

Belarus of Jews and Muslims

Each year on Holocaust memorial day, Belarus has its own tragedy to recall. In the early 20th century, Jews made up 43 per cent of the population in Minsk and equally high rates were found in provincial centers. Yiddish was one of four official languages – de facto and de jure – between the First and the Second World Wars. The other three languages were Belarusian, Russian and Polish. Modern Belarusian literature is unimaginable without Jewish Zmitrok Biadulia, and the renowned artist Marc Chagall, who never forgot his native Vitebsk while living in France.

Today's Belarusian authorities like to present the country as an Orthodox Christian and Slavic nation. But historically, Belarusians of other religions and ethnic backgrounds significantly enriched the country. Jews and Muslims, in particular, have made lasting contributions to the country's history and culture. They represent tolerance and multicultural character for which Belarus is seldom credited today.

Every Tenth Belarusian Was Jewish

Today, about 30,000 Jews live in Belarus which has a population of 10 million. Although that is much more than in the neighboring countries, it is significantly less than in the past. At least a third of the population of nearly all Belarusian cities used to be Jewish. Numerous yeshivas and synagogues were found all over Belarus. Chabad Hasidism was founded in the 19th century by Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk and Shneur Zalman of Lyady. Labor Zionism was also founded in Belarus and Minsk held the second convention of Russian Zionists in 1902.

Jews constituted an integral part of Belarus since at least the 14th century. Their own cultural significance has been

complemented by their role of mediators of contacts with Western Europe. They say that Baruch Spinoza, the Jewish Renaissance philosopher, temporarily hid in Belarusian Jewish communities following his conflict with his native community in Holland. There were only very limited religious persecutions in Belarus until the 19th century and the country was famous for its tolerance.

Belarusians have never displayed any religious fanaticism. For example, some decades after Spinoza, a member of the Belarusian noble family of Radziwills, Marcin Mikalaj Radziwill – after experimenting with Christian denominations – adopted Judaism. The Belarusian national movement also generally avoided anti-Semitism; even the nationalist musician Andrei Melnikau sings a [song](#) with Chagall's text about his love for Belarus.

In the 19th century, anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire began to force Jews out of the country. Many migrated to Europe and the United States. Under the Soviets, some Jews chose to assimilate and seek new prospects in other regions of the Soviet Union. In Western Belarus governed by Poland the dire economic situation, combined with Zionist sympathies, again compelled many to migrate overseas.

The Nazis dealt the final blow to Belarus's Jewish population. By destroying Belarusian Jews and their culture, the Holocaust also destroyed a valuable part of Belarus itself. Jews constituted more than a tenth of the population, and an even higher percentage in smaller cities and towns. They played a significant role in culture and science. Remnants of old synagogues and religious schools in urban areas are a testament to this thriving period. Even today, older Belarusians remember their Jewish neighbors and some Yiddish words.

While the devastation caused by World War II wiped out large swathes of Belarusian Jewish culture, postwar Russification

played a role as well. Both Belarusians and Jews began to renounce their languages – Belarusian and Yiddish – in favor of Russian. Today, Belarusian Jews are studying Hebrew, as there is no place for Yiddish in modern Belarus. Its last traces are found in the klezmer music performed by groups such as the Minsker Kapelye of Dmitri Slepovitch.

Dozens of prominent Israeli politicians were born in Belarus – Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Shimon Perez, Chaim Weizmann – to name just a few. Today's famous Jews of Belarusian origin include the expressionist Chaim Soutine, chess grandmaster Boris Gelfand, sociologist and political scientist Moisey Ostrogorsky, and Hebrew language reviver Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

Qur'an in Old Belarusian

The Muslim community never reached the strength of that the Jewish population did, but it managed to make a remarkable contribution to Belarusian statehood and culture. Belarus is the only European country where numerous Muslim communities settled peacefully in the Middle Ages without conquest.

Since the 14th century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Litva) – the first united Belarusian state – invited to serve soldiers and military experts from various Oriental lands and peoples, and sometimes settled Muslim prisoners in the land. Today they are frequently referred to as Lithuanian or Belarusian Tatars, but the generic name 'Tatars' was used quite arbitrarily until a century ago to denote many Muslim ethnic groups of predominantly Turkic origin.

They very soon integrated into Belarusian society and the only distinction that they retained was their Islamic faith and script. There would be no discussion in Minsk about whether or not a European city should have a mosque in the center – the Belarusian capital has had once since the 16th century in the district of Nemiga. It was only in the 1940's that Communist

authorities tore down the building.

Almost immediately, successive generations of Muslims began to write in Belarusian with modified the Arabic script. The Belarusian Arabic script that resulted from this syncretism invented, for instance, original letters for specifically Belarusian sounds like [dz] and [dž] not found in either the



Cyrillic or Latin versions of the [Belarusian alphabet](#). Due to its more precise phonetic system, Belarusian Arabic script in fact enables us to understand how Belarusians spoke their language in earlier centuries.

Sometime in the 16th century, Belarusian became the first living European language into which the Qur'an was translated from the Arabic. There are thousands of Belarusian Muslim manuscripts – both religious and secular. Until 1980s, Muslims were the denomination with the largest volume of religious literature in the national language.

The Muslim community was famous also for its contribution to the army of the Grand Duchy of Litva. Its men were disproportionately represented in the military, until they were decimated by a series of large-scale wars with Moscow in the 17th century. Now there are only about 10,000 Belarusian Tatars. Nevertheless, when the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic fighting against Communist Russia formed the national army in 1918, it appointed a Muslim, Colonel Hasan Kanapacki, as its commander.

The Jews and Muslims serve as two examples of how different cultures shaped the Belarusian nation and were wedded to it by land, language, culture, and also fate. Remarkably, their decline coincided with that of the entire nation. Both connect Belarus to other cultures and regions of the world. Unfortunately, people too often portray the country as "Europe's last dictatorship", an isolated and hopeless place. But there is much more that Lukashenka regime in the rich

historical fabric of Belarus.