ANDREJ KOTIJIARCHUK

The Tradition of Belarusian Statehood:
Conflicts about the Past of Belarus

Belarus remains the least known country in Europe. There are several reasons for this. The first one can be ascribed to the fact that during the modern period the Belarusian state did not exist as a separate entity on the map of Europe. During this time Belarus had no sovereignty, being initially a province of the Poland-Lithuania Federation, the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. Thus, the Belarusians were considered as a non-historical nation without a tradition of statehood or their own ruling class.

The conception of the Belarusian statehood was formulated in the first history of Belarus published after the first Russian Revolution in 1910 in Vilna (now Vilnius), written by Vaclav Lastouski in Belarusian. In this work author the history of this land was viewed with a Belarusian perspective for the first time. According to Lastouski, Belarus had an old tradition of statehood and its own ruling class. As previous Belarusian state-formations he mentioned the middle ages Principality of Polatsk (p. 8-11) that he considered as the first Belarusian state and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia that according to Lastouski was an independent Belarusian-Lithuanian state from the mid-13th century to 1569 (p.15-16). In Lastouski’s opinion after the union of Lublin with Poland (1569) Belarus lost its own political elite (the Belarusian nobility of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) through a process of self-Polonization and later while under Russian Empire control when the Russian authorities liquidated former Grand Duchy laws, its administrative system, the Greek-Catholic Church and transformed Belarus into an ordinary Russian

37 Lastouski, Vaclav. (Ластаўскі, Вацлав) 1910. Канцэпцыя існавання Беларусі. Вілаціна, see also Lastouski, Vaclav. (Ластаўскі, Вацлав) 1926. Гісторыя беларускае (ўкраінскага) княства. Старога палітычна-гістарычных временаў ад канца X в. да пачатку XIX стагоддзя. Канцінт/Катовіч.
region without any special legal status. In April 1916, in Stockholm Vachau Lastouski and another Belarusian political leader Ivan Lückievich at the conference Peoples of Rusită made an application to establish the political and cultural autonomy of Belarus. It was in Sweden, where the Belarusian question appeared on international scene for the first time.30

Lastouski’s conception was developed by another Belarusian historian Mitrofan Dounar-Zapolski (Kiev University),31 who was one of the most famous specialists on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania during the time of the Russian Empire.32 In 1918 under the order of the government of the Belarusian Democratic Republic he wrote a work entitled The Basis of Belarusian State Individuality, which was published in 1919 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Hrodna in Belarusian, English, German and French editions.33 It was a political manifesto for the young Belarusian Democratic Republic. Dounar-Zapolski remarked, "at times doubt has naively been expressed about the fact that a Belarusian state existed. While it is true that no state existed under that name – just as there were no Italian, Belgian, Ukrainian and others states before they were formed – the Belarusian nationality represents of itself in the Lithuania-Ruthenia.34" He wrote that the middle age’s Ruthenian Principalities such as Polatsk and Turau "embrace the whole area of present-day Belarus and were independent states with their own dynasties."35 Dounar-Zapolski stressed that the full name of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was the Grand Duchy of

Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia and while highlighting the predominance of the Belarusian (Ruthenian) nobility in this state.

The Lastouski-Dounar-Zapolski conception became a base for the Minsk historical school that existed in the 1920s in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus, which focused mostly on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia as a Belarusian-Lithuanian state.44 Both Lastouski and Dounar-Zapolski worked at that time in Minsk. But during the Stalin purges, this school was closed and 32 professional historians including Lastouski were killed. All their work was proclaimed to be anti-Soviet and nationalistic and as a result forbidden. Their names were forgotten. The German historian Rainer Lindner notes, "the history of Belarusian historiography during the Soviet time was a history of its liquidation.45"

A Soviet conception of Belarusian statehood was created during the Stalin period. In 1934 the first “Marxist” history of Belarus was published written by Vasil Shcharybako.46 In 1948, The Conception of the History of Belarus as conceived by the Communist Party was published and a history of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), written by three Stalinists historians was produced in 1954.47 According to the Soviet conception, the BSSR as a part of the Soviet Union was the first state in Belarusian history. The Belarusian ethnos had no tradition of statehood, their own ruling class and

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31 After the 1830s, when the Russian authorities closed the Academy of Polatsk (1820) and the University of Vilnius (1832) until 1818, there was no university on the territory of present-day Belarus. Consequently, most of the Belarusian historians graduated from Kiev University or the University of Dorpat (Orya) Tartu.
32 Dounar-Zapolski, Mitrofan. (Dounar-Zapolski, Mitrofan) 1901. Гісторыя і ахвядання Беларускага генерал-губернатара Літоўскага пры Вільні. Том 1. Кнэа.
35 Kipel, 39.

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46 Shcharybako, Vasil. (Шчарбацо, Василь) 1934. История белорусов. Мinsk.
historically had been under old “Russian” (the Kievan Rus’), Lithuanian, Polish and later, Russian power again. This conception found expression in the Constitution of the BSSR in both 1937 and 1978, which stated that the Belarusian people had no tradition of sovereignty before 1917 and that the first real Belarusian state was the Soviet Union. From the late 1930s until 1992, the Belarusian language was vilified as a rural dialect. The adoption of the Russian language as a mother tongue by the Belarusians was a sign of Communist loyalty and as a result, the Belarussian language was held in contempt. The start speaking Russian, the quicker we will construct Communism.”

The start of the Perestroika era was accompanied by the political rise of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and culture played a huge role. As Taras Kuzio argues, the history of the Grand Duchy was used by the Soviet Belarusian historians as it “re-emphasized Belarusia ties to the West, called for the country’s “return to Europe”, and stressed Belarusian history and national characteristics as different to Russian.”

The democratisation of Belarusian society can be dated from a sensational article about Kurapaty – the formerly unknown site of Stalin’s purges near Minsk where between 1937 and 1941 about 250 000 people were killed. This article, which was published in 1988, was written by two historians, Zianon Puzniuk and Jauhen Siniavou. For the non-numerous national intelligentsia the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was the year, which brought the restoration of Belarusian sovereignty. Between 1992 and 1994 the forbidden before “anti-Soviet” histories of Belarus written at the beginning of the 20th century by Lastouski, Ihnatouski and Dzounar-Zapolski were republished.

As a result, in the preamble of the first independent Constitution of 1994 it was proclaimed that: “We, the People of the Republic of Belarus. Recognizing ourselves as a full-fledged subject of the international community... supported by the centuries-long history of development of Belarusian statehood” (emphasis mine – A.K.).

The democratic minority in the Belarusian parliament at that time wanted to insert a statement about “the centuries-long tradition of statehood,” but the Post-Communist majority blocked the proposal. However, in the preamble to the law “On the preservation of a national heritage” adopted on 22nd March, 1995 it was stated that the national heritage of Belarus was created during the “existence of our own states (the Principality of Polatsak, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia, the Belarusian Democratic Republic, the Belarusian SSR)” and in the structure of other states (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union).
The new 1996 Constitution of Belarus kept the preamble of the 1994 Constitution. However, the Lukashenka political regime refused to accept the Belarusian tradition of statehood and began on the basis of the Soviet model to create a new conception of “the centuries-long history of Belarusian statehood.” The official authors thus inherited the Soviet and tsarist Russian tradition of treating the main problems of Belarusian history from the point of view of Soviet historiography or Russian monarchic-clerical historiography of the 19th – beginning of the 20th century. They idealized the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic and look at Belarusian history before 1917 from a Pan-Slavonic Orthodox perspective i.e. the so-called “theory of zapadnorsizm.”

Alexander Lukashenka said, “the idea of the Belarusian state is closed related to the idea of the Slavonic Orthodox brotherhood.” As a result since 1996 a conflict between these two conceptions has been ongoing, or more precisely, let me say, that a war for the history of Belarus has started.  

From the second half of the 9th century until now there have been several state formations on the territory of present-day Belarus. These were:

1. Ca. 862 – 12 century, Kievian Rus, which included the Principality of Turov
2. Ca 980 – 1216 The Principality of Polotsk (ca 980-1001 under the supremacy of Kievian Rus)
3. Early 1250s-1569 The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia
4. 1569 – 1772/1795 The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth
5. 1772/1796 – 1917 The Russian Empire
6. March 25, 1918 – January 1, 1919 The Belarusian Democratic Republic with its capital in Minsk
8. February 27, 1919 – June 6, 1919 The Lithuanian-Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic to be known as the “Lithel” with its capital in Vilnius and then

11. February 18, 1921 – September 17, 1939 Poland on the territory of Western Belarus.
12. October 30, 1939 The united Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic as a part of the Soviet Union, which included the Western and Eastern part of Belarus proclaimed in Białystok (Poland)
13. July 17, 1941 – July 3, 1944 Nazi Germany including Nazi “Reichskommissariat Ostland”:
   • Belarusian general province on the territory of Central Belarus, from 21.12.1943 with the collaborationists Belarusian government the “Belarussian Central Rada”
   • Ukrainian general province on the territory of the Brest and Homel regions
   • Nazi Germany (Eastern Prussia) on the territory of the Hrodna region

Which of the state-formations from this list is reflected in present-day Belarusian “centuries-long history of development of statehood,” according to either alternative or official historiographies, can be seen in table one below. Therefore, we can identify two conflicting historical traditions of Belarusian statehood (the Kievian Rus – Principality of Polatsk; the Belarusian Democratic Republic – Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic), and different interpretations of political units on current Belarusian territory. The tradition that I term “official” reflects the point of view of the government and is supported by the state’s institutions. Historians who are in opposition to the

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official ideology express an alternative view, which was formulated by Lastouski and Doukar-Zapolski in the beginning of the 20th century.

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Note: The plus and minus signs indicate whether or not each historiography considers the state formation was a predecessor of present-day Belarus.

Kievan Rus – The Principality of Polatsk

Actually the conflict about statehood starts from the centuries when the pre-statehood period of Belarusian history began. The official historiography concentrates on only the early Slavic tribes: the Kryvichi, Dryavichi and Radzimichi. According to this scientific point of view, the Eastern Slavonic tribes penetrated into the territory of future Belarus in the 7th – 9th centuries, which was already settled by Baltic tribes such as the Varangians and Lithuanians. The Baltic-Slavic substrata became a base for the creation of a

future Belarusian ethos. However, the official historiography disclaimed the role of this Baltic substratum in the ethno genesis of the Belarusians.

Around 980, two independent state formations appeared on Belarusian soil. These were the Polatsk (Palatskia in old Scandinavian) and Turov Principalities. According to the Nestor chronicle the first duked was a Scandinavian. Their names also bear witness to this fact. In the land of “Kryvichi,” in Polatsk, Ragnvald began his reign. In the land of “Dryavvich” the founder of the town Turov was the Viking Tor. Tor’s duchy soon became part of Kievan Rus. However, the Duchy of Polatsk with Ragnvald’s dynasty remained independent during the 10th to the beginning of the 13th centuries (with the exception of a very brief interlude) and is considered to be the first real state in Belarusian history.

Contemporary historians of the Viking Age usually attach less importance to Polatsk/Palatskia, mentioning only Kiev/Königsgård, and Novgorod/Holmgår. Meanwhile, according to the Scandinavian sagas Rus’ was divided into three parts, with three capitals: Novgorod, Kiev and Polatsk. In the final decade of the tenth century the Duke Valdemar of Kiev and Novgorod who was Swedish by origin, occupied the Kingdom of Polatsk with Viking support and destroyed the town (later it was reconstructed in another place.) Valdemar killed Ragnvald and married his daughter Ragnhild. In spite of this, Polatsk acquired independence even as soon as in the time of Izyaslav, who was Ragnhild’s son. The whole of the 11th century was marked by the continual struggle the Ragnvald dynasty of Polatsk against the Rurik dynasty of Kiev and Novgorod. The literary languages of this state formation were Old Ruthenian and Church Slavonic. The first territory of this state-formation embraced the lands of Polatsk’s kryvichi. Later this state was occupied the Baltic and Finish tribes on the territory of modern Latvia and Lithuania but the majority of population according to archaeological excavations was comprised of Eastern Slavs. The independence and strength of Polatsk was obvious due to its control over the most important part of the eastern trade route via Polatsk at the Dvina / Daugava river to the Baltic. At the beginning of the
12th century the political centre of this Principality moved from Polatsk to Minsk, which was founded ca 1067. This independent state had quite wide international contacts. For example the Princess of Minsk, Sofia (1141-1198) was married to a king of Denmark, Valdemar I den Store (1131-1182). The chronicle of Arnold from Luèbeck (at the beginning of the 13th century) considered the last Prince of Polatsk and Minsk named Valdemar/Valodsha (who died in 1216) as “a king of Ruthenians”. So, alternative Belarusian historians understand the Principality of Polatsk more as a separate state-political structure, which was situated mostly on the present territory of Belarus. The Belarusian ethnic group arose from the Principality of Polatsk, which marked the birth of Belarusian history.

The official historiography concentrates on the Kievan Rus and their part of the territory of present-day Belarus, such the Principality of Turov. According to the official point of view Kievan Rus was the “old Russian state – the common state of all Eastern Slavs.” Alternative historiography says that this common state is some kind of historical phantom. There was no one state that existed for long period of time with either one spoken language or one common policy. Rather, there was an unstable and short-lived confederation which consisted of different and hostile Slavic, Baltic and Finnish tribes.

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia

According to classical Belarusian historiography the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia (GDL) was a Lithuanian-Belarusian or Belarusian-Lithuanian independent state until 1569, when the federation with Poland was created.38 People of different nationalities inhabited the country; the majority of the population consisted of Belarusians and Lithuanians. In addition, there were Poles, Jews, Germans, and Lithuanian Tartars. The political elite was mostly comprised of the Lithuanian (both Lithuanian and Samogitian) and Belarusian (Ruthenian) nobility in an ethnic sense, although both groups were known from the end of the 16th century as the “Lithuanians”. This term had a political not ethnical meaning. Belarusian lands formed the largest part of the GDL. It was in the GDL that the Belarusian nation proper was formed. According to the law, official positions could only be given to the Lithuanian and Belarusian gentry by birth.39 The official language was old Belarusian. The first book in the history of the GDL was printed in Vilnius in 1522. It was the Bible, which was translated and printed in Belarusian by the humanist Francisco Skarina. Moreover, at that time the name “Belarus” didn’t exist as a political entity and the country was simply referred to as Lithuania, the territory of which consisted of four historical provinces: Lithuania, Samogitia, Belarus and Polesia. The modern Lithuanian Republic consists of Samogitia and half of the historical province “Lithuania.” The other half of historical Lithuania along with Polesia and Belarus was used to create the modern Republic of Belarus. The state border between Belarus and Lithuania has only existed since 1922 and it is one of the newest borders in all Europe. This means that historical Lithuania was actually a Lithuanian-Belarusian State.40

From the official point of view, the Grand Duchy Lithuania is regarded as a Russian Lithuanian state, the Orthodox nobility of which aspired to unite with the Russian Muscovite state. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and everything connected with it (the noble democracy, the Union of Lublin, Roman Catholicism and the Church Union of Brest) are portrayed in a negative light while at the same time, Russian politics and the Russian political system are presented in exclusively positive terms. Even the blame for the devastating

38 Some nationalistic Belarusian historians considered the GDL as a Belarusian state. This conception was formalized in the 1930s in Vilnius / Vilnius by Michál Sukhanenok and renewed in the late 1980s – 1990s by the schoolteacher Miháil Jermonovic, see: Jermonovic, Miháil, (Ulauszoci, Minsk) 1991. Пá дэсятых зборнікў Мінска: Жылыцкі і Беларускі, 1999. “Belarusian national historiography and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a Belarusian state.” Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa - Forschung, Volume 48, 383-396.


Wars led by Russia in the 16th – 18th centuries against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is pinned on Poland or the “aggressive politics of Sweden.” The partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were thus a natural end to that anarchic state. As a result of its own crisis the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was overwhelmed by anarchy. The Orthodox and Protestant populations were discriminated against by the Catholics. Thus Russia, Prussia and Austria dismembered the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in three parts.62

According to the alternative historiography, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth demonstrated a high level of ability to settle all the problems of this multicultural and multi-confessional state through the use of law and had started constitutional reforms just before the partitions occurred. They criticize the pro-Russian approach, which argues that the Russian absolute monarchy was much better than the noble democracy of the Commonwealth.

The Russian Empire

Neither the official nor the alternative historiography recognizes the Russian Empire as representing a stage of Belarusian statehood. They agree that after their incorporation into the Russian Empire, the Belarusian lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania lost the previous status of autonomy they had enjoyed in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Between 1832 and 1840 the authorities cancelled the Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Belarusian and Lithuanian lands were renamed “the North-Western land.” No special laws were issued regarding Belarus, which could have been treated as if it were a region with a special legal status. But the official historiography has a pro-

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62 For the origin of this conception, see: Тарчениович, Олег. (Тарчениович, Олег) 1887. Обзоры истории Белоруссии с древнейших времен. Санкт-Петербург; Катаевич, Михаил; Касевич, Михаил. 1864. Лексикон истории Литовской Руси. Минск; Ватасков, Павел; Балковская, Мария. 1886. Лексикон истории Литовской Руси. Минск.


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The Belarusian Democratic Republic – Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic

For alternative historians the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BDR) was the first modern Belarusian state. In March 1917 the Russian Revolution started. In November, the Russian Bolsheviks seized power. In December, the first All-
Belarusian Congress in Minsk proclaimed a republican government in Belarus but was disbanded by the Bolsheviks, who instead proclaimed the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus. In the spring of 1918, the Germans renewed their attack and pushed the Russian communists from Minsk and central Belarus. The council of the All-Belarusian Congress in Minsk proclaimed itself the temporary power in Belarus and on March 25, 1918 declared the independence of the BDR, which was to embrace all the territories with a majority of the Belarusian population. But in fact, it occupied only the central part of modern Belarus. The new government of the country started the work of restoring the land, which had been devastated during World War I. The Belarusian government proclaimed its support for all the main principles of democracy such as freedom of speech, printing, religion, unions, strikes, etc. The Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Finland, Poland, Turkey, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Armenia, and Georgia recognized BDR "de iure." The Belarusian diplomatic mission for Denmark and Sweden led by Isaac Lure was opened in Copenhagen.

At that time all of the Belarusian national intelligentsia supported the idea of a Belarusian state. The Prime minister of the government was the author of the first history of Belarus, Vaclav Lastouski. Another famous historian Prof. Mitrofan Donar-Zapolski started to organize the first National University. Belarusian intellectuals and writers such Janaka Kupala, Alexander Cvikiev, Ivan and Anton Luckievic, Raman Skimant, Alexander Ulasu, Lavon Vitan-Dubieksaus, Vaclau Ivanouski, Branislau Taraskievic, Ales Harun, Karus Kahaniec, and many others were political figures in the BDR at that time. Meanwhile, the Germans did not recognize the BDR. Therefore the BDR held no general elections, and the self-appointed administration lacked the elements necessary for full international recognition. Furthermore, its subservience to the Central Powers alienated many loyal elements in the population. Soon, however, Germany was defeated, and the young Belarusian state found itself sandwiched between two huge aggressive forces – the Russian Bolsheviks coming from the east and the Polish army coming from the west. Both forces were against the idea of an independent Belarus and tried to occupy it. In 1919, as a counterbalance to the BDR, the Russian communists proclaimed a Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). In his turn, a leader of Poland Joseph Pilсудski informed Belarus about his plans to create a federation of Poland, Belarus and Lithuania. Soon after this the Polish-Soviet war started. The government of the BDR had to escape abroad - to Lithuania. The government of the BDR in exile thus existed from 1920 (in Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Germany and finally the USA). In 1988 the Belarusian Institute of Art and Science in New York published a 394-page book Belarusian Statehood devoted to the BDR. 

According to the official point of view, on the 25th of March 1918, under the conditions of German occupation, the Belarusian Democratic Republic was proclaimed, as a national bourgeois-democratic state. However, it was not a fully-fledged state: it had no Constitution, no state boundaries, it had no armed forces of its own or financial system and other attributes of statehood were not developed. Opposition historians argue that without the BDR the BSSR would not have been possible. The creation of the BDR forced Moscow to proclaim the BSSR and created the Belarusian group of Bolsheviks. As a response to the official point of view, opposition historians have published several works devoted to the BDR. For example in a monograph on military troops of the BDR written by Aleh Latyshonak it is argued that about 10,000 people served in the Belarusian regiments of the BDR. In 1998 The Archives of the Belarusian Democratic Republic were published – a collection of

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mostly diplomatic documents in two volumes, each of which consists of more than 1500 pages.66

According to Alexander Lukashenka the Belarusian SSR of 1919 was the first real state in Belarusian history,67 and moreover, for him the Belarusian SSR is the one and only proper basis for Belarusian statehood. The Constitution of the BSSR of 1919 declared that all power belonged to the common people. As a result of the Belarusian Soviet policy of enlargement of the ethnical Belarusian territory in 1924 (the Mahilyou and Vitselbsk provinces) and in 1926 (the Homel region) areas of land were transferred by Soviet Russia to Belarus. In 1939 the territories of Western Belarus under Polish rule were reunited with the Belarusian SSR. The official historiography notes that the Belarusian SSR was one of the co-founders of the Soviet Union on December 30, 1922 and especially that on April 27th 1945, the Belarusian SSR was admitted to the UN as one of its founder states. The whole world community acknowledged the contribution that the Belarusian people had made to the victory over Nazi Germany. Official sources also idealize the economic success of the post-war Belarusian SSR. The leaders of the Belarusian SSR, Pirotar Panamarenka, Kiryl Mazurau and Piotr Masherau are regarded as the main heroes of modern Belarusian history. According to Alexander Lukashenka, the collapse of the Soviet Union is the geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century.

For alternative historians the Belarusian SSR was a merely a puppet of the Soviet Union. They argue that the Belarusian SSR was proclaimed twice, both in 1917 and 1919. This formation had no separate monetary system, army or foreign policy. The first territorial formation of the Belarusian SSR consisted of only 6 districts of the Minsk province. It was a lollipop state-formation. Republican borders really did not mean anything in the Soviet Union, because in reality it was a unitary not a federal state. The territory of the Belarusian SSR was changed several times by Moscow. For example, according to the Treaty of Riga on 21 March 1921 between Soviet Russia and Poland, without the participation of the Belarusian SSR, Western Belarus with its 4 million people was joined to Poland. Moreover, there was never any reunion with Western Belarus, which never belonged to the Belarusian SSR. Rather, change occurred with the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland. In 1939, according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Western Belarus was joined to the Soviet Union while Hitler started World War II by occupying Poland. The Soviet “liberation” put Western Belarus in a situation similar to that of the Belarusian SSR with its waves of Stalinist purges. In October 1939 the Soviet authorities moved the cultural and political centre of the Belarusian movement in Eastern Poland Vilna/Vilnius to Lithuania. In August 1945 Moscow joined some Belarusian territory (17 districts of the Belastok region and 3 districts of the Brest region) where the majority of population was Orthodox Belarusians to Poland. The membership of the Belarusian SSR in the United Nations was the idea of Joseph Stalin, who in this way intended to strengthen the representation of the Soviet Union.

According to the alternative historiography, only the period of 1920s witnessed a short Renaissance of Belarusian national thought and culture. Firstly, after the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Belarusian language became the official language on the territory of the BSSR. The political leaders of the BSSR (many of whom were former members of the Belarusian Social Farmers party, the “cesery”) provided a quite independent policy in the cultural and economic sectors and they dreamed about some form of “the Mongol variant” — a buffer independent state between the Soviet Union and free Western world. They used the Danish and Dutch system of farmer’s estates and were against the kolkhoz (the agriculture minister was Dmytry Prshchepau). But even this progress was stopped in 1930 when the regime of Joseph Stalin discouraged nationalism in the Soviet Union, and the Belarusian SSR, like the other republics, was much more closely controlled. The Kremlin started waves of repression against any signs of different ways of thinking.


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Hundreds of Belarusian political, scientific and cultural leaders were liquidated. Hundreds of thousands of farmers were exiled to Soviet concentration camps in the process of the creation of the kolkhoz - collectivisation. Having this in mind, the collapse of the Soviet Union seems to be a natural result of its history.

**National and Cultural Symbols**

Both historical traditions have a separate system of national and cultural symbols. The current national flag of Belarus (since 1995) is the official flag of the BSSR with a slight modification, which aimed to remove the Communist symbols. According to the official interpretation, deep red symbolizes the glorious past of Belarus. That was the color of the victorious standards of the Belarusian regiments that defeated the German crusaders at Grunewald (East Prussia) in 1410, and was the color of the battle flags of the Red Army divisions and Belarusian guerrilla detachments that liberated the country from Nazi invaders and their henchmen in 1944. Green symbolizes the future. The example of Grunewald is a good illustration of the anti-Western rhetoric of the Belarusian government.

*Figure 1. The official flag of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) created in 1951-52 during the period of Stalin's rule*

![Image of the official flag of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR)](image)

The current oppositional red-white-red flag originated from one of the flags of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia. Historically, the white-red-white flag first appeared as the national flag of Belarus in the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918. It was also the flag of the Belarusian political parties and national organisations in Eastern Poland in 1921-1939, and continued to be used by collaborators during the Nazi German occupation and by the Belarusian Diaspora in the West. This flag was the national flag of Belarus in 1991-1995. According to their interpretation, deep red symbolizes the glorious past of Belarusian history. That was the colour of the victorious standards of the regiments of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania led by the Grand Hetman Orthodox Ruthenian magnate Konstantin Astrozski that defeated the Russian troops at Vorskha in 1514. The color picture (1520s) of this battle, which is kept in the National Historical Museum of Poland, is the first historical reference to this flag. According to legend, during this battle a white bandage with a bloodstain stripe across its centre was used as a victorious banner.

*Figure 2. The current national flag of Belarus (since May 1995)*

![Image of the current national flag of Belarus](image)

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20 However, in the short chapter about the Stalinist purges in the latest version of the official school textbook of Belarusian history there is no information about the Kurapaty.

the commonwealth of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia. It shows a horseman with a raised sword advancing on an enemy. During the time of the Russian Empire the Pahonia was the coat of arms of the Vitebsk “Belarusian” province. From the beginning of the 20th century the Pahonia became the symbol of the Belarusian national movement. In March 1918, the government of the Belarusian Democratic Republic proclaimed the Pahonia the national coat of arms of Belarus. During the German occupation of Belarus in World War II, the Pahonia continued to be used by the collaborationist government. It was replaced when Belarus was liberated by Soviet forces, and became the Belarusian SSR. The Pahonia was again adopted as the official national symbol of Belarus when it declared its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991. The Pahonia with some modification is also the national coat of arms of Lithuania.

When Alexander Lukashenko became President a propaganda campaign was started by the state Media against the Pahonia and the national white-red-white flag. These national symbols were associated exclusively with Nazi activity in Belarus during 1941-1944. The opposition ironically asked which kind of other symbols could possibly have been used by the collaborators? There were only Soviet or Nationals symbols in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. For example the Russian Vlasov troops in the Nazi army used Russian national symbols.

Note: The black mourning line symbolizes the sorrow of the divided nation. After the Riga Peace Treaty of 1921 between Russia, Poland and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Eastern Belarus was annexed by Russia. Western Belarus was annexed by Poland.

The main symbol of the opposition is the Pahonia (in English “chase”), which was the same historical coat of arms for both Belarus and Lithuania since it originates from the time when the Belarusians and Lithuanians were unified in

Figure 3. The national flag of Belarus in 1918 and 1991-1995

Figure 4. The flag of the Union of Belarusian youth, which was a collaborationist organization under Nazi control in 1941-1944 based on the national red-white-red flag

Figure 5. The flag of the government of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in exile in 1921-1939

Figure 6. The Pahonia
However, as a result of this propaganda during a referendum on May 14th 1995, 75% of voters answered ‘yes’ to the question “do you accept the new state symbols?” No images of new symbols appeared on the voting ballot. A significant number of voters considered their ‘yes’ vote as providing support for the Pahonia and white-red-white flag, which had been adopted only four years previously. Moreover, the 75% of ‘yes’ votes were equivalent to only 49% of the entire number of Belarusian voters. According to the Belarusian constitution a majority of 50% is required for state symbol change. However, on the day following the vote, without parliament’s ratification and prior to the release of the official results of the referendum, the Pahonia and national white-red-white flag were removed from all state buildings in Minsk. The current national coat of arms of Belarus is a modification of the coat of arms of Soviet Belarus.

Figure 7. The current coat of arms of Belarus

National Anthem

The current national anthem of Belarus was adopted following a decree by Alexander Lukashenka on July 2nd 2002. This has a Belarusian text based on the old Soviet melody of the anthem of the Belarusian SSR. Until 1955 the anthem of the BSSR was the Soviet International. The Belarusian anthem was introduced in 1955 and started with the following words: “We are Belarusians. We are searching for ways to happiness together with our brother Russians.” There was also a great deal of Communist propaganda in this text, such as references to the great name of Lenin etc. The new version removes any mention of cooperation with Russia and all Soviet remarks. The first words are “We are Belarusians. We are peaceful people.” In place of Russia came a new idea about the union of brotherly nations. The words “Long live the union of brotherly nations” are repeated three times. There are also such remarks as “Together with our brothers we bravely defended our native home.” The opposition and national intelligentsia regard either one of two songs as representing the national anthem. The first is the national anthem of the Belarusian Democratic Republic Come, We Shall March in Joint Endeavour, (“My vyjuzhem shchylnymi radami”). The second is Oh God Almighty (“Mabnuty Bozha”) which was written by the American-Belarusian poet Natalla Arsenieva. In April 1995 the parliamentary education and cultural committee
of Belarus recommended this lyric as the national anthem of Belarus. Today Oh God Almighty is a part of the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic service in Belarus and is used at the different opposition meetings.

The Official Language

According to the 1996 Constitution there are two official languages in present-day Belarus, Russian and Belarusian, but the authorities mostly use Russian apart from at cultural events. The situation was the same in the BSSR from 1933 to 1991. The opposition’s language is Belarusian, the official language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (until 1696), the Belarusian Democratic Republic, the Belarusian SSR (until 1933 with Polish, Jewish and Russian) and the only official language of Belarus according to the Constitution of 1994. The situation is the same as regards Belarusian grammar. Officials use “narkomanka,” a system of grammar introduced in 1933 during the Stalin purges against the national intelligentsia, the grammar has a strong Russian influence. This grammar is used by the authorities, state newspapers and in the state system of education. The opposition uses the “tarashkivtsa” or “classical” grammar created by Branslau Taraskevic at the beginning of the 20th century. It was used in the Belarusian Democratic Republic, the Belarusian SSR (until 1933), Eastern Poland (until 1939), during the Nazi occupation in 1941-1944 and by the Belarusian Diaspora in the West. From 1991 this is the grammar used by most of the Belarusian opposition newspapers, non-government journals, and on the non-governmental Internet.

National Heroes

The history of statehood is strongly connected with a tradition of national heroes. The main problem of Soviet Belarusian historiography was its depersonalisation of history. All of the political leaders of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were forgotten, because according to the official conception, Belarusians did not have their own ruling class. The American-Belarusian historian Janka Zaprudnik has called this process “the peasamctification” of the Belarusian nation. He wrote that the Belarusian Catholic nobility of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth created the Belarusian political idea and returned the Belarusian language to the status of a literary language. According to the first census in Russian Empire in 1897 more than 43% of the nobility of “the North-Western land” (modern Belarus, Lithuania, the Białystok region of Poland and the Daugavpils region of Latvia) considered their native tongue as Belarusian. Most of the leaders of the Belarusian national revival (adradzhenie) were Catholic gentry by origin.22 Many of the leaders of the Belarusian national movement during the 19th were forgotten because of their anti-Russian politics. Moreover, the period of the Belarusian Democratic Republic and the history of the national intelligentsia at that time were absolutely closed themes. The same can be said about the history of the Belarusian Diaspora in the West. Even the majority of the Belarusian Communist political and cultural leaders of the Belarusian SSR during the 1920-1930s remained outside history, because most of them were liquidated during the Stalinist purges. In the late 1980s-early 1990s Belarusian historians began to return all of these names to the collective memory.

The current official historiography tries to select the safest persons from this list and to use a pro-authority ideological interpretation of their activity. So, from the Middle Ages and period of early modern history they have chosen to acknowledge only those Orthodox Belarusian nobles and cultural leaders, who according to the official interpretation were opposed to the Catholics and who supported Russian policy. It is also interesting to note that the Protestant Belarusian figures of the 16th – 18th centuries such as Simon Budny, Vasil Capinski, Illa Kapiewicz are also very popular, perhaps due to their anti-Vatican rhetoric which also looks like an anti-Western one. And of course, all of them supported the idea of the unity of the Slavic nations. For example, the

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official sketch of Belarusian history on the President’s website states, “Simon Budny favored the comprehensive cooperation of the Slavic peoples.” But this is nonsense. According to Belarusian historiography, Tadeusz Kościuszko, who was born in Belarus and was the leader of an anti-Russian uprising on the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1794 is a hero, while from the official point of view he is regarded as a traitor and an enemy. In contrast, the Russian general Alexander Suvorov who bloodily suppressed this uprising on the territory of Belarus is a hero for the authorities. Thus, in Belarus the Suvorov museum has existed from the Soviet period until the present day. The same applies to the museum of Felix Dzierzynski, who was from the Polish-Belarusian gentry by birth and who was the first director of the Soviet secret police.

According to the official position, Orthodoxy is the only national Church of Belarus as it represents the most ancient Christian faith on the Belarusian lands. They fail to mention that the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus is a rather new modern Church created in the place of Belarusian minor Orthodox Church (6, 5% of population in the late 18th century) and became the major Church during the time of the Russian Empire especially after the liquidation of the Belarusian Greek-Catholic Church in 1839. According to the President’s website, only the Russian Orthodox Church is carrying out the huge task of the spiritual revival of Belarusian society. There is no similar information about the work of the Catholic and Protestant Churches, which together represent half of the Belarusian population.

All the political leaders of the national movement in the time of the Belarusian Democratic Republic are described by official historians as nationalists and traitors. For example, an article about the famous poet Janka Kupala written by the Russian scholar Alexander Kavko for the national encyclopedia of Belarusian history was censored. The reason for this was that

the information given about the activity of Janka Kupala as a political figure of the Belarusian Democratic Republic and about his anti-Russian position at that time, contradicted the official (Soviet by origin) interpretation of this poet. Another example comes with Larisa Henius, one of the best Belarusian poets. In the 1930s she was a secretary of the government of the BDR in exile in Prague. She was arrested in 1946 by the Soviet secret police in Prague and was held as a prisoner of the GULAG for 25 years. She did not collaborate with the Nazis. However, in 1996 all of her poetry was excluded from school and university courses on Belarusian literature. Official historians describe the old Belarusian Diaspora in the West as the successor of the Nazi collaborators. Thus, present-day Belarus has two very different galleries of national heroes.

Other Competing Symbols

There are also two versions of Independence Day. According to the official one, it is on the 3rd July – as on the 3rd July 1944, Soviet troops liberated Minsk, the capital of the BSSR. The opposition celebrates the 25th March – as on 25th March 1918, the BDR proclaimed its independence in Minsk. Last, but not least, even the spelling of the country’s capital is different – Minsk (official), according to the Polish and Russian tradition or Minsk (opposition), according to the old Belarusian tradition.

Conclusion or Who Will Win the Struggle for the Past?

There are two different and conflicting interpretations of the tradition of statehood as well as two conflicting systems of national and cultural symbols. If we look at the current situation in Belarusian historiography the advantage of the alternative (opposition) school is obvious. The majority of Belarusian historians try to write history from a national perspective. There are several centres of independent historical research. Among them are the Minsk school.


with its main journals the Belarusian Historical Review/ Bielarski historyczny obieg and Spadzista, the Hrodna school, which produces the magazine Historychny almanka and the Mahiliou school which is responsible for the magazine Kraj. All these journals are non-governmental and published with foreign support. There is also a national historical association, which brings together all the opposition historians. But at the same time, the majority of historians are working at either state universities or the Institute of History. A very important centre of Belarusian alternative historiography is the University of Białystok in Poland. There the Polish historians who are mostly Belarusian by origin have created a department of Belarusian history and culture, a Polish-Belarusian historical association as well as publishing the magazine Bielarski historyczny/Bielarski historyczny zbiór. The Belarusian Diaspora in the USA and Canada have founded the Belarusian Institute of Art and Sciences in New York and published several historical works in addition to the magazine Zapisi. They have strong cooperative links with the North American Association for Belarusian Studies.

There is only one official historical magazine supported by state. This is the Belaruski historychny chasopis. Its authors are mostly old historians, but they occupy several important positions at the universities and Institute of History. During Soviet times they were Marxist historians. Thus, they are interested in mostly Soviet history, the history of World War II and the economic history of the 19th-20th centuries. The biggest problem for them is their poor knowledge of Belarusian history and sources before 1917. The first official history of Belarus under Lukashenka rule was published in two volumes in 1998, which was written by a group of 29 historians. Most of them have not participated in conferences and are quite unknown in Belarusian historical circles. This work, especially the first volume (until 1917) got a terrible but nevertheless, fair review in the independent historical magazine the Belarusian Historical Review. The author of the review and editor of this magazine Hienadz Sahanovic called the conception of this book “returning to the North-Western land” which meant to the conception of tourist Russian historiography as well as representing a “war with Belarusian history.” In their turn, the authors of the official edition proclaimed on the presentation of this edition, that their main task was “the derthronement of myths” and “to provide criticism of the non-scientific conception of some Belarusian historians.” The official media called this book “the best historical book of the last ten years and the first one written from a scientific perspective.”

In 2001 an alternative history of Belarus was published with Polish support in both Belarusian and Polish versions. This edition was the outcome of a project of the Institute Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (the Institute of Central and Eastern Europe) of the Catholic University of Lublin. This work was written by two Belarusian historians, Hienadz Sahanovic (volume 1) and Zakhar Shybeka (volume 2). There has been no review of this work in either the state’s historical magazine or in the state media.

On the one hand, it seems as if the alternative historiography is winning. If one visits the bookshops in Minsk, one finds a lot of books representing the non-official perspective. There are four independent historical magazines and only one official one. Independent historians organize 90% of all historical conferences. However, on the other hand, the whole system of historical education is under very strong state control. The authorities have prohibited all historical textbooks published between 1991 and 1995. They are also trying to nurture a new generation of historians who will be loyal to the official conception of statehood. For example, there is even censorship of the titles of

61 Skrúko, Andrej. (Skrūko, Andrejs) 1998. Паўднёвы направы гісторыяў пазьнай падзень. Навіны 21 (October).
potential PhD dissertations. Thus, in my opinion, at present both sides still have the possibility to win this war for Belarusian history.

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