

# Long Live Stalin?

Last Sunday, a thousand Belarusians carrying national flags and wooden crosses marched from central Minsk to the Kurapaty forest. Nearly 100,000 people were shot dead during the Stalin era in Kurapaty. On just one day 74 years ago, more than a hundred representatives of the intellectual elite of Soviet Belarus were also shot dead in the cellars of the Minsk KGB (then known as NKVD) internal prison "Amerikanka".

The archive of the President of the Russian Federation still keeps the list with the names of the 103 residents of Soviet Belarus who were sentenced to death by Joseph Stalin on 15 September 1937 and shot on the night of 29 October 1937. According to some historians, this was the way Stalin's assassins celebrated the day of Lenin's Komsomol – The Communist Union of Youth's anniversary. The victims were Belarusian writers (as many as 22 people), government officials, labor leaders, prominent doctors, teachers, priests, military officers, students and others.

## **The Tunnel of Death**

Leanid Marakou, who is a researcher of Stalin's repressions in Belarus and an author of the multivolume encyclopedia with biographies of thousands of persecuted intellectuals, has documentary evidence that Soviet authorities repressed more than 600 public and cultural figures of Soviet Belarus in the three autumn months of 1937. In the period from August 1937 to December 1938, known as the "bloody tunnel of death", over 10,000 Belarusian people were killed.

Marakou estimates that the NKVD killed or exiled to concentration camps up to 90 percent of Belarusian writers (over 500), 100 percent of priests (around 3000), one in three teachers (around 4,000), around five thousand state officials (engineers, economists, and almost all directors of factories

then in Belarus). According to Marakou, "the secret NKVD institutions worked for Stalin in the 1930s. They had already foreseen the huge potential in the geographic location of Belarus by that time".

He points out that Bolshevik authorities in Moscow were primarily concerned about the possible independence of Belarus and its separation from the Soviet Union. To avoid this, they destroyed the nation's intellectual elite and gene pool that had been accumulated over the centuries. Marakou explains that "the characteristic fear, indifference and passivity in Belarusian people today is a result of that genocide."

Once a successful businessman, Marakou left his lucrative job to start researching Stalin's terror 10 years ago when he learned that his uncle – talented Belarusian poet Valery Marakou – died on that terrible night on October 30, 1937.

According to the data of another Soviet totalitarianism researcher Ihar Kuznyatsou, between 600,000 and 1,500,000 residents of Soviet Belarus became the victims of Stalin's repressions and terror: almost every tenth person, every third or fourth family. By official figures, 152,399 criminal cases and 235,552 people were revisited after Stalin's death. 175,914 of the repressed Belarusians were rehabilitated, but 59,638 of the victims were denied rehabilitation.

However, it is impossible to count the exact number of repressed people in Soviet Belarus. In today's Belarus, KGB archives are still closed to researchers.

### **Back in the 1930s**

Four years ago, prominent scholars and former political prisoners in Minsk organized a public tribunal to deal with the crimes of Stalinism in Belarus. They stated that it was not impossible for the country to become a rule-of-law state without having a fair trial over the communist crimes and criminals. Belarus has commemorated 20 years of its

sovereignty this year, but the state under 17-years of Alexander Lukashenka's rule has not even tried to revisit the Soviet past. We witness attempts to rehabilitate Stalin and to level crimes of the Soviet regime in the country that has suffered so much from Stalinism.

New high school history textbooks downplay the scale of crimes of the communists. They stress the positive role of Stalin in the historical process. Official propaganda has the same attitude. For instance, in the biographical reference book "The Generals of the State Security of Belarus" (Minsk, 2008), compiled by KGB Major-General Ivan Yurkin, it is claimed that the KGB simply maintained "social order" and "implemented the leading party guidance". The growth in repressions was explained by the battle within the intelligentsia for whom it was a "quick and effective way to get rid of competitors."

In the summer of 2005, the historical and cultural complex "Stalin Line" was opened not far from Zaslavye town near Minsk. On official holidays visitors can observe spectacular combat reconstructions between Soviet and Nazi soldiers. Official ceremonies usually take place next to the monument of Joseph Stalin which was erected there several years ago. Another bloody dictator's monument was installed in 2000 by the Belarusian authorities in the town of Svislach in Hrodna voblast. It happened almost four decades after a huge Stalin monument was removed from Minsk Central Square as a part of the Khrushchev Thaw.

In 2006, a three-meter monument to the founder of the KGB, "the initiator of mass terror, provocation, and the institution of hostages" Felix Dzerzhinsky was raised on the territory of the Minsk Military Academy. The initiator of that memorial was the Chairman of the State Border Guard Service Alexander Paulovski, for whom Dzerzhinsky was a "positive figure in our history." Another monument to Dzerzhinsky has been standing in front of the KGB headquarter in the center of Minsk since the Soviet era.

There are more similar stories to tell. Belarus remains the only post-Soviet republic which has kept the ominous name of the KGB without any changes and celebrates officially the day of the October Bolshevik Revolution.

In this context, all the events that have taken place after the brutal crackdown of opposition protests on the day of presidential elections on 19 December 2010 in Minsk seem very symptomatic. Lukashenka's special riot forces arrested dozens of opposition figures, journalists and civic activists, including five presidential candidates. They were thrown into the same "Amerikanka" prison – nowadays the Minsk KGB detention center.

If someone thinks that Stalinism is impossible in the 21st century right at the center of Europe, the Belarusian authorities are trying to prove the opposite. The recent amendments to the Belarusian law related to financing of parties and NGOs from abroad, holding mass rallies and expanding powers of the KGB that were [introduced](#) in October, are another step in this direction.

Kanstantsin Lashkevich