‘Soviet Identity’ and War Myths in Belarus

On 3 July, Belarus’ national holiday commemorating “Freedom and Independence,” President Aliaksandr Lukashenka informed war veterans that Belarusian independence was achieved by the “generation of victors” who sacrificed their lives to free the country from foreign occupation.

Of all the republics of the USSR and members of the Anti-German Coalition, he added, Belarus was hit the hardest by the war. But how is a war that ended 68 years ago related to the modern state?

Soviet Identity?

There is a tired old cliché that Belarus is a Soviet theme park, a phrase overused in the West, most often on Internet tourist sites. Most Belarusians do not want a return of the Soviet Union, but they do have some ties to a Soviet identity, one that has been consciously and deliberately fostered by the Lukashenka presidency and linked to the USSR’s victory over Nazi Germany.

The crucial event of the past is the Second World War, but that designation refers to the entire period 1939-1945. In Belarus focus is on the “Great Patriotic War” that started with the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. This sudden attack ended the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, which had divided eastern Europe between Stalin’s USSR and Hitler’s Germany. In 1939-40, Stalin annexed eastern Poland, the Baltic States, Bessarabia, and northern Bukovyna.

The war remains a painful memory for residents of Belarus. But the historical record is distorted by state propaganda reminiscent of the late 1960s and 1970s, when Leonid Brezhnev
was General Secretary of the CC CPSU, and former partisan Piotr Masherau headed the Belarusian Communist Party. Most of the major memorials to the war in Belarus, such as Khatyn (1969) and the Brest Hero Fortress (1971), date back to this period, as does the recognition of Minsk as a Hero City (1974).

Human Losses

Although much of the emphasis in the media has been on Belarus’ role in the victory over Nazi Germany, with commemorative parades and celebrations on dates such as May 9 and July 3, the glorification of the war is based also on what has been aptly termed “the cult of competitive suffering.”

As Andrej Kotljarchuk of Södertörn University in Sweden noted in a recent article in the Journal of Belarusian Studies, it was Masherau who declared in May 1965 that one in every four residents of Belarus had died during the war and Lukashenka in a speech of July 2004 who amended this figure to one in three, and subsequently by sheer repetition created what has come to be accepted as an indisputable fact.

In official rhetoric, Belarus identifies with the war today because proportionally it suffered more than any other participant worldwide. Moreover, by its selfless sacrifices, helped to end the “Fascist scourge” in Europe. The current state, in official parlance, owes its existence to those who sacrificed their lives in struggle against this “brown plague.”

Total human losses in Belarus during the war are estimated officially at 2.2 million. The Belarusian Ministry of Statistics yearbook maintains that the population in 1940 (including the western territories) was just over 9 million. Unless that figure is seriously in error, that would mean that if there were one-in-three human losses, the total would have been 3 million, or 800,000 more than officially stated.
But unraveling state propaganda needs to go further. Who were these people? According to the 2011 textbook of the Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences (2011), edited by Professor Aliaksandr Kavalenia, over 1.4 million were civilians and 800,000 were former POWs of which “a considerable number” were people from Belarus.

What does “a considerable number” mean? A majority? It is unlikely, given the reported mobilization of 500,000 Belarusians at the start of the war, or about one-sixth of those garrisoned in the Western military district in 1941. Many historians also consider the 1.4 million civilians total to be significantly overstated.

The Holocaust in Belarus

Crucially, there is no separate mention here of the Holocaust in Belarus and Jewish deaths, which amounted to around 600,000 or 43% of civilian losses. Today, the number of Jews living in Belarus, formerly an integral part of the Pale of Settlement, has dwindled to around 25,000, only about 0.26% of today’s population of 9.4 million.

The key question is whether the former Jewish population is included in state narratives about the link between the past war and contemporary society. The answer seems to be yes, but not directly and not specifically. As in the Soviet period, Jewish deaths are simply added to the overall losses.

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If one includes the Jewish population, and deducts the largely non-Belarusian contingent of POWs, then Belarus likely lost a maximum of 1 million inhabitants during the war, or about one-ninth of its 1940 population. In his speech to veterans on May 9, 2013, however, the president repeated the mantra of one in three deaths among the “Belarusian people” and then lambasted those who try to reexamine the history of the war. He made no
Similarly, on 3 July, Lukashenka declared that as a result of an “inhuman genocide, the country lost one-third of its population”. Thus the term genocide was applied to human losses without any specific mention of the destruction of one of the largest Jewish populations of Europe. Moreover, even the reference to “freedom” was inaccurate since the republic in its current borders was not liberated from Nazi occupation until 28 July, more than three weeks after the recapture of the capital Minsk.

What the War Brought to Belarus

The enormity of the war on Belarusian lands cannot be denied. Belarus is a key part of what Timothy Snyder has deemed the “bloodlands” of Europe between Hitler and Stalin.

It also suffered other losses: NKVD executions in 1937-41 of Belarusians, Poles, Jews, and others (bodies of Baltic soldiers found at Kurapaty, for example); deportations in 1940-1941 and after the war; about 400,000 sent for forced labor to Nazi Germany; the flight of people from the Nazis in 1941 and the Red Army in 1944; and the 1944-53 anti-insurgency operations of the MGB-MVD against an estimated 70,000 “terrorists” made up of Belarusian “collaborators,” the Polish Home Army, and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

The BSSR was divided under Nazi rule: the Nazi occupation regime did not even recognize a separate Belarusian region. The republic also suffered the loss of Vilna (Vilnius), Bielastok (Bialystok), and other areas through the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the postwar settlement between the USSR and Poland. Precise figures on population and losses are practically impossible to adduce.

What one can say, however, is that an official narrative of the war based on the loss of one in three inhabitants of Belarus is a myth as false as the general’s uniform that the
president wears to military parades. Those who have pointed out this and other fallacies are castigated as “historical revisionists” who malign the state and the memory of those who died for it in 1941-45. The truth, unfortunately, is always the first casualty when reinventing the past.

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