

Victory Day: Between Remembrance and Militant Memory

9 May 2016 in Minsk started with a procession “Belarus Remembers,” which marched through the heart of the city, carrying pictures of the veterans.

Too frail to walk over longer distances, they joined the procession at the Victory Square for the official part. Festivities continued with president Lukashenka laying wreaths at the Monument of the Victory.

Belarusian Victory Day looked more modest and appropriate in contrast to the lavish Russian military parade, which took place in the same morning in Moscow. On the other hand, celebrations of the victory over the Nazi Germany in Minsk differ from the European commemorative practices. Belarusian authorities still pay tribute to the military aspect and focus on the Great Patriotic War, [instead of the entire WWII](#).

The actual commemoration of the victims and coming to terms with the war remains in the background of the patriotic state-sponsored celebrations, although in 2016, quite symbolically, the Victory Day fell on the eve of Radaunica. It is the ancient Ancestors Remembrance Day, the ninth day after the Orthodox Easter, when people traditionally travel across country to visit the cemeteries and remember their loved ones.

Victory Day: connecting past

and present

Along with the Victory Square, major festivities on 9 May take place near the war monument of the Minsk Hero City, by the museum of the Great Patriotic War, which re-opened in the new location in 2014. In many ways this museum reflects official memory of the war and approaches to the Victory Day in Belarus. Its 22-meter glass dome reminds of the German Reichstag. Lukashenka pointed out this reference specifically, emphasising Belarusian contributions to the victory in the war.



On 9 May 2016, president addressed the crucial role of the Belarusian people in the Great Patriotic War in the same vein. He noted that “we will not allow to distort the truth about this victory, falsify it or take it away from our children and grandchildren.”

Such rhetoric along with the traditions of grand celebrations of the Victory Day date back to Soviet times. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor states reinvented commemoration of the victory in different ways, yet glorification of the victory remains the universally positive reference point.

Drawing on the images of the partisan republic, the Great Patriotic War, and heroism, current Belarusian regime benefits from the Soviet-inspired approach with minimal adjustments. Modern memory culture still centers around the Great Patriotic War during 1941 – 1945. By contrast, legacies of the WWII and fates of Belarusian veterans, who fought on its fronts since 1939, remain in the background.

Patterns of remembrance

Family histories of almost every Belarusian feature tragic stories of fighting, self-sacrifice, and privations during the war. The number of [WWII Belarusian casualties](#) makes up about 2.2 million people: soldiers, civilians, and victims of the Holocaust.

More than 1.3 million Belarusians fought in WWII, yet the time takes its toll on the veterans. On the eve of the 71th anniversary of the victory over the Nazi Germany, only 13,700 former soldiers and partisans were the major protagonists in the celebrations of the Victory Day. Its unequivocally positive message will likely define collective memory patterns for years to come.



Recognising this immense mobilising potential, Belarusian authorities use the memory of the war [to legitimise current political regime](#). Yet the side-effect is that the actual history moves to the background, while the commemorative practises encourage the cult of the war.

The Great Patriotic War is an undisputed part of the school curriculum in Belarus, while some schools diligently enforce the “military-patriotic” theme for their students in a more straightforward manner.

Along with humanities or sciences, high-school students have an option to choose this specialisation for their last two years in school. If they do, they get to wear military-style uniforms and can study military-related subjects.

Militarised memory: war myths and cults

The theme of Belarusian contributions to the victory and crucial role of partisan movement create a certain counter-narrative to the memory politics [in contemporary Russia](#). The latter is actively developing its own version of the sacred Great Patriotic War, prioritising exclusively Soviet/Russian role in the defeat of the Nazi Germany.

Appropriation of the victory in the war became especially important with the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, as Russia started to assert its dominance in the post-Soviet region. One of the recent images of Russian war cult are the black-orange striped St. George's ribbons, which replaced the red flags as major war-related symbols.

The ribbons appeared in 2005 in reaction to the Orange revolution in Ukraine and firmly took hold in the public sphere during the recent Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. Along with the portraits of Stalin, military posters, and anti-German car stickers these ribbons became more prominent in public and virtual space as tools of aggressive memory construction.



This merchandise gradually appears to find its way to Belarus, yet the state attempts to counteract the trend. Both Belarus and Kazakhstan developed their own versions of a special ribbon for the Victory Day. Babrujsk municipality recently prohibited to use St. George's ribbons and Russian flags during the Victory Day themed car rally.

In contrast to Belarus, the war cult in Russia assumes more assertive forms. In one of the recent incidents, people wearing WWII uniforms and St. George's ribbons threw raw eggs and disinfectant at the high school participants of the annual research contest "The Individual in History. Russia in the 20th Century," organised by the human rights group Memorial. Protesters accused it of falsifying history, labelling students as "fascists" and "traitors." Among the victims of this attack was the Russian writer Liudmila Ulitskaia.

By comparison, Belarusian version of war memory is less aggressive, as the state is not actively involved in any ongoing military conflicts. Yet Victory Day commemorations in Belarus show how war cults in essence prevent coming to terms with the war trauma, especially when the state deliberately upholds military-oriented patriotic education, inspired by Soviet approaches.

In this respect, Victory Day celebrations might better fulfil their purpose, if they genuinely focus on the message of peace and encourage historical reflection, rather than military grandeur. The main challenge is to shape collective memory in a less artificial way, avoiding trivialisation of the immense human sacrifice, that Belarusians paid during the war.

Belarus' Three Independence Days

Although many question whether Belarus is really an independent state today, its three independence days paint a different picture.

Depending on one's political views, Belarusians consider

either 25 March, 3 July or 27 July as their real day for commemorating their independence as a nation.

On 27 July, Belarusian civil society activists and journalists symbolically celebrated the third of these independence days – the 24th anniversary of the Declaration of Belarus' Sovereignty in 1990. Two decades ago it was essentially the main official holiday for the young nation.

This year the authorities organised a bloated, pompous celebration of the Belarus Independence Day on the 3rd of July. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians came out to watch a military parade in Minsk for the capital's official Independence Day celebration for the duration of Lukashenka's reign.

The opposition, however, believes that the 25th of March is the nation's real independence day, as it was the day when the Belarusian Peoples Republic was founded in 1918.

Official Independence Day – 3 July

The authorities only recognise and celebrate 3 July as the nation's official Independence Day, also known as the Day of the Republic.

Every year they commit substantial financial and human resources towards its preparations. This year they wanted to make it an especially notable commemoration as it would mark the 70th anniversary of Minsk's liberation from Hitler's Nazi forces.

This year Russian president Vladimir Putin came to Minsk right before Belarus' Independence Day to open with his Belarusian counterpart a new Museum of the Great Patriotic War.

This joint opening of the museum was meant to demonstrate the historical and political unity of both countries. Perhaps due to him having slightly different views about Belarusian

independence on the eve of Belarus' Independence Day parade, Putin quietly made his way back to Moscow.

As the independent newspaper Naša Niva reported, around 200 thousand people gathered to watch the traditional military parade held on 3 July. Moving the time of the parade from its traditional morning schedule to the evening may help to explain the record turn out this year.

The parade proceeded through the city centre with military vehicles bearing not only Belarus' official red-green flags, but also Soviet and Russian flags.

Lukashenka typically avoids speaking Belarusian

Lukashenka typically avoids speaking Belarusian, and is known to ridicule those who do so, but on 1 July he surprised many by delivering part of his speech in Belarusian.

He spoke about the unity of the Belarusian nation and the universal consensus held among its people in support of its sovereignty. He also emphasised Belarus' independence and the historical links of Belarus with the Soviet Union, calling the victory over the Nazi forces "our victory".

Justifying the choice of making 3 July a national holiday, he said that Belarusians themselves had decided to "restore this historical connection" when they voted for this date as Independence Day in a nationwide referendum in 1996.

Declaration of Sovereignty – 27 July

Prior to 1996, Belarus celebrated its independence on 27 July. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Belarusian parliament passed its Declaration of Sovereignty on 27 July 1990. The 1995 referendum organised by Lukashenka was responsible for changing the timing of Independence Day.

In this referendum, one of the questions suggested moving

Independence Day from 27 July to 3 July. According to officially reported results, nearly 90% of voters came out in favour of changing the date. The West, however, did not recognise the referendum's results due to what they stated were multiple election violations and widespread vote rigging.

Since then, the state media and authorities have been silent about 27 July. For example, last year although Belarus' state Channel 1 journalists covered extensively the preparations and celebrations of the 1025th anniversary of the baptism of Kievan Rus, they did not say a word about the Declaration of Sovereignty. This year the anniversary also went unnoticed.

Some opposition-minded Belarusians try to commemorate the anniversary of the Declaration of Sovereignty of Belarus on their own.

Last year on 26 July 2013, just a day before the anniversary, the young activists from the movement "Alternativa" (Alternative) tried to wave the traditional Belarusian red-white-red flag on a bridge in the centre of Minsk.

The police, however, prevented them from doing so and eventually arrested them for their illegal unsanctioned political act. In the past the opposition has organised meetings, but few people attend them.

The Declaration of Sovereignty of Belarus clearly refers to the end of a particular epoch in history, one that remains uncomfortable for the current neo-Soviet political rhetoric, and hence their avoidance of the topic.

Freedom Day: 25 March

Belarusian opposition and many diaspora groups consider Freedom Day, which falls on 25th of March every year, as the most important day for commemorating the independence of the Belarusian state. This date marks the proclamation of the Belarusian Peoples Republic (*Bielaruskaja Narodnaja Respublika*

or BNR) in 1918.

The BNR existed for only a few months, as the Communists subsequently crushed and destroyed it. Its leadership moved into exile. Ivonka Survilla has served as the President of the BNR's Council since 1997, an organisation which primarily consists of Belarusian diaspora.

For supporters of recognising Independence Day on 25 March the proclamation of the BNR signifies the first properly independent example of Belarusian statehood.

without the BNR neither Soviet Belarus and nor contemporary Belarus would have ever seen the light of day

According to an [article](#) recently published in the Journal of Belarusian Studies, many historians believe that without the BNR neither Soviet Belarus and nor contemporary Belarus would have ever seen the light of day.

Celebrations surrounding Freedom Day in Belarus take place primarily in opposition-focused centres and media, while the official channels of communication disregard it outright or distorts its image. This year, for example, Freedom Day coincided with the turbulent events unfolding in Ukraine and was used as fodder to dissuade people from making Belarus like Ukraine.

Opposition activists organised a rally throughout Minsk and brought not only white-red-white flags (unrecognised by the state), but also Ukrainian flags. In the 1990s public rallies on 25 March gathered tens of thousands of Belarusians, but now they draw considerably smaller numbers.

To discredit the opposition, state media accused those who celebrate the declaration of the BNR of being supporters of the Ukrainian *banderovcy* (the Ukrainian nationalists from WWII who fought against all sides in the war).

The government conveyed a very negative message: those who celebrate the 25 March Freedom Day are trying to launch their own "maidan" in Belarus, and these same people are the "successors of the Nazis".

Unity needed?

According to a [2009 survey](#) conducted by the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies and the Novak Laboratory, 57% of respondents considered 3 July as Belarus' primary national holiday. The 27 July and 25 March received only 1% of support of respondents of that survey.

As [Aliaksandr Klaskouski](#) on Naviny.by noted 25 March, celebrated by the opposition, remains foreign to many Belarusians. Most of them know little about its pre-war history.

By promoting the Soviet era and nearly ignoring the rest of Belarusian history, the country has become more vulnerable to an increasingly assertive Russia.

Hopefully the country's president speaking in his native language on the Independence day will become the first step in helping Belarusians reclaim their rich history and culture.