

Dziady in Belarus

On 28 October thousands of Belarusians are expected to visit Kurapaty to mark Dziady.

Dziady is a traditional day of remembrance of the deceased ancestors observed in Belarus. Kurapaty is the place on the outskirts of Minsk where the Bolsheviks executed over 200,000 people in 1930s.

Dziady is more than a traditional holiday. It has also become a symbol of resistance to the Soviet regime and the revival of the Belarusian nation. In 1988 Dziady became the day when the Belarusian first organised a mass demonstration against Soviet rule.

Belarus is the only country where the Dziady celebration preserves its authentic form. On this day, Belarusians visit not only the graves of their dead relatives, but also invite them to visit their houses. □As with most traditional folk holidays it has pagan roots. Belarusians believed that on this holiday the deceased souls visit their descendants. The hosts even leave spare sets of flatware on the tables for the dead.

Dziady used to be a holiday that was granted the status of a day off in 1990s. However, Lukashenka abolished it as the people associated Dziady with the anti-Communist struggle.

Lukashenka and Communism

A great number of Belarusians still miss the Communist past. These people nearly all support Lukashenka, who thinks that “The Communist ideology, based on Marxist-Leninist ideology, should be a key part of the Belarusian state ideology”.

Research conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies showed that 48.7% of people over 60 and 29.3% aged between 50 and 59 even wish for the

revival of the Soviet Union. These very groups actively support Lukashenka and the idea of closer ties with Russia. On the other side, young people do not want revival of the USSR and support the idea of an European path for Belarus: 55.1 % of those between the ages of 18-29 want to join the European Union.

That is why today's authorities keep silent about the [mass executions in Soviet times](#) in public, and support the Communist party which maintains its loyalty to Lukashenka. Communism remains one of the fundamental principles of Lukashenka's regime, which are full of fissures and cracks when analyzed under the facts of Soviet rule in Belarus.

The Article That Changed the Belarusian History

Kurapaty is the Belarusian symbol of Stalinist repressions. The first mass action which gave hope for changes in Belarus took place there, on Dziady. The demonstration was a reaction to publication of the article written by Zyanon Paznyak and Yauhen Shmyhalyou "Kurapaty – the Road of Death".

Literature and Art magazine published this article in 1988. It is unbelievable that such article was published in the Soviet Union. In the article, the authors depicted about the mass executions in Kurapaty, and how the Soviet special services tortured and murdered dozens and thousands of people. According to their research , every night from 1937 until 1941 the NKVD delivered people to Kurapaty and shot them.

No one knows exactly how many peaceful citizens the Soviet authorities killed. Initially, the Communists spoke of a figure of around 30,000. Zyanon Paznyak who publicised Kurapaty crimes claims that the number may more likely be 100-250,000, while British historian Norman Davies thinks it is over 250,000.

They Went to Dziady as Population, and Returned as People

The truth about the mass executions had a powerful effect on the Belarusian society in 1980s. 30 October 1988 became a historical day for Belarus. In those days, it was extremely difficult to distribute information and dissidents had not yet forgotten what prisons and mental hospitals looked like. Despite all this, thousands of people came to the demonstration.

The Soviet authorities behaved brutally on that day. Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau described that day as “The Long Road Home” in his autobiography:

They started dispersing the demonstration – they beat and arrested people, poisoning them with gas, using portable gas-sprays. They poisoned Paznyak as well – he was leading the crowd. But Paznyak did not surrender. He led the crowd to the outskirts and then to Kurapaty. However, the troops were there to block the way. Then Paznyak led the people to the field, where the religious ceremony took place under the snow which fell from the sky.

It was on Dziady when people hoisted the white-red-white flag for the first time in Soviet Belarus. Belarusian writer Vitar Kazko said after the action that “They went to Dziady as a population, and returned as a people”.

The Soviet authorities were scared, for the first time in many years. They were scared not only because the people found out about the mass executions. They were frightened because the peaceful protesters continued their rally to Kurapaty despite the demands and the brutal actions of the authorities.

Vandals Destroy Kurapaty, the Authorities Keep Silence

Today, there is a People’s Monument in Kurapaty. People come here and erect their own crosses. But every year, vandals dig out the graves, destroy crosses, break memorial shields, and paint swastikas on the icons.

The favourite target for the vandals is a bench with the following encryption: "From people of the USA to People of Belarus, for Memory". People call it "Clinton's bench", as the American government presented it in 1994 during his visit to Kurapaty.

The authorities try to leave the acts of vandalism unattended. In fact, they do not give any help or protection to the memorial complex. The law-enforcement agencies initiate criminal cases for vandalism, but only one case has reached the courts thus far, and only because members of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front caught the vandals on the spot. The court considered the vandals guilty but they were then granted amnesty and released.

Today a private company is building park near the stove. The owners claim that the visitors of the new complex will have an excellent opportunity "to hide from the city fuss". Of course, business should develop in Belarus, but the question is, whether it should happen next to the place where hundreds of thousands were murdered under Stalin.

The History Will Decide

Every year since 1988 the opposition marches to Kurapaty. The age of the participants has changed greatly. Previously, it was mostly middle-aged people who came to Dziady, but today the great majority of the participants are young.

The authorities do not let any information about Kurapaty to seep into history textbooks. They threaten students who participate in political activities with expulsion from universities and administrative detentions. But still young Belarusians come to Kurapaty on Dziady.

The Communist regime also seemed unbreakable but it lost to the History in the end.

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