

# Poland and Belarus Clash Over a Movie

Relations between Belarus and Poland have deteriorated in the recent decade, as Warsaw openly supported Belarusian opposition more than all of the other European nations put together. Earlier this month yet another war of words took place. Poland officially protested against a new Belarusian film *The Old Talasz* that is devoted to the 1920 Soviet-Polish War waged in Belarus.

Last week the Polish Foreign Ministry accused the film producers of caricaturing Polish characters and "using the wrong history vision to drive a wedge in close relations between Polish and Belarusian societies". *Rzeczpospolita*, the second largest Polish daily, published a long article on Belarusian-Polish relations in the inter-war period and expressed its concern about unfair and inaccurate representation of Polish soldiers.

However, many in Belarus remain unpersuaded by the myth of a free and prosperous life of Belarusians under a Polish administration in early 20th century. Good relations between Belarusians and Poles today do not mean that they need to forget their history or let their governments abuse it for their own purposes.

## **The Old Talazs Movie**

Belarusians have lived with Poles in one confederate state the Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita* in Polish) for over 200 years – longer than under the Russian rule. But they have also suffered from forced Polonization in early 20th century. After the World War I, Poland conquered Western Belarus, while Moscow created a marionette Belarusian Soviet Republic in Eastern Belarus.

*The Old Talasz* movie which caused the new wave of controversy between Poland and Belarus refers to those years. The film is based on a novel of a classic of Belarusian literature Jakub Kolas. The novel describes the war between the Communist Russia and Poland, which had just secured its independence from Russia. As an official Belarusian TV channel explained, "a part of the population fought for Bolsheviks, a part for the Poles and the rest simply for the independence of Belarus. Peasant Vasily Talasz picks up his weaponry and fights for the sake of his family".

The film focuses on Polish atrocities in Belarus during that war. The movie depicts Polish soldiers in a grotesque form, similar to how the Nazis were portrayed in Soviet movies. They walk around in shiny boots, sing mazurka, kill women and children, burn villages and torture innocent Belarusian peasants to build on their corpses the imperial Poland "from sea to sea".

Although the movie clearly tries to ridicule the Poles, the atrocities during the war were well documented and recognised not only by the Soviets but also by anti-communist Belarusian politicians such as Anton Luckievich, a former Prime Minister of the Belarusian National Republic. Neither Poland nor Soviet Russia should be proud of what they did in Belarus at that time.

### **1939: Soviet Occupation for Poland, Reunification for Belarus**

The biggest controversy deals with the interpretation of September 1939 events, namely the German-Soviet invasion of Poland and beginning of the World War II. For Poland, it was a loss of territory. For Belarus it was a unique chance for reunification albeit under Communist control and terror. To blame Belarusians for celebrating the 1939 unification of the land means forgetting the real situation in Belarus then.

By 1939, Polish authorities closed all schools with Belarusian

language as the language of instruction in the nearly 4 million strong region of Western Belarus. Only four dozens of schools retained some minor teaching of the Belarusian language. Warsaw also did not develop agrarian and backward regions populated by Belarusians which later became indoctrinated by Communist propaganda. The Polish state preferred to settle ethnic Polish colonists on Belarusian lands and failed to undertake the badly needed land reform.

However, as the *Rzeczpospolita* article correctly emphasizes, the Polish authoritarian regime of that time never persecuted its opponents as cruelly and systematically as the Soviets. Even Communist terrorists got their reasonably fair trial and mostly survived in Poland. The Polish government also did not touch private property rights unlike the Soviets in the east of Belarus.

Soviet Belarus felt all the shocks of Stalin's terror since the late 1920s and many people were murdered, jailed and exiled. But the country underwent also successful – if forceful – economic and social modernization. Belarusian culture and education flourished – although in increasingly bloody framework of Bolshevik thinking and constantly losing thousands of artists, writers, poets and other intellectuals as a result of terror. Nevertheless, common people started to identify themselves as Belarusians, mostly under Soviet rule.

### **Official Anti-Polish Propaganda Today**

These unpleasant facts give a fertile ground for controversial discussions on Polish-Belarusian relations. The Belarusian regime prefers to use the old Soviet propaganda cliché about "bloody White Poland" and the old Russian accusations of the "Polish intrigues".

Belarusian state media regularly produces biased anti-Polish content. For instance, last week, Belarusian state TV broadcasted a series called "Polish Lessons" in which it

accused Poland of financing the opposition and staging a *coup-d'etat* in Belarus.

At the same time all state-run media regularly run reports about unemployment, the difficult life and economic crisis in Poland. Lukashenka's propaganda also made a point of publicly supporting Polish populist politician Andrzej Lepper, and hinted that the Polish government was guilty of his death. However, this propaganda has little impact because their twisted interpretations are too evident to most Belarusians.

The Belarusian opposition is too fragile to risk a conflict with Poland which often gives them a last refuge. Because other Western nations have little interest in Belarus the opposition often has to follow the official Polish line. And that may lead to dangerous repercussions for the Polish image in Belarus as many presented positions contradict the well-known realities of western Belarus.

Nevertheless, the contemporary Poland is more open than in the past and is developing a critical view of its history. Anti-Polish sentiments are not popular among Belarusians today. Active Polish help in the struggle against dictatorship has already left its mark on the modern Belarusian language. New words for leaflet (*uliotka*), sticker (*nalepka*) and police station (*pastarunak*) seem to be adopted from the Polish language.

In these conditions broadcasting *The Old Talash* movie says of Belarusian hostility to Poland as much as Polish broadcasting of *The Teutonic Knights* would prove their anti-German mood.