

# The Counter-Narrative of WWII and the Far Right-Identity

by **Andrej Kotljarchuk**

**T**oday, many of the historical narratives upon which Europe has built its post-war identity are under attack. Far-right revisionists are using alternative perspectives to advance alternative values. The aim of this article is to map out identity formation in far-right movements in today's Belarus with the focus on their work with the memory of World War II. The process of identity formation in Belarusian far-right movements is discussed here in terms of discursive tropes of the counter-narrative of World War II. The author analyzes how memory work has changed depending on the political and cultural context in Belarus after 1991. The paper shows that the relationship of the Belarusian far right to historical narratives of World War II is a cornerstone of their collective memory and identity. The article examines the strategies used by the Belarusian far right to gain influence within the population in the context of oppositional protests and the

military conflict in Ukraine. A special focus is on the specifics of the digital memory work.

## Introduction

The official Belarusian World War II pantheon (known in Belarus mainly as the Great Patriotic War) includes only those who fought the Nazis. This reflects the Soviet past and Lukashenka's close ties (much resented by pro-West nationalists) with Russia. They celebrate the Soviet partisans and the Red Army which fought against the Nazis.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, both the Polish anti-Nazi resistance in Western Belarus (prior to 1939 belonging to interwar Poland) and Jewish partisan resistance are suppressed in the official narrative of World War II.<sup>2</sup> Most Belarusians who collaborated militarily with the Nazis were forced into exile after 1945. But they created a counter-narrative of World War II and kept it alive in American, British, German Canadian, and Australian exiles.<sup>3</sup> The fall of the

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Belarusian veteran memorial in South River, New Jersey, erected in 1974. Description (both in Belarusian and English): “Glory to Those who fought for Freedom and Independence of Byelorrussia”.

PHOTO: VITAL ZAJKA

Soviet Union gave them a new audience. In the early 1990s the veterans of pro-Nazi military formations were widely celebrated in Belarus. The veteran diaspora provides these heroes and martyrs, the fighters against Communism for the country’s freedom and independence. It is also credited with preserving “true” pro-Western values and the Belarusian language and culture during the long-term exile. In the 1990s a counter-narrative of World War II created by the veterans in the West was successfully deployed and then developed by their younger sympathizers in Belarus.<sup>4</sup>

**Theoretical Frameworks and Aims of the Study**

One group of Eastern European diasporas that has been especially successful in passing on its symbolic capital during the Cold War is that of the Belarusian pro-Nazi military veterans. This is due, not least, to the Cold War that was

a favorable setting for an active promotion of their myths in the West. It was also due to the concentration of Belarusian pro-Nazi military veterans in the US, the UK, and Western Germany – principal NATO countries. The veterans established professional relations with intelligence services, army and veteran associations of these countries. They also founded legitimate veteran associations and journals and have written memoirs that kept the cult of pro-Nazi soldiers alive. Their narratives, symbols, and ideologies began to be adopted by far-right sympathizers in Belarus after the Cold War. Georges Neumeyer and Laure Mink argue that the symbolic past is as important as the future, not only for central governments but also for different political organizations and associations, which are increasingly forced into “memory games” in Eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Ruth Wodak, Austrian linguist and Professor in Discourse Studies and Rudolf de Cillia, Professor of

Applied Linguistics at the University of Vienna, draw attention to how historical narratives vary in different public spheres; each has its own audience, genre rules, and rhetoric. The method developed by Wodak and Cillia in tracing major discursive tropes of counter-narrative (creation of the myths, half-truths and significant silences) is used in this study.<sup>6</sup>

In many European countries today, ultranationalist movements spread veterans' messages in media and politics. In the Baltic states and Ukraine, the "double genocide theory" was developed, which compares Nazi atrocities with Stalinist crimes against humanity. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Ukrainian scholars and politicians began debating the Holodomor-as-genocide (Soviet state-run mass famine in the early 1930s) alongside the Holocaust and the Nazi crimes against the Slavic population. The "re-discovery" of the Soviet mass famine has played a crucial role in the contemporary political identity of Ukrainians. In 2006, the Rada recognized the Holodomor as a genocide of Soviet regime against the Ukrainian people. According to the law, public denial of the Holodomor is considered illegal, but the punishment for such actions is not specified.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, in 2021 the Russian Duma and President Vladimir Putin prohibited by law the comparing of the actions of Stalin's Soviet Union and the Nazi Germany during World War II.

On the one hand, the official narrative of World War II in Belarus is similar to the one in Russia. On the other hand, today, the counter-narratives of pro-Nazi veterans who fought against the Soviet Union and the Stalinism have gained a new audience, due to the ongoing political crisis and new digital technologies. The oppositional parts of Belarusian society that are currently suffering from massive political repression are looking for a new non-Soviet gallery of national heroes and martyrs.<sup>8</sup>

One of the aims of this article is to shed light on the efforts of the Belarusian far right regarding the memory of World War II that left an enduring legacy. The research questions are: How has the collaborator's symbolic capital, which

was memorialized, codified, and ritualized during the Cold War, been re-imported to Belarus after 1991? How have the narratives created by Waffen-SS veterans in the West been modified by their sympathizers in Belarus? How does the counter-narrative of World War II shape the identity of the Belarusian far right?

Manuel Castells has described how the "networked" society of the Internet allows even small, under-resourced networks a good deal of visibility.<sup>9</sup> What role do digital technologies play for the memory work of the Belarusian far right? How has the counter-narrative of World War II been fitted into the ongoing political context? What supra-national narratives of World War II were developed and how do they affect issues of Belarusian far-right identity? How do the military conflict in Ukrainian Donbas and the mass protests in 2020 in Belarus affect the memory work and identity issues of the far right?

## Historical Background

Like other European countries occupied by the Nazi Germany, Belarus has a dark history of the military collaboration with Nazi Germany, via the auxiliary police, the SIPO/SD and the Waffen-SS. In the early days of the occupation the Nazis were initially reluctant to arm the Belarusians, sending many collaborationist police and military battalions from neighboring Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine to Belarus. In March-June 1944, however, the SS recruited a large Belarusian Home Defense Force (BKA, or *Weißruthenische Heimwehr*), to be used against partisans and civilians who supported the Soviet resistance.<sup>10</sup> When the Red Army retook Minsk on July 3, 1944, the BKA forces were moved to East Prussia and recreated as a Waffen-SS Siegling brigade, used to fight partisans in France. Another military formation was the *Weißruthenische Schutzmannschafts Bataillon der SD 13* (aka Btl.13 Sipo.u.SD). This strong unit with about 1,000 soldiers led by SS-Untersturmführer Kurt Junker, and formed in 1943, was heavily involved in the Holocaust in Belarus.<sup>11</sup> After the liberation of the republic, the battalion was moved to Poland where it

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took part in the suppression of the Warsaw uprising, and then to the Reich.<sup>12</sup> In late 1944, the Siegling brigade was transformed into the 30<sup>th</sup> Waffen-SS division (first formation) and sent into combat on the Western front. Due to its low combat capacity and the desertion of many soldiers, this division was dissolved.<sup>13</sup> However, in January 1945, in a typical last ditch move to encourage allies to keep up the fight against Soviet Union, Himmler allowed the formation of a new, this time national Belarusian Waffen-SS division (*30. Waffen-Grenadierdivision der SS weißruthenische nr. 1.*). The division, led by SS-Obersturmbannführer Hans Siegling, was formed under the auspices of the Belarusian Central Rada (BCR) – a pro-Nazi administration in German exile. The division did not participate in combat and was surrounded by the US army in April 1945.<sup>14</sup> Finally, a special unit, *Luftlandebataillon Dallwitz*, was formed by the Abwehr from Belarusians in 1944. Based in Eastern Prussia, this battalion sent its agents behind the front. By then, however, the war was lost; and the bulk of veterans from different pro-Nazi Belarusian military formations (about 10,000 individuals) were forced into exile. Most of them achieved displaced person status in the West (often giving new names and fake biographical notes about their activity during the war). Some of them were recruited after the war by the CIA.<sup>15</sup>

Initially, the Committee of Byelorussian War Veterans functioned as an umbrella organization for all veterans from Belarus in the West. However, the Belarusian diaspora soon split politically between two “governments” in exile: the BNR (Belarusian Democratic Republic) and the BCR (Belarusian Central Council). Both the BNR and the BCR included mainly former political and military collaborators with Nazi Germany. The division affected the veteran movement. “General” Frantisek Kushal (aka Francis Kuschel), the former Nazi-police lieutenant-colonel and the commander of the BKA, was the leader of the veteran association under the BNR. “General” Dzmitry Kasmovich (aka Dmitry Kosmowicz), the former Nazi officer and police chief in Minsk and Smolensk, and

officer of Dallwitz battalion, was head of the veteran association under the BCR.<sup>16</sup>

The end of the “hot stage” of the Cold War buried veterans’ plans for a military revenge. The CIA Belarusian project AEPRIMER for training of special agents sent to the USSR was terminated in 1959. The veterans turned to the past and began to develop a counter-narrative of World War II, adroitly excluding pro-Nazi sentiment, recruitment to the SS and SD, participation in war crimes (including the Holocaust and the genocide of Roma), and an embarrassing, German-led battle against the Allied troops. The German SS and SD formations acquired new national-flavored names in the veteran press; for example, the 30<sup>th</sup> Waffen-SS division became “the Belarusian Sturm Division”, the 13<sup>th</sup> SD battalion was renamed “the Belarusian Special Battalion” and the 68<sup>th</sup> auxiliary police battalion in Navahrudak led by Barys Rahula (aka Boris Ragula) became the national unit called “the Belarusian Squadron”.<sup>17</sup> To conceal the affiliation to the SS and SD was the deliberate choice of the leaders of the movement.<sup>18</sup> The aim was to avoid the association of the veterans with the Holocaust and other war crimes and to build the myth of the creation of a national army under the Nazis, with the primary aim of defending Belarus. In fact, recent research shows massive participation of, for example, the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities.<sup>19</sup> The soldiers of the 30<sup>th</sup> Waffen-SS division (first formation) participated in bloody anti-partisan actions in France.<sup>20</sup> Soldiers of the division killed 40 civilians in Étoyon near Belfort, on September 27, 1944, in retaliation for the villagers’ support of French partisans. Paradoxically, the soldiers who fought against Allied troops in 1944 became the citizens of these countries after 1945. Only few Belarusian veterans, primarily those who served during the Nazi occupation of Belarus (prior to summer 1944), were suspected by Western justice of war crimes and even fewer were convicted.<sup>21</sup> About twenty former soldiers of the 13<sup>th</sup> SD battalion were sentenced by Soviet (1962 and 1987) and Polish (1957) courts to prison or the death penalty for crimes against humanity.<sup>22</sup>





Banner presented by Belarusian Youth Front at the 2014 oppositional demonstration in Minsk. The banner includes a portrait of Mikhal Vitushka surrounded by images of Ukrainian ultranationalist leaders Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych with the slogan "The heroes never die".

PHOTO: RADIO FREE EUROPE/  
RADIO LIBERTY

In 1962 the opus magnum *Змагарныя дарогі* [Combat Roads] by Kastus Akula (previously Alexander Kachan) was published in Canada, edited by Frantisek Kushal.<sup>23</sup> This volume illustrates the major discursive tropes of the Belarusian counter-narrative of World War II: silence about the Holocaust and other atrocities, and the image of the BKA as a national army that fought against Bolshevism for the freedom of Belarus and all Europe. The veterans actively promoted this counter-narrative in Belarusian-language periodicals and memoirs, detailing heroic battles in which patriots, warriors and martyrs valiantly fought for an independent Belarus against Communism. In 1974 the World Congress of Belarusian veterans was held in Manchester. The veterans decided to start a new magazine, *Зважай* [Attention], and discussed the creation of military archives as well as the publication of memoirs.<sup>24</sup> Cold War policies favored their memory work. At that time, the veteran associations were courted by main-stream conservative political parties, the US and British Army and their veteran associations as well as the international Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations. Meanwhile, Belarusians at home were, like all Soviet citizens, taught to venerate only Red Army soldiers, native partisans, and underground fighters. Collaborators and the Holocaust were, with a few exceptions, forgotten. As Per Anders Rudling points out,

World War II became a foundation for the creation of a modern Belarusian identity. In fact, no historical event has had a greater influence on today's Belarus.<sup>25</sup> The Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War remains a key factor in Lukashenka's historical politics – albeit with a different slant.<sup>26</sup>

### To Pass the Torch. The Fall of the Soviet Union and a New Window of Opportunity

In late 1980s, Belarusian veteran organizations in the West were in deep crisis. The 1986 meeting of Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in Reykjavik symbolized the end of the Cold War. The legal authorities in the US and the UK started investigations against influential members of Belarusian veteran organizations, suspecting them of crimes linked to the Holocaust.<sup>27</sup> The rapid fall of the Soviet Union gave the veterans new opportunities and a new audience. In 1991, the political monopoly of the communist party was replaced in Belarus by an unstable democracy. The exiled veterans soon began to visit independent Belarus and found political and cultural sympathizers there. They set up Chernobyl aid committees and met their brothers-in-arms who had survived the Gulag. In 1993 Joseph Sazyc, head of the BNR government in exile and former Waffen-SS officer, visited Minsk. He met the head of state,

Left: Belarusian military collaborator with the Nazis on the cover of Belarusian-language German police journal *Беларус на Варце*, [Belarusian on Guard], no. 1, 1943. From the author's private collection.



Right: The cover of magazine *Барацьба* [Fight] – organ of the Belarusian Liberation Front with the slogan "Belarus über alles" on the sword. From the author's private collection.



the social-democratic politician Stanislau Shushkevich, took part in the official assembly devoted to the celebration of independence and gave many interviews to state-run television and press. Kastus Akula, the editor-in-chief of *Зважай*, also visited Belarus. His memoirs were reprinted in Belarus and shortlisted as one of the best historical books. He moved the printing of *Зважай* to Minsk. In Belarus, Akula presented himself as a former veteran of the BKA and the British Army, an anti-Communist and great Belarusian patriot. He concealed the fact that in Canada, he was considered to be a veteran of the Western Guard and the Nationalist Party of Canada – two extreme right-wing populist organizations.<sup>28</sup>

As a result of intensive contacts, a large corpus of veteran literature was reprinted and widely distributed in Belarus. Belarusian media and academia celebrated the BKA as a first true national army. After the years of strong Russification in Belarus, the veterans who spoke their native language looked like great patriots who had maintained the Belarusian culture in exile. Their SS past was suppressed. They were described as iconic Belarusians who preserved na-

tive culture and represented true, i.e. pro-Western, national anti-Communist identity. Mikhas Bieliemuk (aka Michael Bielemuk), a US citizen and former officer of the police battalion in Bialystok, acted in the 1990s as a great sponsor of Belarusian Orthodox Church. Educated at the Department of History at Ohio State University, he founded the popular historical journal *Полацк* [Polatsk] in Belarus and became Doctor Honoris Causa of the National Academy of Sciences. His memoir, which glorified the war activity of Bialystok Belarusian police battalion, was printed in Vilnius and distributed in Belarus under the remarkable title *You cannot change your destiny*.<sup>29</sup>

**A** liaksandr Lukashenka became president of Belarus in 1994 in the result of the first democratic elections in the country. In 1995 and 1996 he won two referendums that dramatically increased his power and allowed him to rule the country for the next 25 years. Unlike many neighboring countries, the Lukashenka regime politically marginalizes such ethnic referents of nation such as native language and national history, basing its nation building on the idealized

past of Soviet unity.<sup>30</sup> The regime sponsors only a WWII narrative of a nation united against fascists – Soviet-style, that is, albeit shorn of pro-Communist facets. According to Vitali Silitski, exploiting the mythology of World War II certainly has a practical political significance for Lukashenka. This gives Lukashenka a special position as the last defender in Europe against Fascism (the official term of Nazism in Belarus).<sup>31</sup> This narrative is enshrined in many new memorials and holidays.<sup>32</sup> Belarus under Lukashenka underwent a dynamic process of the memorialization of the sites of the Holocaust and the Nazi genocide of Roma. However, until 2020 the military collaboration of many Belarusians with the Nazis was suppressed, since the official narrative of World War II is based on the Soviet-rooted narrative of the glorious struggle of the *entire* Belarusian nation against Nazi Germany.<sup>33</sup>

**T**he contemporary history of the far-right movement in Belarus is under-studied.<sup>34</sup> The exact number of far-right activists is unknown since none of the organizations were recognized by the state. All calculations are tentative; however, the number of skinheads in Minsk alone is estimated (2004) at about 300 supporters.<sup>35</sup> The first far-right organizations were established in Belarus in the mid-1990s. Among them were the paramilitary organizations *Белы Легиён* [White Legion] and *Краі* [Land], the cultural Kryuskaja Draugija Druvingau and Gega-Ruch, as well as sport- and skinhead-oriented *Белая Воля* [White Will-power] and Support88. Their memory work focused on the counter-narrative of World War II representing “true” heroes through the journals and newspapers. In 2004 a new journal of military history magazine *Беларускі Рэзыстанс* [Belarusian Resistance] edited by Siarhej Iorsh was established in Minsk. Pretending to be an academic publication, this periodical popularized the narratives of diaspora and developed the myth of massive anti-Soviet national military resistance after 1945, coordinated by the BNR and BCR governments in exile. Siarhej Iorsh was also editor-in-chief of the newspaper of non-Soviet military veterans *Голас*

*Камбатанта* [Voice of Combatant] as well as pocket calendar series.<sup>36</sup> The myth on post-war anti-Soviet military resistance, created by the magazine *Belarusian Resistance*, was adopted by the ultra-nationalistic newspaper *Голас Краі* [Voice of Land].<sup>37</sup>

**I**n 2008, the KGB arrested the leaders of the White Legion for attempting to blow up the Victory Monument in Minsk – the principal memorial of the Great Patriotic War in the country. The criminal prosecution was terminated; however, it led to the destruction of this organization. One of the last famous public actions of the Belarusian far right was in 2010 when during the football match between Dynamo Minsk and Vitebsk, the fans unfurled a banner at the stadium with a portrait of Rudolf Hess and the slogan “For us, your life is an iconic example of loyalty”.<sup>38</sup> The fan-club of Dynamo Minsk is famous in Belarus for its far-right connection. By 2016 the KGB had destroyed practically all far-right organizations in Belarus, which were never recognized legally by the state. The leaders of the movement were sent to prison or had to leave the country or went underground. All periodicals that popularized the counter-narrative of World War II were dissolved. Since then, the revisionist narrative has been driven underground. The situation became even worse for far-right sympathizers when in 2020 the state introduced criminal prosecution for the rehabilitation and glorification of Nazism and collaboration with the Nazis.<sup>39</sup>

## The Digital Era as a New Window of Opportunity

The destruction of far-right organizations included, inter alia, the inability to continue physical activity on streets. However, this challenge was soon solved. In recent years, the Internet has come to every Belarusian household. This created a new window of opportunity for far-right activists both in exile and underground. Manuel Castells has described how the networked society of the Internet allows even small, under-resourced networks a good deal of visibility. Castells’ vision of a “space of flows” – the hubs in which networks crisscross – is

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useful in studying the counter-memory work on both revisionist narratives and practices, providing the storylines, heroes and rituals that can be deployed in a wide national context. Using social networks and digital platforms, the activists popularize an alternative gallery of national heroes and martyrs. They also redefine suspected Nazi war criminals as martyrs for the fatherland and victims of Stalinist terror. Today, digital work is the only possibility for the Belarusian far right to mobilize their movement and to recruit new members. The collaborationist history is widely propagated via social networks, on YouTube films, and in small private forums and groups associations, all outside the KGB's control. The activists also participate in various international digital forums. How have the new forms of memory work and ongoing political crisis reshaped the identity of Belarusian far-right?

### **An Alternative Gallery of National Heroes and Martyrs**

On February 16, 2018 (a few days before the BKA Memorial Day), Bulbash United, one of the largest alcoholic beverage companies in Belarus, posted an article on its official homepage on Facebook. The text included a portrait of General Kushal in front of the map of Belarus. The photo was accompanied by a text glorifying his life, which contained the following words: “Throughout his life, he strove to create a powerful national army as the main guarantee of the independence of Belarus. Today we remember the name of Frantisek Kushal. He is a well-known political figure, the founder of the BKA, a publicist and author of memoirs [...] He went through two wars and remained a man of worth.”<sup>40</sup> The publication caused a storm of positive and negative comments and was widely disseminated via digital forums. Only after the reaction of Russian mass media did the article disappear from Bulbash United's homepage. The Kushal case is an example of how the counter-narrative of World War II became popular outside far-right groups. His memoirs under the remarkable title *Attempts to organize a Belarusian army during the German occupation of Belarus* were printed in Belarus in the 1990s and became well-known.<sup>41</sup> The memoirs,

which are considered by many Belarusian and Western historians as a reliable source;<sup>42</sup> are in fact a very well-constructed counter-narrative of World War II based on falsifications, silence and half-truths. Upon arriving in the US, Mr. Kushal was recruited as a special agent by the CIA (under the cryptonym CAMBISTA-10) and as an FBI informant.<sup>43</sup> This position gave him a great deal of security. The CIA knew about the Nazi past but he was still known in the US as “two-star general Francis Kuschel”.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Kushal ended the war as a Nazi police lieutenant-colonel and the freshly-achieved rank of general. He started his military service in 1915 as a professional officer of the Russian Imperial Army, then took an active part in the creation of Belarusian military forces in 1918–1920. During 1921–1939 he was a captain in the Polish army. Captured by the Red Army in 1939, he survived the Katyn massacre due to being recruited by the NKVD as an informant.<sup>45</sup> During his life in exile, the Soviet authorities accused Kushal of war crimes as the man “who directed the execution of 40,000 Jews”.<sup>46</sup> As the chief inspector of auxiliary police and head of the police school in Minsk he did not participate directly in the atrocities. His contribution to the Nazi extermination war was the training of the collaborationist officer corps, which was involved in crimes against humanity. The 13<sup>th</sup> SD battalion was Kushal's personal project. Despite his memoirs, he never led the 30<sup>th</sup> Waffen-SS division and it was not he who “saved” this division via US captivity. The archival records tell us a classic story of a temporizer who changed service and cap insignia many times and survived under any regime. Kushal died in 1968, celebrated by Belarusian and Ukrainian diasporas in the US as a great commander of the 50,000 men strong National Army.<sup>47</sup> In fact, the short-lived BKA was an auxiliary police formation under the SS with about 28,000 policemen. Kushal acted as a staff coordinator of this formation, since every BKA unit was under the command of the local German police-chief. The myth of Kushal as a founder of the national army was successfully reimported to Belarus and used by far-right activists as a confirmation of the correctness of their narrative of World War II.





Banner of Belarusian detachment *Пагоня* [Chase] within the Ukrainian Azov Battalion. Ukraine. 2015.  
PHOTO: RADIO FREE EUROPE/  
RADIO LIBERTY



Vitushka surrounded by the portraits of Ukrainian ultranationalist leaders Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych and the slogan: “Heroes never die”. The banner provoked a strong reaction from Alexander Surikov, Russia’s Ambassador in Belarus. The Young Front replied to Surikov that only Belarusian nation may decide who their heroes were and whose portraits should be on the banners. Andrus Tsianiuta, the deputy head of the Young Front explained for media why they placed these figures with slogan “Heroes do not die”: “We participate in the demonstration in order to show our support to Ukraine, therefore we placed Belarusian and Ukrainian heroes together. Belarusian heroes Bulak-Balakhovich, Mikhail Vitushka and Vincent Hadleuski appeared together with Ukrainian heroes Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevich. By this we wanted to show that Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples have been very close in past, and our national movements have been developed in similar way”. The heroes on the Young Front banner are important for the history of Belarus and Ukraine, but they are not recognized today by the official authorities (in Belarus)<sup>54</sup>. Paradoxically, like in Ukraine, many collaborators and ethnic cleansers who fought for Hitler and were also involved in mass-violence actions against major Slavic population recognised today by many people as “martyrs for the fatherland”.

The official gallery of heroes and martyrs of World War II is losing its legitimacy for the anti-Lukashenka democratic opposition, due to their popularity in the official historical narrative. The ongoing political crisis helps the far-right to promote the cult of anti-Soviet and pro-Nazi heroes, which has reached broad segments of society.<sup>55</sup> This myth also shapes their own identity as the only true successors of heroic pro-European martyrs for the fatherland. At the same time, after the brutal suppression of the peaceful protests in August 2020 and the subsequent political reaction, the anti-Lukashenka democratic opposition today is in search of heroes from the past who fought against dictators.

The 2020 Protests, the Belarusian Far Right and the Donbas Connection

The anti-globalist, anti-EU and anti-liberal rhetoric of Lukashenka gives him a great support within the European far-right movement. For example, a delegation of the British and Italian far right, led by Nick Griffin and Roberto Fiore, visited Minsk in 2016 and had a meeting with ideologists close to the presidential administration.<sup>56</sup> The popularity of Lukashenka within the international far right have led to a split within the Belarusian far right. Some intellectuals have changed sides and became pro-Lukashenka propagandists.

One of them is Aliaksei Dzermant, a sociologist from the National Academy of Belarus and the founder of *Kryuskaja Draugija Druvingau*. This organization identifies itself as a part of the extreme right-wing network, *Allgermanische Heidnische Front*. Dzermant was also a founder of Gega Ruch, the organization presented as the successor of the Belarusian National-Socialist Party (founded in Poland in 1933) and its leaders Fabian Akinczyc and Uladzislau Kazlouski, who led the anti-Semitic propaganda apparatus in Minsk during the Nazi occupation. Another pro-Lukashenka ideologist is Aliaksandr Shpakouski, a political scientist and former member of *Правы Альянс* [Right Alliance]. The change of side by some influential far-right intellectuals was not supported en masse by ordinary members since it was considered to damage their identity and threaten major historical narratives. Today, Dzermant is the main advocate of Eurasianism in Belarus.

**T**he role of the far right in the 2020 protests against the unfair elections is unknown. Unlike the Maidan revolution in Kyiv, the symbols of the far-right movement were not visible during the street protests in Minsk. However, Roman Pratasevich, a journalist and key newsmaker of the mass protests, previously served as the propagandist in the Azov Battalion, which has been described by researchers as a far-right militia with connections to neo-Nazism.<sup>57</sup> Pratasevich was arrested in May 2021 by the KGB after his flight was forced to land in Minsk. Another far-right activist, Vital Shyshou, who was found dead in Kyiv in 2020, led the organization Belarusian House in Ukraine. Since 2014, about one hundred far-right activists from Belarus went to Ukraine to participate in the military conflict in Donbas. Many of them joined Azov and Pravy Sector units.<sup>58</sup> In Ukraine, the Belarusian military volunteers created two associations: Atrad Pahonia and Tactical Group Belarus. They developed and reshaped the existing counter-narrative that has been crystallized into its internal and external forms. The external counter-narrative is based on the myth of BKA and the martyrs of post-war anti-Soviet Belarusian resistance.

The anti-Polish discourse, which was natural for post-war veterans, is suppressed, since Poland is described as a country on the “right side” in the struggle against the communism and liberalism. Another reason for this was the strong anti-Polish rhetoric in Lukashenka’s politics of memory. The silence has also been applied to prominent Belarusian veterans in the West who fought against the Nazis in the Anders Army.<sup>59</sup> Like SS-veterans in the Cold War West, Belarusian far-right activists use the narratives of World War II in order to claim special status as exclusive true patriots. The war in Ukraine is presented as a war for Belarus too. The supra-national perspective is also important. The military conflict in Donbas is described as the war against the non-European “Eastern Empire”. The volunteers claim that they fight for all of Europe, defending a pan-national future confirmed by NATO and the fall of the Berlin wall, and saving Western civilization from Russia.<sup>60</sup>

The internal historical narrative of Belarusian military volunteers in Donbas is based on neo-Nazi values. The SS-runes and insignia of the 30<sup>th</sup> Waffen-SS division are on helmets of many volunteers.<sup>61</sup> In 2016, police in the Vitebsk region arrested Stanislau Hancharou, one of the Belarusian volunteers in Ukraine, a soldier of the Azov Battalion. He was known in Donbas under his nickname Terror-Machine. The media published photos of his body covered by tattoos presenting an illustrated history of Waffen-SS and Nazi atrocities. The symbols of the 30<sup>th</sup> Waffen-SS division and Sonderkommando Dirlewanger are adjacent to the image of SS soldiers, as well as a panorama of a death camp with a guard in front shooting a prisoner in the head. Terror-Machine had a personal page in the social network V Kontakte, in which he promoted the ideas of neo-Nazism and White Power.<sup>62</sup>

**I**n many countries, far-right extremists are openly proud of their countries’ contingents in the Waffen-SS and neo-Nazi ideology.<sup>63</sup> Today’s Belarus is an exception. Very few far-right activists (e.g. Dzmitry Rubasheuski, a Belarusian volunteer in the Pravy Sector Bat-

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The popularity of Lukashenka within the international far right have led to a split within the Belarusian far right.

”  
The romantic  
image of  
pro-Nazi  
veterans  
became more  
and more  
popular in  
Belarus.

talion) admit openly the commitment to ideas of National Socialism.<sup>64</sup> Instead, they prefer to speak in public about “controlled democracy” and present themselves as “moderate right” and “non-extremists”.<sup>65</sup> In my opinion, the reasons for such careful political statements are the introduction of anti-Nazi legislation in Belarus and the threat of political repression.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

The pro-Nazi military veterans in the West have been very successful in passing on their symbolic capital to the contemporary Belarusian far right. Their networks benefit today from free digital networks and media, using what Manuel Castells terms “transnational discursive public spaces” to gain visibility despite their small size and limited resources.<sup>67</sup> They successfully developed counter-narratives of World War II and adapted them to the ongoing political situation. They succeeded in winning the public legacy and building social capital, through the construction of a glorious past for the fighters for the fatherland.

This also shaped their own identity that could be defined in terms of “new right” as a historical and cultural one. They realized the need of pro-European segments of society for a new gallery of anti-Soviet heroes and martyrs. The Ukrainian conflict in Donbas and the ongoing political crisis in Belarus gave them a new audience, but also reformed their identity which is based today on the connection between past and present. According to the constructed narrative, their predecessors had fought solely to save the Belarusian people from communism and Russian supremacy, as they do today. The pan-European perspective gains them support within the pro-EU circles of the society, which are against union with Russia. This also shapes the identity of the far right as members of a strong historical pan-European far-right project, just like in times of the supra-national Waffen-SS and the Nazi New Europe project.

**T**he clear political distinction between the vision of the past among the democratic opposition and Lukashenka’s regime

helps the far-right activists to strengthen their social capital and secure their future political legitimacy. This contradiction increased after the 2020 protests when the government started a massive propaganda campaign in which the peaceful democratic protesters were presented as the heirs of the military collaborators with the Nazis.<sup>68</sup> However, despite their lack of resources, the far-right activists have an effective counter-weapon, the Internet, through which they attack the official narratives and distribute their own version of the past. Despite the existence of critical international and national academic research on Belarusian military collaboration with the Nazis, the romantic image of pro-Nazi veterans became more and more popular in Belarus. The revisionist history presented by the Belarusian far right is selective, manipulative, and toxic for the message they spread. The Holocaust and other Nazi crimes are not mentioned. Unfortunately, the work of professional historians has its limits; very few historians have published popular texts, and even fewer use the Internet to popularize the results of academic research. At the same time, far-right activists are very successful in their use of digital space in order to promote the counter-narratives of World War II in a fairly simple form. The narrative of a “glorious past” has a very practical meaning for the extreme right: It shapes their identity and legitimizes their movement within Belarusian civil society. We can conclude that the counter-narrative of World War II is ready for a post-Lukashenka Belarus. ●

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