Belarus: The Great Patriotic War vs the Second World War

On 9 May the annual parade took place in Minsk to honour the victory in the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany. According to today’s official statistics during that war every third Belarusian inhabitant died. Nazis killed around 600-800 thousand Jews, 80% of the total Jewish population of Belarus.

Remembering the war which started in 1941, after Germany’s attack against the Soviet Union, Belarusian authorities prefer to forget that the Second World War started not in 1941, but in 1939, when Hitler and Stalin were allies.

This year state media reported thousands of people were taking part in celebratory procession on the main street of Minsk including war veterans, members of labour collectives and children. Alexander Lukashenka and his youngest son Mikalay headed the procession.

The celebrations surrounding Victory Day and Independence Day in today’s Belarus very much resembles the celebrations which took place in the Soviet Union. Military parades and procession of athletes are followed by a speech by a political leader.

Every year, depending on the foreign conjectures in his speeches, Alexander Lukashenka typically constructs an image of a foreign enemy. It could be NATO, the government of the United States, nationalists in Latvia or “arrogant European officials”. This year Lukashenka decided to speak about the threat from the West. According to him:

*Sovereign Belarus is constantly at a gunpoint of the undeclared cold war. Some people in the West have not been*
able to accept the fact that Belarus has not become another “banana republic,” dancing to the tune of transatlantic democracies. We are stifled by sanctions. They sling mud of slander at us. Along our borders NATO warplanes are flying, new bases are opening, provocations are being plotted.

The tradition of celebrating Victory Day started in the 1960s in the Soviet Union. From that era, the Soviet propaganda machine was constructing the myth of war aimed at creating a model of a Soviet patriotism. The basic foundation myth consisted of Soviet society’s political unity, the leadership of the Communist party and heroism of the Soviet people during the war.

The war myth in the Belarusian Soviet Republic included the partisan myth. According to the Soviet ideologists during Nazis occupation most of the Belarusian people rebelled against the Nazis and struggled as partisans in the forests in Belarus. In the 1960s the partisan myth was maintained by a new generation of the Belarusian political elite. In 1950s-1970s the Belarusian Communist Party bosses included 75 former partisans. The most famous of them Piotr Masherau, who for many years served as the first secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus.

Nowadays the myth of the Great Patriotic War remains the primary national historical myth of the Belarusian state. Current Belarusian political elites use the old Soviet historical myth to legitimise an authoritarian political regime in the country.

**The Great Patriotic War vs the Second World War**

Soviet historiography, as well as the official Belarusian historiography, about the Second World War differs in many ways from Western historiography. In a Belarusian school textbook there is a clear distinction made between the Second World War and Great Patriotic War.
The Great Patriotic War started on 22 June 1941 when the Nazi invaded the USSR and ended on 9 May 1945. Such periodisation does not include the Winter war between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1939-1940, the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states in 1940 or the division of Poland in autumn 1939 according to a secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Nor does it address that while German and Soviet armies occupied Poland, they organised a joint Soviet-German military parade in the centre of Brest-Litovsk (today Brest), a Belarusian city near the Polish border on 24 September 1939:

The Belarusian educational system almost exclusively focuses on the period of the Great Patriotic War, conveniently forgetting that the Second World War started in 1939, not in 1941. First year students of Belarusian universities even have an obligatory course titled: “The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People (in the context of the Second World War)”. The course continues the tradition of Soviet historiography where only the Soviet point of view dominates. The course textbook ignores certain uncomfortable topics such as joint Nazi-Soviet activities prior to 1941, discrimination of Ostarbeiters (Belarusians taken out to Germany as forced labourers), it fails to mention the Katyn massacre or treatment of the Soviet troops of Central Europe’s civilian population in 1944-1945.

**Glorification of the War in Lukashenka’s Belarus**

In the beginning of 2000s the administration of Lukashenka launched a new project to create a new ideology for the Belarusian state. The project aimed to create an ideology which could justify the Belarusian political and economic model. The Great Patriotic War was a part of this project. The myth of the war had to serve as the main historical myth and as a cornerstone of the Belarusian state.

In 2005, the year of the 60th anniversary of victory in the
Great Patriotic War, in order to perpetuate the heroism of Belarusians, state authorities renamed two central Minsk streets. Francysk Skaryna Avenue, named after a great Belarusian culture figure of the 16th century became Independence Avenue (Praspekt Nezalezhnasci). Masherov Avenue named after a former Communist leader of Belarus became Victors Avenue (Praspekt Peramozhcau). Both of the two new names refer to this constructed war mythology.

The same year a new memorial Stalin Line opened near Minsk. According to its official web page, the memorial marks a system of defence installations and symbolises the heroic struggle of the Soviet people against the Nazi invaders.

**The Great Patriotic War as an Instrument of the Regime’s Legitimisation**

While Victory Day is a Soviet holiday, Independence Day is the second official holiday which is bound up in the Great Patriotic War. It is celebrated on 3 July and, unlike Victory Day, its genealogy starts in independent Belarus.

The authorities moved the Independence Day to 3 July after a referendum in 1996 which specifically included this question. That day symbolises the liberation of Belarus from the Nazi invaders. The previous Independence Day date was 27 July and referred to the Declaration of State Sovereignty in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The heroism of the Belarusian people during the Great Patriotic War serves as the main historical myth of political identity the Belarusian leadership is trying to construct. Belarusian citizens loyal to the government should believe that the main historical event in the country’s history was a victory in the Great Patriotic War, where Belarus was fighting against the West.

The two most important state celebrations in Belarus – Independence Day and Victory day serve a useful purpose for
the Belarusian political regime. As with many other authoritarian regimes, the Belarusian state is looking for external enemies to justify failures in economics and foreign policy.