

1939 in Belarus: National Reunification or Soviet Occupation of Eastern Poland?

On 16 September local authorities closed an exhibition entitled "West Belarusian Atlantis" in Zaslaue near Minsk. The author of the project, Ihar Melnikau, dedicated the exhibition to Belarusians in the Polish army in the 1939 Polish-German campaign and to everyday life in Polish-ruled Western Belarus.

The exhibition effectively propagated the notion of a Polish-ruled Western Belarus as a legitimate and more human alternative to Soviet Belarus. The state official who closed the exhibition purportedly said that the exhibition denigrated the Soviet Union, hence it denigrates modern Belarus.

Belarusian society is split on what happened on 17 September 1939 when Soviet troops entered what was then Eastern Poland. For some this day signifies the unification of western Belarus with the rest of the country. Others underscore that that all Belarusians effectively ended up under Stalin's totalitarian rule. Positive and negative attitudes toward 1939 unification exist throughout the political spectrum.

Media Coverage of 17 September: Nothing or Negative

Between the World Wars Belarusians were divided. The Eastern half formed its own Soviet republic, underwent Belarusisation, but also experienced an era of violent modernisation and political violence. Western Belarus remained split among various Polish provinces and while undeveloped, it faced less political violence.

In Western Belarus, Belarusians officially became a minority,

marginalised in every respect of the word and by 1939 they did not have a single school in their own language. As WWII broke out and the Polish state collapsed, the Soviet Union sent its troops to modern day western Belarus on 17 September 1939.

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Among other official holidays, 17 September has always been in the shadow of bigger Soviet historical dates such as [Victory Day](#) or October Revolution Day. Still, it was a part of the official calendar. Each September Soviet Belarusian media discussed "Polish repression" and "Soviet liberation." Films were produced about the topic and streets were named after 17 September and people who fought against the Polish authoritarian regime.

Today's Belarusian state takes another line. This September top Belarusian officials were silent on 17 September. State-controlled media – Belarus Segodnya, BelTA or Zviazda – did not dedicate a single article to the topic. Opposition-minded Eurobelarus.info exclaimed in its headlines, "Why is the Government Forgetting the Anniversary?"

The closure of Melnikau's exhibition was the only move the Belarusian state made to defend 17 September's memory. This decision was made by Ruslan Trukhan, an official of the Minsk Province Executive Committee, and it was likely his own initiative. Interestingly, before the exhibition opened the First Channel of Belarusian state TV praised its opening on a news programme.

The provincial and Zaslauye officials hesitated to openly confront the issue. First, they underscored the ideological controversy surrounding the topic. Indeed, some of Melnikau's interpretations bring up several questions – like when he talks about "Belarusian regiments" in the Polish army in 1939, although it is well known they did not exist.

Yet then the authorities dropped their ideological arguments and halted the exhibition, justifying it by saying that a renovation project for electrical system in the museum about to commence.

Was Soviet Belarus a Fake State?

Many opponents of the Belarusian government are rather active in their criticism of 17 September. They dismiss Soviet Belarus as a "fake state" or even a Soviet occupation of Belarusian lands. In Soviet Belarus, they say, Belarusians were only to suffer from political repression.

Hence, Belarusians gained nothing from its reunification and the population of Western regions post-1939 faced harsher economic conditions. "In 1939, the Soviet Union became larger, not Belarus," is a phrase one hears again and again in these kinds of discussions.

Professor Alies' Smalanchuk lamented, "life in [interwar Poland](#) was hard. Yet the problems there could never be compared with how it was in the villages of Soviet Belarus."

Belarusians had missed possibly its greatest opportunity in 1939 - an alternative path than that of reunification under Stalin?

Nasha Niva weekly regularly told its readers that Belarusians had missed possibly its greatest opportunity in 1939 – an alternative path than that of reunification under Stalin. Some mysterious Belarusian activists allegedly planned to rise up and establish a Western Belarus Republic. Moreover, the same newspaper claims that the Nazis were considering establishing a Western Belarusian protectorate.

The only exception to this dismissive mood concerning reunification can be found in some commentary by [Vital' Cyhankou](#) for the Belarusian Service of RFE/RL. He advised in a joking manner, "One can easily stop every discussion about 17

September 1939 with one question: Do you oppose a twofold enlargement of Belarus' territory?"

The critics of 17 September claim to debunk Soviet myths, yet they also create new ones. They say that life was better under Polish administration and support their statements with anecdotal evidence. But one can hear all kind of anecdotes about the Polish administration and Soviets, as is true for virtually every major political event. For instance, one such story is how the Soviets brought tractors for agriculture which astonished Western Belarusian who tilled their plots without any machinery under Polish rule.

As a matter of fact, socioeconomic indicators and development rates speak in favour of Soviet Belarus. The only – if undoubtedly serious – exception to this trend was the level of political repression, which was undoubtedly much more severe in Soviet Belarus. Unlike in Western Belarus under Polish rule, it had no ethnic character, Belarusians both participated in persecutions and suffered from them.

Does the Public Appreciate Unification?

The subsequent [World War](#) and [Nazi occupation](#) diluted the public's memory of 17 September. Still, enough people held grievances against the Communist government which brutally carried out its modernisation programme and stripped many people of their social privileges and property.

After all, Western Belarusians had a weak national consciousness to begin with and placed little value in national reunification. They preferred their small and inefficient plots of land, which were their own after all, to the Soviet Union's reunification, modernisation, education or 'better off together' dogma with of its related persecution.

RFE/RL journalist Zmitser Bartosik produced a series of programmes on recollections of reunification from people who experienced it in 1939. According to him, typically positive

attitudes towards reunification were found in people whose parents (who were usually teachers) were brought up conscious of their being Belarusian.

All in all, 17 September 1939 will remain a divisive issue in society. What was, in fact, more important: to achieve national unity or avoid the mass political violence of the Soviets? What should be prioritised: the interests of the nation or the grievances of individuals who lost their property, posts or became victims of political persecution? This dilemma has no easy solution.

The opponents of 1939 Belarusian unification can discuss the possibility of a peaceful and democratic unification but the historical reality shows that this is but wishful thinking. Belarusians were too weak then to unify in any other way.

Generally, divided nations rarely have the chance to unify at a time of peace (think of Vietnam, Armenia or Yemen), or unify at all (think of Koreans or Azeris). Belarusians got their chance, and it is no wonder that the date of 17 September 1939 will always have its proponents.