

Russia Monopolises WWII Victory at the Expense of Belarusians and Ukrainians

On 25 October, Norway celebrated the anniversary of its liberation by the Soviets from German occupation in 1944. In commemoration of this important day, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg hosted Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Norway.

Neither Belarusian nor Ukrainian officials were invited to attend, despite the substantial contributions of both these nations to the Soviet struggle against Nazi Germany. Unfortunately, letting Russia claim victory for itself during WWII at the expense of other post-Soviet countries has become a trend in the international community.

Moscow monopolises the Soviet WWII narrative for propaganda purposes at home and abroad. Russia's monopoly on the victory is especially tragic for Belarus whose people overwhelmingly sided with the Allies and paid a much higher price for this historical victory over Nazi Germany than many other European nations.

Russia Hijacks Collective Heritage

Moscow continues to drop hints of their moral superiority over the West as a result of the high price the Soviet Union paid for its victory over the Nazis. The Kremlin is also continuing to exploit the Soviet Union's collective victory during WWII in support of its current foreign policy objects.

Recent developments in Ukraine illustrate this very point. As a recent article in Time magazine noted:

[u]nder Russian interpretation of history, the struggle that began with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941

continues for Russia today, in a direct line through the generations, with the conflict in Ukraine.

Indeed, when speaking on the very day of Russia's annexation of Crimea Putin claimed that Crimeans had needed protection from the new leadership of Ukraine, some of whom were, in his words, "neo-Nazis and anti-Semites."

The Kremlin can be accused of many things, but modesty is not one of them. In 2010, Putin announced that Russia would have won the war with Nazi Germany even without Ukraine's assistance, "because we [Russians] are the victors," and "the war was won mostly thanks to the resources of the Russian Federation".

Uninformed Consent?

Amazingly, Russia's attempts to monopolise the Soviets' victory has been met with very little resistance in the West.

Earlier this year, the French government declined to invite Belarusian representatives to the 70th anniversary of the Allied forces landing in Normandy. Instead, out of 15 former Soviet republics, Paris invited only Russia's President Putin and President Poroshenko of Ukraine – the latter apparently primarily to carry out negotiations on the Ukraine crisis.

The previous 60th anniversary of the Normandy landing, which was commemorated back in 2004, also featured President Putin – and not a single other official representative from the ex-soviet states were in attendance.

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Even [historical institutions](#) are culpable in this historic justice – thus, the former Soviet military museum in Berlin became the German-Russian museum in the 1990s. Putin's have

demonstrated a similar stance. In its [article](#) "Russians Rewrite History to Slur Ukraine Over War", Time magazine describes Moscow's exploitation of the conference on memory of the Nazi atrocities to promote its present day policies. Despite these insights, Time effectively appropriates the narrative that the Soviet victory was Russia's victory.

The Great Patriotic War: Fought in Belarus and Ukraine

The non-Russian populace from the Soviet Union, however, contributed at least as much as the Russians to the war, especially the Eastern Slavic nations of Belarus and Ukraine. The war waged primarily on Belarusian and Ukrainian lands and barely touched Russia proper.

Many of the bloodiest episodes of the war – stagnate front lines, guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency – also primarily took place in Belarus and Ukraine. They resulted in catastrophic losses. The counterinsurgency operations by Nazi forces in Belarus burned down either completely or partially 5,295 Belarusian villages and led to the death of 150,000 of their inhabitants.

A recent article by Andrej Kotliarchuk in the Journal of Belarusian Studies shows that the total number of Belarusians who died in WWII [is still a matter of debate](#). The estimated casualties among civilians inside Belarus vary between 750,000 and 1.4m. Together with Belarusians who died fighting Nazi Germany or died at the hands of the Nazis outside Belarus, the total figure of Belarusian casualties is estimated to be around two million people (out of a pre-war population of 10.5m), including many [Belarusian Jews](#).

Belarusians Fought Against Hitler on All Fronts

Before 1939, Belarusians [lived a life divided](#) – some lived in Soviet Belarus, others in Western Belarus, which was at that time ruled by Poland. Yet throughout WWII Belarusians in the east and west sided with anti-Nazi forces. Ethnic Belarusian

soldiers in the Polish Army bravely fought against the German invasion in 1939. Later on, ethnic Belarusians and Ukrainians constituted up to a third of the Anders' army, a Polish force, that was deployed to the Middle East and Italy.

After the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Belarusian population largely avoided collaboration with the Nazis. 1.3m ethnic Belarusians and natives of Belarus joined the Red Army, despite the large-scale political violence from years past in the Soviet Union. Others headed to the woods with gun in hand.

Already by the end of 1941, 12,000 armed Soviet Belarusian partisans were actively at work in the nation's woods and swamps. By 1 April 1944, 185,000 armed fighters fought were in the ranks of the Belarusian Soviet partisan units that were subordinate to the Belarusian Staff of the Guerrilla Movement (BSGM). Ethnic Belarusians in the BSGM units made up over 65% of their fighters.

In addition, a number of non-Belarusian guerrilla units operated in Belarus which were subordinate *inter alia* to the Central Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet General Staff (GRU). They stood out for their more skilled fighters – some of them even parachuted in from Moscow. But Belarusians fought in these units as well and among them were the creme of the Belarusian intellectual class, including famous Belarusian philologist Fyodar Yankouski who worked as an intelligence chief for a GRU partisan unit near Minsk.

To understand the full scale of the partisan movement, one needs first to add to these figures the huge losses that the partisans suffered. Second, there were large Polish partisan units active in western Belarus as well. All in all, a very large number of Belarusians – of all ethnic backgrounds – actively participated in the anti-Nazi struggle, even under the most severe conditions of occupation.

The Kremlin knows how to exploit WWII ceremonies to support its propaganda

For the sake of comparison, in France (which in terms of population was about four times bigger than Belarus) 170,000 Frenchmen and women joined the armed resistance.

The clearly substantial contribution of Belarusians as well as Ukrainians to the struggle against the Nazis and their allies was among one of the arguments for Soviet Belarus and Ukraine inclusion as founding members of the United Nations.

Despite some claims to the contrary, collaboration with the Nazis remained very limited. The maximum number of armed pro-Nazi units was around 60,000 men. Many of them had been forcefully mobilised and easily deserted or joined the partisans.

Is Lukashenka Worse Than Putin?

Some media explained that Lukashenka's authoritarian dictator image that was to blame for an invitation not being extended to him to attend the Normandy landing anniversaries and other WWII-related events.

These perceptions have resulted to a gross injustice being done to Belarus. These idealistic arguments about not inviting Belarusian officials on the grounds of their authoritarianism [contradicts its own logic](#) as both Putin and Lavrov of Russia have been invited to these and other ceremonies.

The Kremlin knows how to exploit WWII ceremonies to support its propaganda through a well-funded domestic media and its careful targeting of a foreign audience with media outlets like Russia Today.

The international acknowledgement of the Soviet Union's contribution to the victory over Nazis will not, in and of itself, lead to permitting Russia to monopolise this tragic, yet heroic, historic episode for its own purposes. The Soviet history of WWII also belongs to Belarusians and other former

Soviet peoples who fought against the Nazis to win peace in Europe.