

# **Stalin's victims in Belarus: to remain unburied and nameless?**

On 6 February 2018, the Viciebsk district court fined Jan Diaržaucu for the unauthorized burial of Stalinist terror victims' remains in the forest near the village of Hajsy. Even though the initial discovery of human remains at Hajsy dates back to 2014, the authorities have been winding down the official investigation, leaving the bones and skulls on the surface.

Jan Diaržaucu and the public initiative "Hajsy – Viciebsk Kurapaty" keep petitioning the local authorities to give the site protected memorial status. Yet three years after the discovery, only the 37 crosses of the 'people's memorial' marked the area of the shooting grounds.

As the Belarusian KGB refuses to grant free access to the archives on the Stalinist repressions, it remains unknown where and how many similar burial sites linked to Stalinist terror still exist. Unlike in neighbouring countries, the modern Belarusian heirs of the NKVD have ensured that all data will remain classified until the late 21st century.

## **Hajsy discoveries: who are the victims?**



April 2017 in Hajsy woods. Source: svaboda.org

In November 2014, Jan Diaržaucu and his fellow activists from the Conservative Christian Party BPF informed the authorities about large burial grounds near the village of Hajsy, in the vicinity of Viciebsk. The discovery happened after local residents saw pits and scattered human bones in the nearby woods. The appearance of the pits suggested that so-called “black diggers” had recently unearthed the mass graves in search of valuables.

Local senior residents still have memories of the 1930s NKVD shootings in these woods. After the civil society activists insisted on a proper investigation, the authorities dispatched the 52nd Search Battalion that discovered remains of at least 172 persons in the autumn of 2015. The Investigative Committee in Viciebsk took some of the remains for examination, yet the experts were unable to determine the exact year of death. The remains were quickly marked as “war victims” and buried as such in common graves.

Another burial site was discovered at Hajsy in spring 2017, after grave looters made new excavations in the woods, once

again leaving behind human bones, footwear and clothing. Even though all artefacts dated back to 1938 or earlier, the authorities still hesitated to admit that the discovered remains of 245 people belonged to victims of the NKVD mass shootings.

## **Ignored and unburied: why the authorities don't care about the victims?**

Jan Dzierżaucau, along with civil society activists, installed the first crosses at Hajsy in the autumn of 2014, marking the creation of a "people's memorial". Three and a half years later, they expanded the memorial by adding 34 crosses and new information signs, while the authorities ignored the memorialisation of the killing grounds, [in line with its usual policy](#).



Jan Diaržaucou. Source: svaboda.org

More than that, in February 2018, the authorities tried Diaržaucou for the unauthorized burial of human remains that the 52nd Search Battalion left behind after completing its excavations.

Diaržaucou, who since 2015 coordinates the public initiative “Hajsy – Viciebsk Kurapaty” did not deny that he had buried the bones. At the same time, he pointed out to the court that he did not have any other choice due to the inaction of the local authorities in this issue.

Although Belarusian laws contain a number of norms on rehabilitation of the Great Terror victims, none concerns the re-burial procedures for the people who were shot by the NKVD. Neither does current legislation contain any regulations on the creation of burial sites for their remains.

According to Belarusian advocate Halina Parkhimchyk who

represented Jan Dzierżaucau in court proceedings, Belarusian legislation has rules on burying the remnants of those who were killed during the wars but not as a result of political repressions. However, according to her, moral rules dictate that the victims of the Stalinist terror should also be buried with respect.

Along with the ongoing [glorification of the Soviet past](#), this was probably one of the reasons why the authorities preferred to treat the human remains from the 2015 site as “victims of the Great Patriotic War”. The formal explanation relied on the claim that soldiers from the 52nd Search Battalion had found a piece of cloth identical to those used in German uniforms.

However, archaeologists Mikalaj Kryvalcevič and Valiancina Viargej, who examined the site in 2015, noted that execution weapons were typical for the NKVD, not the Nazis. The scientists also pointed out a lot of similarities between burials in Hajtsy and [Kurapaty – a forest on the outskirts of Minsk](#), where the NKVD executed thousands of Belarusians during the Great Terror.

In 2017, the experts from the Belarusian Academy of Sciences confirmed these findings. Execution style, cartridge cases, coins, footwear and personal belongings all indicate that the Hajtsy burial site was a shooting ground of the Stalinist period. Despite these additional data, the authorities still refer to the need for further investigation and research to be able to grant Hajtsy the status of a memorial.

## **The KGB monopoly over the archives**

The extent of the Stalinist repressions cannot be evaluated without access to the KGB archives. Yet these are closed to the public and researchers. Therefore, the number of [Great](#)

[Terror victims](#) can only be estimated, with suggested figures for those who suffered between 1917 and 1953 ranging from 600 thousand to 1.5 million people. Currently, only relatives of victims can request information from the KGB. Yet even they do not receive the complete cases of their repressed family members.

[The Belarusian KGB](#) managed to bend the laws in its favour, restricting public access to the files on the Stalinist repressions. Due to privacy reasons, the archives generally release the documents after the term of 75 years. The KGB invented a new interpretation of this norm, counting the 75 year embargo not from the time of the file's creation, but from the moment of person's rehabilitation. This means that files of those rehabilitated in the 1990s would remain classified for decades to follow.

Many Belarusians are still not aware that in Minsk alone there are at least seven more places where the NKVD shot innocent people. [Maly Trascianec, a Nazi death camp](#) during WW2 was among them. Soviet authorities skilfully hid these crimes, claiming that all victims died at hands of the Nazis. As the Hajsy story demonstrates, current Belarusian regime eagerly follows the Soviets' lead.

Stalinist repressions touched nearly every Belarusian family, just as the war did. Yet due to the lack of a critical evaluation of the Stalinist past, currently civil society initiatives alone remind Belarusians of its cruel realities and bring to light the NKVD's crimes.