

Dziady in Belarus

On 28 October thousands of Belarusians are expected to visit Kurapaty to mark Dziady.

Dziady is a traditional day of remembrance of the deceased ancestors observed in Belarus. Kurapaty is the place on the outskirts of Minsk where the Bolsheviks executed over 200,000 people in 1930s.

Dziady is more than a traditional holiday. It has also become a symbol of resistance to the Soviet regime and the revival of the Belarusian nation. In 1988 Dziady became the day when the Belarusian first organised a mass demonstration against Soviet rule.

Belarus is the only country where the Dziady celebration preserves its authentic form. On this day, Belarusians visit not only the graves of their dead relatives, but also invite them to visit their houses. □As with most traditional folk holidays it has pagan roots. Belarusians believed that on this holiday the deceased souls visit their descendants. The hosts even leave spare sets of flatware on the tables for the dead.

Dziady used to be a holiday that was granted the status of a day off in 1990s. However, Lukashenka abolished it as the people associated Dziady with the anti-Communist struggle.

Lukashenka and Communism

A great number of Belarusians still miss the Communist past. These people nearly all support Lukashenka, who thinks that “The Communist ideology, based on Marxist-Leninist ideology, should be a key part of the Belarusian state ideology”.

Research conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies showed that 48.7% of people over 60 and 29.3% aged between 50 and 59 even wish for the

revival of the Soviet Union. These very groups actively support Lukashenka and the idea of closer ties with Russia. On the other side, young people do not want revival of the USSR and support the idea of an European path for Belarus: 55.1 % of those between the ages of 18-29 want to join the European Union.

That is why today's authorities keep silent about the [mass executions in Soviet times](#) in public, and support the Communist party which maintains its loyalty to Lukashenka. Communism remains one of the fundamental principles of Lukashenka's regime, which are full of fissures and cracks when analyzed under the facts of Soviet rule in Belarus.

The Article That Changed the Belarusian History

Kurapaty is the Belarusian symbol of Stalinist repressions. The first mass action which gave hope for changes in Belarus took place there, on Dziady. The demonstration was a reaction to publication of the article written by Zyanon Paznyak and Yauhen Shmyhalyou "Kurapaty – the Road of Death".

Literature and Art magazine published this article in 1988. It is unbelievable that such article was published in the Soviet Union. In the article, the authors depicted about the mass executions in Kurapaty, and how the Soviet special services tortured and murdered dozens and thousands of people. According to their research , every night from 1937 until 1941 the NKVD delivered people to Kurapaty and shot them.

No one knows exactly how many peaceful citizens the Soviet authorities killed. Initially, the Communists spoke of a figure of around 30,000. Zyanon Paznyak who publicised Kurapaty crimes claims that the number may more likely be 100-250,000, while British historian Norman Davies thinks it is over 250,000.

They Went to Dziady as Population, and Returned as People

The truth about the mass executions had a powerful effect on the Belarusian society in 1980s. 30 October 1988 became a historical day for Belarus. In those days, it was extremely difficult to distribute information and dissidents had not yet forgotten what prisons and mental hospitals looked like. Despite all this, thousands of people came to the demonstration.

The Soviet authorities behaved brutally on that day. Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau described that day as “The Long Road Home” in his autobiography:

They started dispersing the demonstration – they beat and arrested people, poisoning them with gas, using portable gas-sprays. They poisoned Paznyak as well – he was leading the crowd. But Paznyak did not surrender. He led the crowd to the outskirts and then to Kurapaty. However, the troops were there to block the way. Then Paznyak led the people to the field, where the religious ceremony took place under the snow which fell from the sky.

It was on Dziady when people hoisted the white-red-white flag for the first time in Soviet Belarus. Belarusian writer Vitar Kazko said after the action that “They went to Dziady as a population, and returned as a people”.

The Soviet authorities were scared, for the first time in many years. They were scared not only because the people found out about the mass executions. They were frightened because the peaceful protesters continued their rally to Kurapaty despite the demands and the brutal actions of the authorities.

Vandals Destroy Kurapaty, the Authorities Keep Silence

Today, there is a People’s Monument in Kurapaty. People come here and erect their own crosses. But every year, vandals dig out the graves, destroy crosses, break memorial shields, and paint swastikas on the icons.

The favourite target for the vandals is a bench with the following encryption: "From people of the USA to People of Belarus, for Memory". People call it "Clinton's bench", as the American government presented it in 1994 during his visit to Kurapaty.

The authorities try to leave the acts of vandalism unattended. In fact, they do not give any help or protection to the memorial complex. The law-enforcement agencies initiate criminal cases for vandalism, but only one case has reached the courts thus far, and only because members of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front caught the vandals on the spot. The court considered the vandals guilty but they were then granted amnesty and released.

Today a private company is building park near the stove. The owners claim that the visitors of the new complex will have an excellent opportunity "to hide from the city fuss". Of course, business should develop in Belarus, but the question is, whether it should happen next to the place where hundreds of thousands were murdered under Stalin.

The History Will Decide

Every year since 1988 the opposition marches to Kurapaty. The age of the participants has changed greatly. Previously, it was mostly middle-aged people who came to Dziady, but today the great majority of the participants are young.

The authorities do not let any information about Kurapaty to seep into history textbooks. They threaten students who participate in political activities with expulsion from universities and administrative detentions. But still young Belarusians come to Kurapaty on Dziady.

The Communist regime also seemed unbreakable but it lost to the History in the end.

Instead of Landing in Minsk, Kaczyński's Plane Crashed in Smolensk



In September 2009, the President of Poland Kaczyński sent his condolences to the President of Belarus because of the death of two Belarusian pilots in a crash of Su-27 fighter plane at an air show. Today, state leaders around the world are condoling with the Poles at the loss of President Lech Kaczyński and 95 others in a plane crash near Smolensk.

On April 10, Lech Kaczyński was flying to commemorate the deaths of thousands of Poles murdered by the Soviet Union and buried in the Katyn Forest just across the eastern border of Belarus. On March 5, 1940, Joseph Stalin signed an order to execute 25,700 Polish prisoners of war in the camps of Ostashkov, Starobelsk, and Kozelsk. Only in 1990 did the Soviet authorities admit responsibility for the Katyn murders.

Because of the fog, it was difficult for the pilots to land in Smolensk airport, near the Katyn Forest. Polish media report that air traffic controllers had advised the Polish pilots not to attempt to land at the airport, but turn around and head for Minsk, the capital of Belarus. The obscure military aerodrome near Smolensk lacked the

necessary navigational equipment to receive planes in heavy fog. Despite these warnings, Polish pilots, apparently under pressure from their VIP passengers, decided to take the risk of landing in Smolensk. Perhaps, the Polish delegation had its own reasons not to land in Belarus.

Few people outside Warsaw and Minsk know that Lech Kaczyński was one of the staunchest defenders of human rights in Belarus and a vocal critic of its president. Just last month, condemning the detentions and trials of activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus, Lech Kaczyński wrote a personal letter to Alyaksandr Lukashenka defending the Polish minority. Having received no response from the Belarusian authorities, Lech Kaczynski appealed to the European Union's institutions through the President of the European Union Herman Van Rompuy and European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek.

Notably, Belarus did not send a delegation to the earlier ceremony in Katyn. This is despite the fact that Katyn's victims included hundreds of Belarusians who served in the Polish Army in 1940 when Western Belarus was a part of Poland.

If the Belarus president were to fly to Smolensk, he would not have used an old Soviet plane for that. Ever mindful of what losing their leader would mean for the Belarusian people, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has long ago switched to the sleek and safe US Boeing. Lech Kaczyński was flying a 20-year old Tupolev Tu-154. Tupolev's long history of crashes has never been a secret, but the Polish leadership considered buying a new US-manufactured Boeings an unnecessary indulgence during the financial crisis.

Seventy years after the massacre orchestrated by Stalin, the Polish people once again lost some of its best

compatriots in the cold foggy forest near Katyn.

VC & YK

Kraków City Council Declares Lukashenka Persona Non-Grata

The council of the Polish city of Kraków has declared Aliaksandr Lukašenka, the President of Belarus, persona non grata in the city. It is a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the Union of Poles in Belarus. The city council has passed a resolution which appeals to the European Parliament to take all possible effective action against the Belarusian state to protect the rights of persecuted Poles in Belarus. The [conflict](#) around the Union of Poles of Belarus is quite far from what it may look like at the first glance. The specific is that the conflict has no nationalistic background at all.

In principle, one can find potential grounds for Polish-Belarusian nationalistic tensions on historical and geographic issues, just as there are tensions between Poland and the Republic of Lithuania around the Vilnius region or between Poland and Ukraine on the role of Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the 2nd World War. Polonization and repressions against Belarusian national movement in Poland-occupied West Belarus in 1919-1939, transfer of the city of Bielastok (Polish Białystok) and surroundings from Belarus to Poland by Joseph Stalin in 1945 or the fact itself that Poles are the only ethnic minority in Belarus that was largely formed not as a result of migration of people from mainland Poland but from Roman Catholics of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania adopting Polish self-identification – all these controversial

historical episodes could have been used by a nationalistic Belarusian government as a reason for tensions with Poland.

As a tradition from Soviet times, September 17, the day of the Soviet invasion to Poland in 1939, is still commemorated as the Day of Reunification of West Belarus with the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, but nothing more than that. Belarus has avoided a wave of nationalistic self-esteem buildup all other newly independent states, like Ukraine or the Baltic states, have been through. The regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka is far from being nationalistic. To the contrary, it seems more cautious about the Belarusian-speaking minority, that is mostly represented by urban intelligentsia and youth in opposition to Lukashenka, than about the Polish minority. There is an official Union of Poles of Belarus led by Stanislau Siamashka that is loyal to the government and that gets support from it.

The prosecution of the unofficial Union of Poles of Belarus led by Anžalika Borys is first of all a prosecution of an organization that is independent from the government and refused to demonstrate loyalty. It should be viewed together with the government's reluctance to register political parties (like the Belarusian Christian Democracy) or repressions against free press in Belarus – and not along with nationalistic tensions between certain parties in Poland and Ukraine or the Republic of Lithuania. Read stories by [Belorusskie Novosti](#), [Gazeta.pl](#) (in Polish) and [TVP](#) (in Polish). See also a [background story by Deutsche Welle Russian edition](#)

AČ

Belarus United 70 Years Ago



Yesterday was the seventieth anniversary of yet another alteration of the Belarusian borders. On September 17, 1939, Western Belarus was reunified with Eastern Belarus and the Red Army marched into Poland. The reunification was made possible by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, concluded between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany a month earlier.

Eighteen years earlier, at the end of the Polish-Soviet War, Belarusian territories were divided between Poland and Soviet Russia under the terms of the Peace of Riga. Poland acquired Hrodna and Brest oblasts as well as the parts of today's Minsk and Vitebsk oblasts.

How did the Belarusians fare under the 18-year-long Polish rule? Immediately after the Peace of Riga, a Belarusian party was able to obtain seats in the Polish parliament. Starting in 1923, Belarusian courts and schools were able to officially use the Belarusian language, which was taught in all Polish gymnasia in areas inhabited by Belarusians. However, by the late 1920s the relationship between the Belarusian minority and Polish authorities soured. Many Orthodox churches and Belarusian schools were closed and political opposition suffered state repressions.

This is why in September 1939 the majority of the Belarusian people welcomed the Red Army waving both red and white-red-white flags. However, the Soviet terror soon disabused them of their enthusiasm. In total, over 100,000 people were deported

from West Belarus to the eastern parts of the USSR.

A few months after the unification, the Belarusian borders were altered again. Joseph Stalin ordered Vilnius transferred to Lithuania, which was then annexed by the Soviet Union. After the World War II, Belarusian borders were moved eastward as some of the annexed territory was returned to Poland.

In its history, the map of Belarus endured more changes than the map of any other European nation. Some of the Belarusian people had lived in three different countries without ever changing their addresses. Others lived in no fewer states because they were exiled or deported.

The most recent attempt to unify Belarus with another country failed. The Belarus-Russia Union State, the foundation of which was laid with the signing of the Treaty on the Union between Belarus and Russia in April 1997, never came into existence. It was the first attempt at unification conducted on a voluntary basis. The Union did not actualize not because Belarus stood up to its imperious neighbors, but because the plans of the larger of the uniting countries, Russia, changed.

Read more about the reunification of Belarus:
<http://www.euroradio.fm/en/975/reports/38375/>