

# Belarus: The Great Patriotic War vs the Second World War

On 9 May the annual parade took place in Minsk to honour the victory in the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany. According to today's official statistics during that war every third Belarusian inhabitant died. Nazis killed around 600-800 thousand Jews, 80% of the total Jewish population of Belarus.

Remembering the war which started in 1941, after Germany's attack against the Soviet Union, Belarusian authorities prefer to forget that the Second World War started not in 1941, but in 1939, when Hitler and Stalin were allies.

This year state media reported thousands of people were taking part in celebratory procession on the main street of Minsk including war veterans, members of labour collectives and children. Alexander Lukashenka and his youngest son Mikalay headed the procession.

The celebrations surrounding Victory Day and Independence Day in today's Belarus very much resembles the celebrations which took place in the Soviet Union. Military parades and procession of athletes are followed by a speech by a political leader.

Every year, depending on the foreign conjectures in his speeches, Alexander Lukashenka typically constructs an image of a foreign enemy. It could be NATO, the government of the United States, nationalists in Latvia or "arrogant European officials". This year Lukashenka decided to speak about the threat from the West. According to him:

*Sovereign Belarus is constantly at a gunpoint of the undeclared cold war. Some people in the West have not been*

*able to accept the fact that Belarus has not become another "banana republic," dancing to the tune of transatlantic democracies. We are stifled by sanctions. They sling mud of slander at us. Along our borders NATO warplanes are flying, new bases are opening, provocations are being plotted.*

The tradition of celebrating Victory Day started in the 1960s in the Soviet Union. From that era, the Soviet propaganda machine was constructing the myth of war aimed at creating a model of a Soviet patriotism. The basic foundation myth consisted of Soviet society's political unity, the leadership of the Communist party and heroism of the Soviet people during the war.

The war myth in the Belarusian Soviet Republic included the partisan myth. According to the Soviet ideologists during Nazis occupation most of the Belarusian people rebelled against the Nazis and struggled as partisans in the forests in Belarus. In the 1960s the partisan myth was maintained by a new generation of the Belarusian political elite. In 1950s-1970s the Belarusian Communist Party bosses included 75 former partisans. The most famous of them Piotr Masherau, who for many years served as the first secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus.

Nowadays the myth of the Great Patriotic War remains the primary national historical myth of the Belarusian state. Current Belarusian political elites use the old Soviet historical myth to legitimise an authoritarian political regime in the country.

### **The Great Patriotic War vs the Second World War**

Soviet historiography, as well as the official Belarusian historiography, about the Second World War differs in many ways from Western historiography. In a Belarusian school textbook there is a clear distinction made between the Second World War and Great Patriotic War.

The Great Patriotic War started on 22 June 1941 when the Nazi invaded the USSR and ended on 9 May 1945. Such periodisation does not include the Winter war between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1939-1940, the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states in 1940 or the division of Poland in autumn 1939 according to a secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Nor does it address that while German and Soviet armies occupied Poland, they organised a joint Soviet-German military parade in the centre of Brest-Litovsk (today Brest), a Belarusian city near the Polish border on 24 September 1939:

The Belarusian educational system almost exclusively focuses on the period of the Great Patriotic War, conveniently forgetting that the Second World War started in 1939, not in 1941. First year students of Belarusian universities even have an obligatory course titled: "The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People (in the context of the Second World War)".

The course continues the tradition of Soviet historiography where only the Soviet point of view dominates. The course textbook ignores certain uncomfortable topics such as joint Nazi-Soviet activities prior to 1941, discrimination of Ostarbeiters (Belarusians taken out to Germany as forced labourers), it fails to mention [the Katyn massacre](#) or treatment of the Soviet troops of Central Europe's civilian population in 1944-1945.

### **Glorification of the War in Lukashenka's Belarus**

In the beginning of 2000s the administration of Lukashenka launched a new project to create a new ideology for the Belarusian state. The project aimed to create an ideology which could justify the Belarusian political and economic model. The Great Patriotic War was a part of this project. The myth of the war had to serve as the main historical myth and as a cornerstone of the Belarusian state.

In 2005, the year of the 60th anniversary of victory in the

Great Patriotic War, in order to perpetuate the heroism of Belarusians, state authorities renamed two central Minsk streets. Francysk Skaryna Avenue, named after a great Belarusian culture figure of the 16th century became Independence Avenue (Praspekt Nezalezhnasci). Masherov Avenue named after a former Communist leader of Belarus became Victors Avenue (Praspekt Peramozhcau). Both of the two new names refer to this constructed war mythology.

The same year a new memorial Stalin Line opened near Minsk. According to its official web page, the memorial marks a system of defence installations and symbolises the heroic struggle of the Soviet people against the Nazi invaders.

### **The Great Patriotic War as an Instrument of the Regime's Legitimation**

While Victory Day is a Soviet holiday, Independence Day is the second official holiday which is bound up in the Great Patriotic War. It is celebrated on 3 July and, unlike Victory Day, its genealogy starts in independent Belarus.

The authorities moved the Independence Day to 3 July after a referendum in 1996 which specifically included this question. That day symbolises the liberation of Belarus from the Nazi invaders. The previous Independence Day date was 27 July and referred to the Declaration of State Sovereignty in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The heroism of the Belarusian people during the Great Patriotic War serves as the main historical myth of political identity the Belarusian leadership is trying to construct. Belarusian citizens loyal to the government should believe that the main historical event in the country's history was a victory in the Great Patriotic War, where Belarus was fighting against the West.

The two most important state celebrations in Belarus – Independence Day and Victory day serve a useful purpose for

the Belarusian political regime. As with many other authoritarian regimes, the Belarusian state is looking for external enemies to justify failures in economics and foreign policy.

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## **Why Belarus is Missing in World War II History**

Belarusian ruler Alexander Lukashenka frequently refers to the Second World War in his quarrels with the West. Lukashenka added to the Soviet Victory Day celebrated on 9 May another official holiday, 3 July, the day when the Red Army took Minsk in 1944. In 2003 the government introduced the History of the Great Patriotic War as an obligatory and separate subject not only in schools but also at all universities. The authorities are also building a new grand museum devoted to the war.

The attitude to the role and suffering of Belarus elsewhere in Europe is different. Although only a fraction of Russian territory had been occupied by the Germans, they exploit their victory to the fullest extent possible even now. Belarus had been the main Nazi-Soviet battleground for years, but many in the West also prefer to label Belarusian territories and its people as "Russian". It may sound simpler to them, but to Belarusians this sounds unfair to say the least.

### **Do Belarusian victims exist for Western historians?**

Today the Russian authorities exploit the Soviet victory in the war against Nazi Germany and neglect the fact that the war touched just a very small part of Russia. The war devastated the non-Russian lands of the Soviet Union and in particular

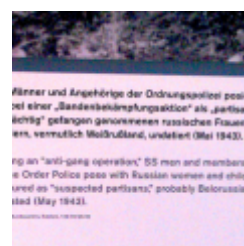
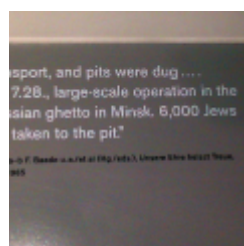
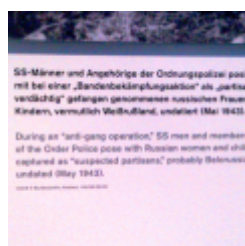
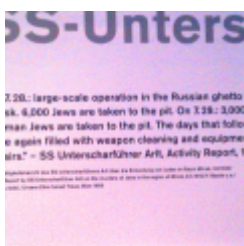
Belarus, which saw the most fierce and prolonged fighting. No wonder, when Belarus was sandwiched between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany in 1939. German troops occupied the land at the very beginning of the war and the Nazis retained the Belarusian territory for three years.

As a result, literally every Belarusian village saw at least some fighting at the beginning and end of the war. Many regions suffered as the frontline stayed there for many months, or partisan activities resulted in brutal collective punishment on behalf of the German administration. There is no Belarusian family which did not suffer in the war directly. This was certainly not the case in Russia, only a fraction of which was actually occupied.

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However, even now, two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is common to hear or read in Russia and in the West the western territories of the USSR being called "Russian." No need to go far to see evidence of it. The museum on Nazi terror in the centre of Berlin names the residents of Belarus "Russians".

This photo gallery from Berlin's Topography of Terror museum, located on the site of the former Nazi secret police Gestapo headquarters, demonstrates the unfortunate habit of many western historians of labelling "Russian" anything to the east of Poland. These are hardly innocent typos, as Moscow continues to exploit the guilty conscience of Germans.



*(pictures by YK)*

The human losses in Belarus were immense, but the exact extent is still a hotly disputed topic. A prominent leader of Soviet Belarus Piatro Masherau, a former partisan himself, considered that every fourth Belarusian died in the war. Lukashenka increased that number to every third. Yet there is evidence that around 1.9 million Belarusians, or 20 per cent of the pre-war population of the land, perished in the war. 500,000-600,000 of them were killed in the Red Army in combat, and more than a million civilians were murdered by Nazis and their collaborators. Most of those killed were Jews and peasants exterminated in anti-guerrilla operations.

### **Partisan Land?**

Myths related to the Second World War were at the core of Soviet Belarusian ideology. The local Communist party presented the land as a "guerrilla country". It was a safe form of Belarusian nationalism: it allowed them to portray Belarusians as heroes but it did not lead to a confrontation with the painful issues of Soviet policies carried out in Belarus.

Belarusians fought both for Soviet partisan groups and pro-German police and military units

The guerrilla warfare in Belarus did not inflict many military losses but caused immense civilian losses. Ultimately, it became an internal confrontation as Belarusians fought both for Soviet partisan groups and pro-German police and military units. For many of them it was not a free choice but rather a choice between the Gulag and the Buchenwald. People in western Belarus in particular had no sympathy for Moscow because they became Soviet citizens only in 1939, after the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union divided Europe in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Many questions remain unanswered about “partisan” Belarus. No doubt Belarusian partisans were more successful in their operations than their counterparts in other countries. Belarusian partisans fought under much harsher conditions than the Yugoslav fighters of Tito because Belarus – unlike the Balkans – was crucial to the German war effort.

Only in the eastern regions which had been part of the Soviet Union since the October Revolution was there a wide-scale indigenous guerrilla movement, albeit with strong control from Moscow. In the western half of Belarus there were mostly partisans which were sent or parachuted from Soviet-controlled areas, who were effective and well-trained commandos.

### **The Second World War remains a hot issue in Belarus**

Belarusian history of the Second World War hides yet another skeleton in the closet – people who cooperated with the German administration in Belarus. There were very few, if any, true supporters of the Nazis. This can be seen clearly by the lack of support for the massacres of Jews in Belarus. Nazis themselves complained that Belarusians, unlike other European nations, were not enthusiastic about their anti-Jewish policies.

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But many people were willing to ally with anyone struggling against the Stalinist regime. And when late in the winter of 1944 Nazis allowed the organisation of the Belarusian Land Defence Forces, tens of thousands of people joined that army. It was a very impressive number as the mobilisation took place only in Central and North-Eastern Belarus.

Those people began to cooperate with Germans, ready to fight against the return of the Stalinist terror. They were poorly armed and Germans had no trust in them and never used them on



the front lines. These battle units, later repeatedly reorganised, led to the eventual formation of a Belarusian SS Division which did not participate in any massacres. The Nazi leadership decided to send them to fight in Western Europe and as soon as they had a chance most of them joined the French partisans. Their fate symbolises the tragic choice between bad and worse faced by Belarusians in that war.

Today Belarusians have almost no anti-German or anti-Western sentiments. Belarusian writer Siarhiej Dubaviec recently noted that all opinion surveys show Germany as the favourite country for emigration among Belarusians, despite all the official glorification of the Soviet anti-Nazi struggle in 1941-45.

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Soviet Belarus had no relations of its own with the rest of Europe to discuss their common history. Independent Belarus very soon returned to the old Soviet ideology which considered the history of the Second World War as a compelling argument to support confrontation with the West.

The war remains an issue for Belarusians, including those who are sceptical of the official propaganda. A major Belarusian publisher once admitted that all books on the last war, even scholarly titles, sell better than any other books.

Belarus and Germany should address their history, acknowledge the facts of Belarusian suffering and the contradictions in Belarusians' attitude towards the German occupation. The current government of Belarus will never do so as it undermines its *raison d'etre*. But Germany as a democratic European state must do so. And they should work with Belarusian society directly and give it still further grounds to challenge the anti-Western rhetoric of the regime.