting actively repeated Russian narratives.¹⁶

The activities of Russian propagandists did not stop after that. Some quotes from publications around that time depict the pro-Russian attitude: “After the collapse of the Soviet Union, anti-Soviet myths about the events of 1939, which were created under the supervision of Western special services, were picked up by local revisionist historians who wanted to demonize the Soviet past. [...] Today this mythology in one form or another supported by Belarusian officials.”¹⁷

On September 17th 2019, the Belarusian State Museum of Yanka Kupala opened an exhibition by the author of this text, called “The border was near Minsk 1921-1941”. It contained numerous photographs, artifacts, documents, materials and uniforms from the private collection of Belarusian historian Ihar Melnikau. The author of the project paid attention to the events of September 17th 1939 on the Soviet-Polish border, namely the fighting between Soviet troops and the soldiers of the Polish Border Protection Corps (KOP)¹⁸. This was one of the few events at which the history of September 1939 was shown not from the Soviet, but from a Belarusian point of view.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Belarusian State University held a roundtable devoted to the 80th anniversary of September 1939.²⁰ It was largely of an academic nature and was not noticed by the public.

Protests of 2020: reviving the anti-Polish and anti-German sentiments

The difficult year of 2020 brought major changes to Belarus. The date of September 17th coincided with the time of the post-electoral protests and took on a strong political tone. The regime took on the Russian narrative around the history of the events of September 1939 and used the date of September 17th as the main anti-Polish argument in the activities of the Belarusian authorities.

The final step onto the path of the Russian-promoted historical narrative was the introduction of September 17th as the National Day of Unity (see Part I above). Previously, Belarusian State periodicals hardly reacted to the date of September 17th. There was rarely a brief mention of this event. Yet in 2021, a significant number of Belarusian state newspapers had a specially designed front page on which they

¹⁶ M. Osipov, “Ученые - о миролюбии белорусской историографии и о величайшем событии нашей истории XX века” [Scientists – on the peacefulness of Belarusian historiography and the greatest event in our history of the 20th century] *SB-Belarus today*, 14 September 2019. <https://www.sb.by/articles/istoricheskiy-moment22.html> (Accessed 13 June 2023).

¹⁷ S. Shiptenko, “Освободительный поход Красной Армии: 17 сентября, праздник всех белорусов” [Red Army Liberation Campaign: September 17, holiday of all Belarusians]. <https://regnum.ru/news/society/2720307.html> (Accessed 13 June 2023).

¹⁸ Belta.by: “Выставка “Мяжа была пад Мінскам. 1921-1941” [The exhibition “Myazha was fallen to Minsk. 1921-1941”], 17 September 2019. <https://www.belta.by/culture/view/vystavka-mjazha-byla-pad-minskam-1921-1941-otkrylas-v-muzee-janki-kupaly-362386-2019> (Accessed 6 June 2023).

¹⁹ A review with some photos of the exhibition can be found at: <https://historiapobach.livejournal.com/49963.html>.

²⁰ Belarusian State University: “Круглый стол к 80-летию воссоединения Западной Беларуси с БССР прошел в БГУ” [Round table dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the reunification of Western Belarus with the BSSR was held at BSU]. 23 September 2019: <https://bsu.by/news/1043673-d/> (Accessed 6 June 2023).

placed pictures of the Red Army soldiers who came “to free western Belarusians from the landlords and capitalists”.

The newspaper Minsk Truth (Мінская праўда) was particularly distinguished. There was a caricature on the cover of the newspaper which one could see “an evil Pole and a German who fought against themselves, a Belarusian man and a Belarusian woman, personifying two parts of a united Belarus and a hand with a Red Star that drove a sword into the border”.²¹ This caricature best illustrates what actually happened to the question of “September 17th 1939” in Belarus. This narrative managed to drive a wedge into the historical and cultural relations between Belarus and Poland and focus on what separates Belarusians and Poles.

After the events related to the presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020 and the protests that erupted, the Belarusian authorities began actively accusing Poland of supporting protests in Belarus. Since the autumn of 2020, almost every Belarusian state-owned mass media has covered September 17th widely, despite the fact that a year earlier, in 2019, when during the 80th anniversary, the events were practically unnoticed at the state and society level in Belarus.

A separate role in promoting the “Russian view” of the history of Belarus is played by popular publications online, which appear on the eve of important historical dates. In 2019, due to the refusal of the Polish side to invite Russian President Vladimir Putin to Warsaw for celebrations related to the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War, most Russian online sources began actively accusing pre-war Poland of cooperation with the Third Reich²². The Russian media actively worked on the theme of the “Polish” hero Tadeusz Kosciuszko, the Union of Lublin (1569) directed against Moscow, the “Pole” Kastus Kalinowski and other subjects of Belarusian history. Given the lack of a sufficient number of academic Belarusian historical studies, such popular publications play an important role in the formation of the historical worldview of the Belarusian society in accordance with the Russian narrative.

In this sense, an academic approach to Belarusian history has become one of the “victims” of the political events in Belarus in the summer/autumn of 2020. In June 2020, Vladimir Putin stated his understanding of the need to seek the truth about the Second World War: “so that no one dares to dirty the memory of those who made a decisive contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany”. At that time, Minsk did not pay attention to this message. However, after the fraudulent election and the confrontation with society, the Belarusian authorities completely changed their attitudes related to the national aspects of Belarusian history. It was the result that Moscow was working so hard to achieve. The Belarusian authorities began to strenuously resist the development of historiography which puts Belarus at the center of study, and instead focused on the Soviet narrative of Belarusian history with the events of 1941-1945 playing a major role.

²¹ *Minsk Truth* “Для Польши – траур?” (For Poland, mourning?). No. 71, 15303. 17 September 2021.

²² See: VZ.ru. “В начале Второй мировой Польше надо винить собственную жадность и глупость” [At the beginning of World War II, Poland must blame its own greed and stupidity], 14 May 2020. <https://vz.ru/world/2020/5/14/1039297.html>; or Fn-volga.ru: “Виноват Запад и особенно Польша. Путин опубликовал статью о причинах Второй мировой войны” [Blame the West and especially Poland. Putin published an article about the causes of World War II]. 19 June 2020. <https://fn-volga.ru/news/view/id/146637>. (Accessed 13 May 2023).

From the very beginning of the protest activity in 2020, the activity of Russian media specialists was seen in Belarus. This was especially true in August when during protest events the authorities suddenly began to turn on loudspeakers, from which Soviet songs of Second World War years were played. This maneuver was made in order to provoke aggression from the protesters and use their reaction as proof that the protesters are neo-Nazis as opposed to Soviet history. But people on the streets danced to the “Random Waltz” and “Katyusha” and did not demonstrate aggression towards the historical music. The Belarusian state ideology then began to spread information about the use of Belarusian national symbols by Belarusian armed formations that collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War. Here the Belarusian power vertical returned to the old Soviet and Russian clichés that the white-red-white flag and the “Pahonia” coat of arms are almost Nazi symbols, and Belarus together with Russia should fight against the falsification of history and the “glorification of Nazism”.

Developments since Russia’s full-scale invasion

The Russian influence in Belarus became stronger after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022. Had the protests of 2020 not happen in Belarus, Minsk might have been less involved in Russian geopolitical games and military operations. The Kremlin actively continues to drive a wedge in relations between Belarus and the West. Yet, despite the Kremlin’s active pressure, Belarus has not yet officially recognized Crimea or any other Ukrainian territories annexed into the Russian Federation.

One of the manifestations of this is the destruction of some graves of soldiers of the Polish “Home Army” in Belarus in July 2022. These events are the “response” of Minsk and Moscow to the demolition of a number of Soviet monuments in Poland and the Baltic states. However, the Belarusian and Russian media remain silent about the fact that monuments and graves of Soviet soldiers are not demolished in Poland and Soviet military cemeteries remain in good condition there. As a result, the Belarusian and Russian societies do not have information about the condition of the Soviet military graves in Europe and have little understanding of the history of the Polish “Home Army”.

Interestingly, since 2022, the authorities are “carefully” trying to focus on the Belarusian language in the urban environment throughout the republic: new billboards with state symbols and inscriptions in Belarusian are erected, inscriptions in Belarusian Latin are actively used at public transport stops, and there are many advertisements in Belarusian at train stations and in shopping centers. All this does not fit into the format of the “ally of the Russian world” which Minsk was assigned in the West. This may be the regime’s attempt of subtly distancing itself from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022.

Conclusion

Presently, Russian influence in the field of historical science in Belarus remains quite strong and therefore poses a danger both for the formation of an independent Belarusian concept of history and the process of forming the historical consciousness of modern Belarusian society. This process has been taking place for quite some time, but truly intensified since 2020 and 2022. The narratives that are being pushed by the Belarusian regime and in official media channels largely reflect those promoted by the Kremlin.

In this regard, an important role needs to be played by the activities of independent Belarusian historians and researchers, who work directly to increase the level of historical knowledge of Belarusians. Much depends on their work, their ability to make history understandable and accessible in order to analyze the past from a more objective point of view which looks at Belarus also separately from Russian-centered narratives.

It is necessary to organize exhibitions, presentations and lectures, where residents of Belarus will be able to see and hear various aspects of the national past. It is also important to publish popular books and articles that will explain various facts of Belarus's past in an accessible and understandable language to raise the level of historical knowledge of Belarusians. However, in order to implement the above-mentioned proposals, the Belarusian society and the authorities must take a step back and understand that it is in the interests of both groups to preserve the independence of the country. In the end, confrontation only benefits the enemies of the Belarusian statehood.

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