

**‘LONG-SUFFERING LANDS’
BETWEEN POLAND AND BELARUS.
POLITICS OF STATE HISTORY IN BELARUS
ABOUT SEPTEMBER 17TH, 1939, WORLD WAR II,
AND BUILDING THE NATION**

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Received: November 16th, 2023

Accepted for publication: July 12th, 2024

Abstract: The present text aims to address the phenomenon of the institutionalization of historical memory in Belarus, a country where Aliaksandar Lukashenka has been president since 1994. It also aims to answer questions related to the possibility of a synchronization of memory related to the moment of September 17th, 1939, perceived contradictorily in Belarus and Poland. Furthermore, we would also like to cover some of the objectives of the national identity construction that the Minsk regime has ideologically built during the last three decades. Instrumentalized by political and ideological discourse, it is the institutionalized memory of the state that sustains the long-term survival of the Minsk regime. Belarus has experienced, since the mid-1990s, a return to Soviet interpretations of historical events, being an extreme case of rehabilitation and glorification of the communist legacy. Especially the so-called Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) has become a center point of Belarusian memory and identity. On June 7th, 2021, the President of the Republic of Belarus signed Decree No. 206, establishing the National Unity Day on September 17th. The decree mentions that September 17th, 1939 symbolizes the restoration of historical justice and the reunification of the Belarusian nation, forcibly divided through Poland’s coercion by the Riga Peace Treaty of 1921. On September 17th, 1939, the USSR invaded Poland; previously, Nazi Germany had started its hostilities against the country on September 1st, 1939. The Red Army occupied the Eastern territories of Poland, i.e., Western Ukraine and Western Belarus. Whereas Moscow and the Western Belarus communists labeled this as a “liberation” and a “reunification” of Belarus within the borders of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, for Poland this day signifies an “aggression” and the “annexation” of the Eastern regions of its national territory. The power of attraction of the “Russian world”, instituted by Kremlin, manifests in Belarus not only by promoting soothing common traditional values, which refer to the Russian and Belarusian uniqueness, but also, at the same time, by denying the ties and space of common memory between Belarus and Poland. The idea that the Soviet aggression of September 17th, 1939, a fulfillment of the secret Additional Protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, is a turning point and a founding moment of the Belarusian nation

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(even though it involved the dissolution of Polish statehood) is a relevant aspect of the political and ideological use of memory by Aliaksandar Lukašenka's regime.

Keywords: politics of memory, September 17th, 1939, Belarus, Poland, liberation, occupation

Rezumat: Textul de față își propune să abordeze fenomenul instituționalizării memoriei istorice în Belarus, o țară în care Aliaksandar Lukašenka este președinte din 1994. De asemenea, își propune să răspundă la întrebările legate de posibilitatea unei sincronizări a memoriei legate de momentul 17 septembrie 1939, perceput atât de contradictoriu în Belarus și în Polonia. Totodată, am vrea să desfășurăm și câteva dintre obiectivele construcției identitare naționale pe care regimul de la Minsk le-a construit ideologic în ultimele trei decenii. Instrumentalizată de discursul politic și ideologic, memoria instituționalizată de stat este cea care susține supraviețuirea longevivă a regimului de la Minsk. Belarus a cunoscut, de la mijlocul anilor 1990, o revenire la interpretările sovietice asupra evenimentelor istorice, fiind un caz extrem de reabilitare și glorificare a moștenirii comuniste. În special așa-numitul Mare Război Patriotic (1941-1945) a devenit un edificiu al memoriei și identității belaruse. La 7 iunie 2021, președintele Republicii Belarus a semnat Decretul nr. 206, prin care se instituie la 17 septembrie, în fiecare an, Ziua Unității Naționale. Decretul menționează că 17 septembrie 1939 simbolizează restaurarea unei justiții istorice și reunificarea națiunii belaruse, divizată forțat prin coerciția Poloniei în urma Tratatului de pace de la Riga din 1921. La 17 septembrie 1939, URSS a invadat Polonia, după ce anterior, la 1 septembrie 1939, Germania nazistă declanșase ostilitățile împotriva acestei țări. Armata Roșie a ocupat teritoriile răsăritene ale Poloniei, adică Ucraina de vest și Bielorusia de vest. Dacă Moscova și comuniștii din Bielorusia de vest au desemnat-o drept o „eliberare” și o „reunire” a Belarusului între frontierele Republicii Socialiste Sovietice Bielorusie, pentru Polonia, această zi semnifică o „agresiune” și „anexarea” regiunilor răsăritene ale teritoriului național. Puterea de atracție a „lumii ruse” instituită de Kremlin se manifestă în Belarus nu doar prin promovarea unor valori tradiționale comune edulcorate, care se referă la unicitățile ruse și belaruse, dar, în același timp, prin negarea legăturilor și spațiului memoriei comune dintre Belarus și Polonia. Ideea că agresiunea sovietică din 17 septembrie 1939, împlinire a Protocolului adițional secret al Pactului Ribbentrop-Molotov, este un moment de cotitură, fondator, al națiunii belaruse (deși a implicat dizolvarea statalității polone) este un aspect relevant al utilizării politice și ideologice a memoriei de către regimul lui Aliaksandar Lukašenka.

Cuvinte cheie: politica memoriei, 17 septembrie 1939, Belarus, Polonia, eliberare națională, ocupație

I. Introduction

In May 2021, the diplomatic relations between Canada and Belarus were severed and the world was puzzled to learn that the institution of the *Rada* (Parliament) of the Belarusian People’s Republic and its government were in exile in Ottawa. We are talking about the oldest country leadership in exile (from 1918), still active in the world, wrote the Toronto-based *National Post* newspaper, on May 26th, 2021¹. Obviously, the historical memory of Belarus is so rudimentary that few people could have indicated such a situation. The present text aims to address the phenomenon of the institutionalization of the historical memory in Belarus, a country where Alyiaxsandar Lukashenka has been president since 1994. It also aims to answer questions related to the possibility of a synchronization of memory related to the moment of September 17th, 1939, perceived contradictorily in Belarus and in Poland.

On June 7th, 2021, the President of the Republic of Belarus signed Decree No. 206, establishing the National Unity Day on September 17th. The legislative text completes Decree No. 157 of March 26th, 1998, which refers to officially established national holidays, anniversaries and historical commemorations. The decree states that “September 17th, 1939 symbolizes the restoration of historical justice and reunification of the Belarusian nation that was forcibly divided in 1921 in line with the provisions of the Treaty of Riga. It is a special date in the history of the Belarusian nation. The establishment of the Day of People’s Unity on September 17th highlights the continuity of generations, the stability, and self-sufficiency of the Belarusian nation and statehood”².

Poland, after initially being the victim of Nazi Germany’s hostilities on September 1st, 1939, was invaded by the USSR on September 17th, 1939. The

¹ Tristin Hopper, “The world’s oldest government-in-exile is in Ottawa”, *National Post*, Toronto, 26.05.2021, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/the-worlds-oldest-government-in-exile-is-in-ottawa>.

² President of the Republic of Belarus, “On amending the Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus (amendments to Decree no. 157 of 26 March 1998). Decree no. 206 of 7 June 2021”, Minsk, 07.06.2021, <https://president.gov.by/en/documents/ukaz-no-206-ot-7-iyunya-2021-g-1623314816>; Daniel Tilles, “Belarus declares national holiday marking Soviet invasion of Poland”, *Notes from Poland*, 07.06.2021, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/06/07/belarus-declares-national-holiday-marking-soviet-invasion-of-poland/>.

Red Army occupied the eastern territories of Poland – Western Ukraine and Western Belarus, recognized internationally as belonging to the Warsaw administration in accordance with the terms of the Riga Peace Treaty of 1921, which ended the Soviet-Polish war. Whereas Moscow and the communists of Western Belarus labeled this act a “liberation” and a “reunification” of Belarus within the borders of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, for Poland this day signifies an “aggression” and the “annexation” of the eastern regions of its national territory. On the night of September 17th to 18th, 1939, the president of the Republic of Poland, the government, and the army leaders crossed the border into Romania, seeking refuge³, and on September 28th, 1939, after the border treaty between the USSR and Nazi Germany was signed, Poland officially disappeared as a state.

In terms of the contents of the present analysis, the article also focuses on the objectives of national identity construction which the Minsk regime has ideologically built during the last three decades. By instrumentalizing a political and ideological discourse, the institutionalized state memory is what sustains the long-term survival of the Minsk regime. The hierarchy of its heroes, established by the political power, is directly related to whether or not they are of use to the regime’s political and ideological strategies and objectives. The valorization of the places of memory, especially public monuments, is closely overseen by the regime, underscoring the effective use of power in disseminating the official discourse on history, nation, and heroes. The historical memory is an ideological, political, national, and social foundation of the regime led by Alyiaksandar Lukashenka, and its institutional creation, by the political power, is performed with great care.

Belarus experienced, since the mid-1990s, a return to Soviet interpretations of historical events, being an extreme case in terms of the rehabilitation and glorification of the communist legacy. Especially the so-called Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) has become a reference point of Belarusian memory and identity. Kastus Kalinoŭski (1838-1864) went from being a national hero against the tsarist regime in Russia, in the early 1990s, to a collaborator employed by Poland, at present. The regime’s reasons are diverse. In a March

³ On the 100,000 Polish refugees in Romania, 1939-1945, see ***, *Polscy uchodźcy w Rumunii, 1939-1947. Dokumenty z Narodowych Archiwów Rumunii*, 2 volumes, introduction by Florin Anghel (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2013), 1576 p.; Florin Anghel, „Dictatura memoriei. Refugiați poloni în România (1939- 1945)”, *Revista Istorică* 5-6 (2010): 409-431; and Florin Anghel, „Topografia memoriei exilului polon. Babadag, 1939-1940”, *Studii și materiale de istorie contemporană XVII* (2018): 191-206.

2019 interview, Ihar Marzaliuk, a Deputy of the House of Representatives, stated that Kalinoŭski – a Uniate Church believer – cannot be considered a national hero, because he had a bestial hatred towards Orthodoxy⁴. His reburial, in 2019, represented a “manifestation of the spirit of the Polish-Lithuanian Union”, according to the opinion of two dignitaries, Anna Fotyga, former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Poland, and Rasa Juknevičienė, former Minister of Defense in Lithuania⁵. In Ukraine, after the war launched by Russia on February 24th, 2022, a battalion was established, later turned into a regiment, made up of Belarusian volunteers⁶, that bears Kalinoŭski’s name, and which, notably, fights against Kremlin’s aggression.

Another relevant example is that of Vasil Bykaŭ, whose literature has disappeared from the public space since 1996. Bykaŭ, the most famous Belarusian writer (1924-2003), has been personally banned by President Lukashenka⁷. After 1994, Bykaŭ had strongly criticized all the efforts made by the head of state to cancel the incipient democracy in Minsk and to return to Soviet totalitarianism. He called the memory policy promoted by the Minsk regime an “anti-memory” (*antypamiats*), a phenomenon which always capitulates in the face of propagandistic stereotypes⁸.

Certain historical figures are treated with caution and nuances, as is the case of Tadeusz Kościuszko, whose monument was recently erected (2018, near the Kosava Castle, in the Brest region). Kościuszko led the 1794 uprising against the rule of the Russian Empire on the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian

⁴ Daria Cusitcaia and Ilaria Zaggia, “Collective Memory and Identity Issues in Post-Soviet Belarus: Soft Belarusisation and the Kastus’ Kalinoŭski Myth”, *eSamizdat. Rivista di culture dei paesi slavi/Journal of Slavic Cultures* XIV (2019): 159.

⁵ Rasa Juknevičienė and Anna Fotyga, “It’s still the same Russia”, *LRT.lt*, Vilnius, 09.05.2022, <https://lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1690383/it-s-still-the-same-russia-opinion>.

⁶ Patrice Senécal, “Aux côtés de l’Ukraine, la dissidence biélorusse prend les armes”, *Le Devoir*, Montreal, 05.08.2022, <https://ledevoir.com/monde/741912/guerre-en-ukraine-aux-cotes-de-l-ukraine-la-dissidence-bielorusse-prend-les-armes>. Also: François-Guillaume Lorrain, “Biélorussie: l’énigme de bataillon Kalinowski”, *Le Point*, 31.03.2022, https://lepoint.fr/monde/bielorusse-l-enigme-du-bataillon-kalinowski-31-03-2022-2470353_24.php; and Iwan Marczuk, “Białoruscy żołnierze walczący dla Ukrainy schwytani lub zabici w Lisiczansku”, *Rzeczpospolita* (Warszawa), 06.07.2022, <https://rp.pl/konflikty-zbrojne/art36654141-bialoruscy-zolnierze-walczacy-dla-ukrainy-schwytani-lub-zabici-w-lisiczansk>.

⁷ Zina Gimpelevich, *Vasil Bykaŭ: His Life and Works* (Montreal & Kingston, London, and Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 8.

⁸ Simon Lewis, “The ‘Partisan Republic’: Colonial Myths and Memory Wars in Belarus”, in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed. Julie Fedor et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 373.

Commonwealth after its second partition in 1793⁹ and is a multinational hero, with his birthplace being in Belarus¹⁰. The winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (2015), Svetlana Alexievich, was the target of a campaign personally orchestrated by President Lukashenka, who branded her a traitor and an enemy of the people¹¹. All the while, Alexievich accused Lukashenka for having turned the state into a “detention camp”¹².

The use of history has varied over the three decades or so since Lukashenka came to power in 1994. During the first decade of his rule, the Belarusian leader emphasized the unity of the three East Slavic peoples, presenting himself as a champion of restoring a union state with Russia. However, from the beginning of the 2000s, the emphasis has increasingly been placed on the advancement of Belarusian independence, protection of its

⁹ Euroradio, “First full-figure Tadeusz Kosciuszko monument unveiled in Belarus”, Minsk, 12.05.2018, <https://euroradio.fm/en/tadeusz-kosciuszko-monument-unveiled-birthplace-belarus>. There was no single full-figure monument to Kosciuszko in Belarus, except for the busts on the premises of the U.S. Embassy in Minsk and in the village of Malyja Sechnovicy. A Memorial Museum-Estate of Tadeusz Kosciuszko is located a few kilometers away from the center of Kosovo, near the majestic palace of Puslovskys’. The house was burnt down in 1941-1944 and rebuilt just in 2003-2004 (Stanislav Korshunov, “Museum Estate of Tadeusz Kosciuszko”, *The Minsk Herald*, 24.04.2014, <https://www.minskherald.com/2014/10/museum-estate-of-tadeusz-kosciuszko/>).

¹⁰ Ivan Posokhin, “Soft Belarusization: (Re)building of Identity or ‘Border Reinforcement’”, *Colloquia Humanistica. Hierarchies and Boundaries. Structuring the Social in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean* 8 (2019): 70. “Kosciuszko considered himself a citizen of Grand Duchy of Lithuania rather than the Kingdom of Poland”, Juozas Skirius, a historian at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas noted. “In his letters, he mentions several times that he is Lithuanian. Of course, being Lithuanian meant different things at the time, but it is an important fact”, Skirius claims. (Julius Palaima, “Tadeusz Kościuszko, a Lithuanian who changed the course of U.S. history”, *LRT.lt*, Vilnius, 13.02.2021, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1340266/tadeusz-kosciuszko-a-lithuanian-who-changed-the-course-of-us-history>; see also: Andrzej Chwalba and Krzysztof Zamorski, eds., *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: History, Memory, Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

¹¹ Alesia Rudnik, “Denazification of Ukraine. What can we learn from Belarus?”, *Belarus Digest*, 04.04.2022, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/denazification-of-ukraine-what-can-we-learn-from-belarus/>.

¹² Tobias Rapp, Volker Weidermann, “I’m Horrified By What Is Happening in Belarus’. Interview with Belarusian Nobel Laureate Svetlana Aleksievich”, *Der Spiegel*, 20.11.2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/svetlana-alexievich-on-the-protests-against-alexander-lukashenko-in-belarus-a-5ef54f55-1816-4933-9afc-b6208645dbc9>. In 2015, Masha Gessen wrote that Russian media had also attacked violently Aleksievich. In “Izvestia”, Zakhar Prilepin, one of Russia’s best-known writers, said Aleksievich was “not a writer”, and that she had been chosen for the Nobel Prize only because of her opposition to the Kremlin (Masha Gessen, “The Memory Keeper. The oral histories of Belarus’s new Nobel laureate”, *The New Yorker*, 29.10.2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/26/the-memory-keeper>).

borders, and the consolidation of Belarusian statehood¹³. The motivations of this communist ideological extension relate to the peculiarities of historical and national development, namely the lack of Belarusian statehood until the 20th century, but also to the modest development of the national movement, during the periods of the Russian/Soviet imperial collapses (1917-1918 and 1991). Officially, the institutionalized memory in Belarus, which emerged after Aliyaksandar Lukashenka took over the leadership of the state, established the Soviet ideological instruments as the foundations of the Belarusian historical and institutional tradition.

II. The Institutionalization of Historical Memory in Belarus

Lavinia Stan states that, after the collapse of the communist regimes in Europe in 1989 and the disappearance of the USSR in 1991, during the political transition stage, only five states had truth commissions, intended to bring the totalitarian memory into debate: Germany, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. None of these commissions, added Lavinia Stan, became widely known in their respective countries, none was credited with bringing all the benefits of truth, justice, reconciliation, and education to their societies, and none was regarded as a role-model for neighboring countries¹⁴. In Belarus, after 1991, there was obviously no debate on the USSR membership or on the communist regime¹⁵.

The fundamental direction of the politics of history in Belarus after 1994 has been to maintain and cultivate the memory of the Great Patriotic War and of the Soviet period¹⁶. The takeover of the Soviet memory also implied the reuse in the public space of emblematic figures of the USSR, including institutions of

¹³ Per Anders Rudling, “‘Unhappy Is the Person Who Has No Motherland’: National Ideology and History Writing in Lukashenko’s Belarus”, in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*, ed. Julie Fedor et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 71.

¹⁴ Lavinia Stan, “Truth Commissions in Post-Communism: The Overlooked Solution?”, *The Open Political Science Journal* 2 (2009): 2.

¹⁵ Nelly Bekus, “Historical Reckoning in Belarus”, in *Transitional Justice and the Former Soviet Union: Reviewing the Past, Looking toward the Future*, ed. Cynthia M. Horne and Lavinia Stan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 109-132.

¹⁶ Aliaksandar Laneuski, “The Militia and the Special Services in the Contemporary Politics of History of Belarus”, *Institute of National Remembrance Review* 1 (2019): 219.

repression and of political (secret) police, such as the KGB. Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the notorious head of CEKA has several streets in Belarus' largest cities named in his honor. The most symbolic manifestation of his memory is Dzerzhinskaya Gora – a mountain peak which at 345 meters above sea level is the highest in Belarus¹⁷. Nelly Bekus explained this by the fact that Belarusian identity is strictly linked to the Soviet era rather than to the national movements of the late 19th century, thus its construction massively employs Bolshevik propaganda tools¹⁸.

It should be noted that the Belarusians have already accepted the symbols that the Lukashenka regime introduced in the 1990s. A large majority consider July 3rd – the Day of Liberation of Minsk from the Nazis (1944) – as the main national holiday. Other important dates, March 25th – the Declaration of Independence of Belarusian People's Republic in 1918, and July 27th – the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Belarus (from USSR), were supported only by 1% of respondents of various sociological interviews¹⁹. The legacy of so-called Belarusian People's Republic of 1918 was condemned, and its symbols linked to “fascism” and collaboration during World War II²⁰. Notably, on July 1st, 2014, after the Crimea and Donbas Russian occupation, Lukashenka spoke publicly for the first time in the Belarusian language, underlining the significance of freedom and independence²¹.

Among the first institutions of memory established by the Lukashenka regime is the State Commission for the control of pedagogical literature publishing in the field of social sciences and humanities, which was created by the presidential decree of August 24th, 1995. Then, in 2004, when the country was celebrating the 60th anniversary of its liberation from the Nazi occupation, the regime introduced a special textbook dedicated to the Great Patriotic War for the final grade of high schools (11th grade). The preface to this textbook is signed by the President of the Republic himself²².

¹⁷ Ibid., 225.

¹⁸ Nelly Bekus, “Hybrid’ Linguistic Identity of Post-Soviet Belarus”, *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 13, no. 4 (2014): 35.

¹⁹ Vadzim Smok, “Belarusian Identity: the Impact of Lukashenko’s Rule”, Analytical Paper 3, Ostrogorski Center, Minsk-London (December 2013): 16, <https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/belarusianidentity.pdf>.

²⁰ Rudling, “Unhappy Is the Person Who Has No Motherland”, 2017, 72.

²¹ Ainārs Lerhis, “The History of Belarus: Multiply Identities”, in *Belarusian Foreign Policy: 360°*, ed. Andis Kudors (Riga: University of Latvia Press, 2017), 23; Posokhin, “Soft Belarusization: (Re)building of Identity”, 65.

²² Anna Zadora, “La Grande Guerre Patriotique comme pilier de l’identité nationale: étude

On January 6th, 2022, during a meeting to discuss historical policy, Lukashenka stressed that “the correct interpretation of history” is of key importance to the state’s security. He ordered historians to review the descriptions of specific periods in history which had been promoted thus far, and to formulate an “appropriate” assessment of the successes and failures of the Belarusian nation throughout its history²³. On February 4th, 2022, President Lukashenka signed a decree establishing a Council for Historical Policy, under the direct authority of the head of the state²⁴. Igor Sergeyenko, the head of the Presidential Administration in Minsk, told journalists on March 2nd, 2022, at the first meeting of the Council for History Policy, that “Historical memory of Belarusians is a target of attacks and all kinds of falsifications. It is no secret that today historical memory is subjected to attacks and all sorts of falsifications. These are attempts to rewrite the history of Great Patriotic War, attempts to interpret certain periods of our history as being part of another state”²⁵. Furthermore, Deputy Head of the presidential administration Igor Lutsy stressed that “every period of Belarus’ history needs to be evaluated from the point of view of national priorities and interests”²⁶.

Essentially, Belarus copied the Russian model of the institutionalization of the historical narrative. The Bulgarian historian on European communist regimes, Evelina Kelbecheva recalled that a State Commission against falsifications and deviations from the historical truth had been operating in Moscow for a long time, which, in addition to members of the academic community, also included officials of the special services and politicians loyal to Vladimir Putin²⁷. “This is a re-Stalinization of Russian history”, Kelbecheva

biélorusse”, *Revue d’études comparatives Est-Ouest* 47, no. 1-2 (2016): 301, 303.

²³ Kamil Klysiński, “The anti-Western narrative in Belarus’s historical policy becomes harsher”, *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich/ Center for Eastern Studies*, Warszawa, 14.01.2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-01-14/anti-Western-narrative-belarus-historical-policy-becomes-harsher>.

²⁴ BeITA, “Sergeyenko: Historical memory of Belarusians is subjected to attacks, falsifications”, Minsk, 02.03.2022, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/sergeyenko-historical-memory-of-belarusians-is-subjected-to-attacks-falsifications-148304-2022/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Igor Lutsy, “Every period of our history needs to be evaluated from the point of view of national priorities and interests”, *BeITA*, 14.09.2023, <https://eng.belta.by/opinions/view/every-period-of-our-history-needs-to-be-evaluated-from-the-point-of-view-of-national-priorities-and-interests-6505/>.

²⁷ Петя Владимирова, “Проф. Евелина Келъцева: Имаме нецувана регресия на историята, пропагандирана от режима на Путин”, *Дневник (Dnevnik)*, Sofia, 27.02.2022, https://dnevnik.bg/intervju/2022/02/27/43172238_prof_evelina_kelbecheva_kritichen_pogle_d_i_prosveteno/.

concluded, while mentioning the existence of a Russian law which condemned any criticism of Stalin²⁸.

June 22nd, 1941, the date when Nazi Germany attacked the USSR, became a symbolic day in the hierarchy of national memory in Belarus. On June 22nd, Belarus marks the National Remembrance Day of the Victims of the Great Patriotic War and the Genocide of the Belarusian People. A decree “On perpetuating the memory of those who died defending the Motherland and preserving the memory of the victims of wars” was signed in 2016. In February 2021, a government resolution adopted the state program “Perpetuating the memory of those who died defending the Fatherland” for 2021-2025²⁹. The main forms of immortalization of those, who died during the wars, are state record-keeping, beautification, and maintenance of military graves, of war victims graves, the submission of data to the automated databank Book of Memory of the Republic of Belarus, the creation of museums and memorial complexes, the establishment of monuments and commemorative signs dedicated to the most important events of the so-called Great Patriotic War³⁰.

Authorities in Minsk put forward a Soviet-Stalinist interpretation of the past, regarding the “reunited” lands. Viktor Drozdov, a Ukrainian professor at the University in Ismail, is of the opinion that Soviet politics of memory formed the myth of the “long-sufferance” of the population, violently separated from the Motherland and suffering from social and national oppression. The myth of the “long-suffering lands” had a similar plotline: of being violently captured by the enemy with a focus on the heavy fate of the people, the heroic efforts of the fight for freedom and an act of liberation; and the beginning of the prosperity era in the Soviet state³¹.

The Council for Political History was created in line with the instruction of the head of state. Four commissions have already been set up within the council: the commission on conceptual basis of national history, the commission on scientific and methodological support of historical policy, the commission on information and educational work and the commission on

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ BelTA, “Belarus marks National Remembrance Day”, 22.06.2022, <https://www.eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-marks-national-remembrance-day-151214-2022/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Viktor Drozdov, “Soviet Politics in Southern Bessarabia and Northern Bukovyna: Representation of the Past and Mythmaking during World War II”, *Plural. Istorie, Cultură. Societate/ History. Culture. Society* 10, no. 2 (2022): 98.

foreign policy support of historical policy³². An important step in the instrumentalization of Belarusian national history was the institutional coordination with the Academy of Sciences with regard to the compilation of an official history, in five volumes, titled *The History of Belarusian Statehood: From Its Origins to Late 18th Century*³³. Aliaksei Lastouski argues that such an official history aims to promote the fundamental idea that the territory and the continuity of state institutions are of the greatest importance throughout the periods³⁴. Lastouski believes that the question of Belarusian language then becomes secondary and that enlighteners are replaced by public officials (from princes to the *nomenklatura* of the Belarusian Communist Party), and the desire to erase and retouch the conflicting pages of historical relations with neighbors becomes greatly noticeable³⁵.

At the end of 2021, the Minsk parliament unanimously approved the Law on Criminalizing the Denial of the Genocide of the Belarusian people³⁶. The bill supplements the Criminal Code of Belarus with a new article “Denial of the genocide of the Belarusian people”, which will face imprisonment for up to five years, and in some cases up to ten years. The bill defines genocide as “atrocities committed by Nazis and nationalist organizations during the Great Patriotic War and post-war period”³⁷. In an official statement, President Lukashenka argued that “the law will contribute to the inadmissibility of distortion of the result of the Great Patriotic War, and also promote cohesion of the Belarusian society”³⁸. This decision followed another one, also unanimously approved by the Minsk parliament, on April 21st, 2021, which referred to “the

³² BelTA, “Sergeyenko: Belarus’ history has many periods that need additional study”, 11.05.2022, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/sergeyenko-belarus-history-has-many-periods-that-need-additional-study-150099-2022/>.

³³ Belarus segodnya, “Sergeyenko: draft textbook on history of Belarus’ statehood ready”, Minsk, 11.05.2022, <https://www.sb.by/en/sergeyenko-draft-textbook-on-history-of-belarus-statehood-ready-.html>.

³⁴ Aliaksei Lastouski, “The Politics of Memory in Belarus: Narratives and Institutions”, in *Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past. A Comparative Study on Memory management in the Region*, ed. Ninna Mörner (Stockholm: Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, Södertörn University, 2020), 91.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Perild, “Belarus approves the bill ‘On the genocide of the Belarusian people’”, 14.12.2021, <https://www.perild.com/2021/12/14/belarus-approves-the-bill-on-the-genocide-of-the-belarusian-people/>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ President of the Republic of Belarus, “Aleksandr Lukashenko signs Belarusian genocide recognition bill into law”, 05.01.2022, <https://president.gov.by/en/events/aleksandr-lukashenko-podpisal-zakon-o-genocide-belorusskogo-naroda-1641466024>.

prevention and prohibition of the rehabilitation of Nazism”³⁹.

Both legislative texts are used by Belarus to regulate the relations with Poland and Lithuania, to relegitimize significant episodes of the anti-Nazi resistance in the territories of the USSR occupied in 1941-1944, but also to establish the official idea that the victories of the Red Army are the main cause for the survival of the Belarusian nation and society. Obviously, there were some Belarusian attempts in the 1990s to opt for a narrative connected to Central Europe and its values rather than Russia⁴⁰, however, these efforts were quickly eliminated by the propaganda of the Minsk regime after Lukashenka and his political partisans became increasingly isolated within the international community⁴¹.

Aliaksei Lastouski mentioned that the institutionalization of history by the political leadership in Minsk also occurred against the background of certain peculiarities of the academic environment in Belarus, related to the nature of the political regime. The control over memory was justified by the politicians through the “struggle for historical truth”. The national concept of history, added Lastouski, was largely based on the Soviet Marxist historiographical tradition, with the search for Belarusian statehood and ethnicity in history and the creation of a long genealogical line of the national state as a foundation for the formation of national identity⁴². These political opinions coincide with those of Russian officials from Kremlin and its institutions instrumentalizing the politics of memory. This is also possible due to the fact that Belarusian historical science has been isolated outside the country for three decades. This has been influenced by a combination of factors: a deliberately isolationist policy by the administration’ institutions, a lack of international exchange, as well as poor knowledge of foreign languages, explained Lastouski⁴³.

The idea put forward by Lavinia Stan regarding the lack of a debate on

³⁹ ***, “Belarus Council of the Republic passes bill to prevent nazism rehabilitation”, *Official Website of the Republic of Belarus*, 21.04.2021, https://www.nelarus.by/en/government/events/belarus-council-of-the-republic-passes-bill-to-prevent-nazism-rehabilitation_i_00001287_22.html.

⁴⁰ See, for example: Helena Glogowska, *Stosunki polsko-białoruskie w XX wieku. Od imperium rosyjskiego do Unii Europejskiej* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2012); Krzysztof Fedorowicz, “Europa Środkowa w polityce zagranicznej Białorusi”, *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Lublin 18, no. 4 (2020): 13-14.

⁴¹ On the political regime in Belarus, see: Zdzisław Julian Winnicki, *Ideologia państwowa Republiki Białoruś – teoria I praktyka projektu. Analiza politologiczna* (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnictwa Arboretum, 2013).

⁴² Lastouski, 88.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 90.

the memory of communism in most states that underwent totalitarianism is explained by Larissa Titarenko who notes that the new Belarusian identity combines a Soviet heritage with several other traditional values (among them being tolerance). Titarenko also states that “‘common Belarusians’ and many educated people could not accept anticommunism”⁴⁴. They rejected this model as there was no attractive (positive) content in it. In reality, as many Belarusians, especially current urban citizens, moved to the cities after World War II, they became part of the educated Soviet middle class or qualified working class and improved their standard of living during the Soviet time⁴⁵. “They had no reasons to call their Soviet history a “‘period of oppression”’: it was almost a “‘golden age”’ for many of them and they did not want to return to Europe as they felt comfortable with their Soviet past and patriotic present, Titorenko added.⁴⁶

In support of these explanations, Nelly Bekus argues that during the existence of the USSR, Belarus had experienced a real “‘golden age”’, becoming one of the most prosperous and developed Soviet republics⁴⁷. The Belarusian national development under Bolshevik rule constitutes an instructive case of nation-formation within the framework of the socialist system, during which a traditional rural society was transformed through a process of industrialization and modernization in a socialist rather than a capitalist mode”⁴⁸, wrote Bekus.

Felix Krawatzek concluded that the lack of a critical confrontation with Stalinism, and the severe limits imposed on opened discussions, are conducive to a shared historical outlook by Belarus. The country’s mnemonic narrative increasingly asserted the independent nationhood, framing it as a nation between East and West, striving for independence⁴⁹. Nevertheless, argued Krawatzek, World War II has remained the major event in Belarusian historical memory, and a focus for the state’s historical discourse. For example, in a speech commemorating September 17th, from 2020, a member of the Minsk Parliament, Sergei Klishevich, explicitly outlined the state memory’s construction: “‘The liberation march of the Red Army that began on 17

⁴⁴ Larissa Titarenko, “Post-Soviet Belarus: The Transformation of National Identity”, *International Studies. Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 13, no. 1 (2011): 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid..

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Nelly Bekus, “‘Hybrid’ linguistic Identity of Post-Soviet Belarus”, *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 13, no. 4 (2014): 36.

⁴⁸ Nelly Bekus, “Nationalism and socialism: ‘Phase D’ in the Belarusian nation-building”, *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 6 (2010): 835.

⁴⁹ Felix Krawatzek, “Remembering a Contentious Past: Resistance and Collaboration in the Former Soviet Union”, *East European Politics and Societies* 36, no. 1 (2022): 306-307.

September 1939 resulted in the unification of Western Belarus and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic”⁵⁰.

Nelly Bekus finds that the ideology of the Lukashenka regime started to be developed in the 1990s, stimulating academic and scientific exploration of the subject. All Belarusian history is the subject of a certain politically determined interpretation within the official historical narration, through the basic source of the Belarusian tradition is considered to be the Soviet era. In the official political memory of Lukashenka’s regime, all Belarusian tradition is focused on Soviet time, and Belarusian history is focused on World War II. Three basic values of this ideology were formulated according to Bekus: 1) a strong presidential power, 2) a socially oriented economy and 3) Christian (or, to be precise, Orthodox) values⁵¹. Larissa Titarenko explained Belarusian identity after 1990s as supportive of a model of identity called “the new-Soviet” or “Soviet-Belarusian”⁵². Robert D. Kaplan, who called Alyiaksandar Lukashenka nothing more than “Putin’s lackey”⁵³ and Belarus – “Russia’s slave”⁵⁴, explained that “the Russians seek a soft power zone of imperial control like throughout Central and Eastern Europe in last centuries. It is not direct rule often. It is indirect rule and heavy influence, one step removed from direct rule. That’s what is playing out in Belarus”⁵⁵. The modern Belarusian identity construction, even if it has its roots in the early 20th century, has been shaped by the regime installed by President Lukashenka after 1994. It is Lukashenka who provided his society with a historical memory derived from the values of the Soviet period and in which the most important moment in the history of Belarus became the so-called Great Patriotic War, between 1941 and 1945, the stage of the conflict between Nazi Germany and the USSR.

⁵⁰ BelTA, “Belarus MP explains symbolism of Red Army march to liberate Western Belarus in 1939”, 16.09.2020, <https://enf.belta.by/society/view/belarus-mp-explains-symbolism-of-red-army-march-to-liberate-western-belarus-in-1939-133507-2020/>.

⁵¹ Nelly Bekus, *Struggle Over Identity. The Official and the Alternative ‘Belarusianness’* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 211.

⁵² Titarenko, “Post-Soviet Belarus: The Transformation of National Identity”, 2011, 13-14. See also: Alexandra Goujon, “Language, Nationalism, and populism in Belarus”, *Nationalities Papers. The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 27, no. 4 (1999): 661-677 and Astrid Sahn, “Political Culture and National Symbols: Their Impact on the Belarusian Nation-Building Process”, *Nationalities Papers. The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 27, no. 4 (1999): 649- 660.

⁵³ Urs Gehriger, “The New Empires in the East”, *Die Weltwoche*, 24.02.2022, <https://www.weltwoche.ch/daily/the-new-empires-in-the-east/>.

⁵⁴ Ziemowit Szczerek, “Russia Will Not Collapse”, *New Eastern Europe*, 12.11.2012, <https://www.neweasterneurope.eu/2012/11/12/russia-will-not-collapse/>.

⁵⁵ Gehriger, “The New Empires in the East”, 2022.

III. *The National Unity Day of Belarus. September 17th, 1939: The Reunification of Belarus or the Annexation of Eastern Poland by the USSR?*

Serhii Plokyh, a Ukrainian historian from Harvard University, argues that the main problem with Soviet explanation of the invasion of September 17th, 1939 as an act of fraternal assistance to the Ukrainians and Belarusians was that, according to the secret Protocol signed by Molotov and Ribbentrop in Moscow, on August 23rd 1939, the Soviet sphere of influence extended beyond territories inhabited predominantly by Ukrainians and Belarusians⁵⁶. Plokyh added that of the two partners who signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939, it was the Soviets who were most concerned with its possible impact on public opinion in their country. Soviet propaganda had to explain the act of force on September 17th, 1939 and the collaboration with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany in terms of the occupation and abolition of Poland.

As a result, the idea of “liberating” Western Ukraine and Western Belarus from the “tyranny” of Poland and their respective “reunification” with the Soviet republics of Kiev and Minsk was promoted. “Western Ukraine and Western Belarus, wrote *Pravda* on September 11th, 1939, regions of predominantly Ukrainian and Belarusian population, are the objects of the most flagrant, shameless exploitation on the part of the Polish landlords. The situation of the Ukrainians and Belarusians is characterized by a regime of ethnic oppression and lack of rights. The ruling circles of Poland, flaunting their supposed love of liberty, have done all they could to turn Western Ukraine and Western Belarus into a colony without rights, consigned for plunder to the Polish lords”⁵⁷.

On the 70th anniversary of the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland, Lukashenka congratulated his fellows on the “reunification of Western Belarus with the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic”: “On 17 September 1939, Lukashenka said, the Red Army launched an emancipatory mission. Its goal was the defense of the Belarusian and Ukrainian populations on the territory of Poland. Regardless of the different opinions and assessments of the events

⁵⁶ Serhii Plokyh, “The call of blood. Government propaganda and public response to the Soviet entry into World War II”, *Cahiers du monde russe* 52, no. 2-3 (2011): 295.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 297.

connected with this date, it is an indisputable fact that the result of the military operation led to the reunification of the artificially divided Belarusian people, something that was a historical justice”⁵⁸. Lukashenka had more conclusions on the first celebration of People’s Unity Day, in Minsk, on September 17th 2021, when he stated that “During 20 years (1919-1939) over 4 million people, who lived in the territory occupied by Poland, were deprived of the right to speak the native language, go to national schools, develop their original culture, and simply call themselves Belarusians”⁵⁹. It comes as no surprise, continued the President, that residents of Western Belarus welcomed the Red Army as a liberator on 17 September 1939, with tears in their eyes and with flowers in their hands⁶⁰.

The official interpretations of the Belarusian president regarding the September 17th, 1939 moment can cause polemics at the level of the scientific circles as they address ideologically and unilaterally the occupation of Western Belarus by the Red Army. Lukashenka motivated the “beginning of the liberation campaign” of the Red Army, launched on September 17th, 1939 against Poland by the fact that the Riga Peace Treaty, of March 1921, “subjugated” 1.5 million inhabitants located on almost 52,000 square km. This treaty was “a geopolitical catastrophe of our history”, stated the president, especially given that Poland had received statehood “on a plate” from Lenin’s Council of People’s Commissars, after more than a century from its disappearance, and instead of gratitude towards Soviet Russia, immediately chose to “demand” Belarusian territories⁶¹. At the time of Soviets’ entry into Poland, Lukashenka explained in his official speech on National Unity Day in 2022, “Poland no longer existed as an international politics subject”, given that the head of state had already “left” by September 16, “the gold reserves had been transferred to Romania” and on September 17th, 1939 “the Nazis were already in Brest”⁶².

⁵⁸ Rudling, “Unhappy Is the Person Who Has No Motherland”, 2017, 79.

⁵⁹ President of the Republic of Belarus, “Patriotic forum Symbol of Unity”, 17.09.2021, <https://president.gov.by/en/events/uchastie-v-forume-patrioticheskich-sil-simvol-edinstva-1632399678>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Belarus Segodnya, “Lukashenko: in alliance with East Slavic neighbours, Belarusian lands developed, but they almost perished in the embrace of the West”, Minsk, 17.09.2022, <https://www.bb.by/en/lukashenko-in-alliance-with-east-slavic-neighbours-belarusian-lands-developed-but-they-almost-perished.html>.

⁶² Belarus Segodnya, “Lukashenko spoke about paradoxes of history, liberation of Poland from fascism and current descendants of Nazis”, Minsk, 17.09.2022, <https://www.sb.by/en/lukashenko-spoke-about-paradoxes-of-history-liberation-of-poland-from-fascism-and-curre>

The Belarusian ideological construction of the “liberation” of September 17th, 1939, based on the premise of Poland’s exploitation of the territories in the West, created heroes of resistance in the territories “occupied” by the Treaty of Riga, whom Lukashenka himself recommends to the nation: Sergei Pritytsky, Vera Khoruzhaya, Ded Talash, Kirill Orlovsky, Stanislav Vaupshasov, whose merits could be found in literary works written by the real Belarusian writers named Maksim Tank, Valentin Tavlai, Maksim Sevruck, or Grigory Shirma⁶³.

In Poland, the idea of Belarusian “reunification”, performed on September 17th, 1939 caused emotions, indignation and a public revisiting of the memory of that day. The Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw (IPN – *Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej*), the government institution which manages Polish historical memory, reacted to the initiative of the President of the Republic of Belarus and described the day of September 17th, 1939 as the day that marks the beginning of the Soviet invasion of Poland: “Pronouncing the anniversary of 17 September 1939 as the ‘Day of People’s Unity’ in Belarus, stated IPN, offends the memory of not only Polish but also Belarusian and all other victims of both totalitarian regimes”⁶⁴. As a matter of fact, concluded IPN, September 17th, 1939 is the “Day of Totalitarian Unity” of the two regimes, Nazi Germany and Soviet Union⁶⁵. In an editorial published in the Polish government daily *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, Belarusian historian Ihar Melniku explained that on September 17th, 1939, although there was an act of “unification” of Belarus, Stalin’s aim was to trigger a world communist revolution. According to Melniku, September 17th should not be used as a weapon against Western neighbors, and Belarusians should understand that their unity was built on a tragedy, that of Poland⁶⁶.

Warsaw based Belarusian historian Aliaksandr Smalianchuk wrote that on September 17th, 1939 the unification of the Belarusian nation took place

[nt-descendant.html](#).

⁶³ Belarus Segodnya, “Lukashenko about Riga Peace Treaty results: its price is the broken fates of millions of Belarussians”, Minsk, 17.09.2022, <https://sb.by/en/lukashenko-about-riga-peace-treaty-results-its-price-is-the-broken-fates-of-millions-of-belarusians.html>.

⁶⁴ Institute of National Remembrance, “The IPN’s statement on the establishment in Belarus of a new public holiday on the anniversary of 17 September 1939”, 08.06.2021, <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/8215.The-IPN039s-statement-on-the-establishment-in-Belarus-of-a-new-public-holiday-on.html>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, “Białoruś obchodzi święto dnia zjednoczenia, ma upamiętniać 17 września 1939 r.”, 17.09.2021, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/artykuly/8247904,bialorus-swieto-dnia-zjednoczenia-napasci-zsrr.html>.

within the borders of an enormous “concentration camp”: USSR⁶⁷. In the memory of contemporary Belarus, argued Smalianchuk, September 1939 is not one but two “sites of memory”, and very distant at that. One is the memory of the symbolic triumph of the Belarusians: the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic authorities and the Communist Party are credited with its emergence and consolidation. The second “site of memory” functions at the level of communicative memory, as a symbol of tragedy, and refers to the vision of men helpless in the face of a cruel and merciless power; and remains a source of social trauma, which still cannot be the subject of dialogue and treatment⁶⁸. Reunification of Belarusian territories took place in 1939, added A.F. Velikiy, head of the History Department at the University of Minsk, and the problem of Western Belarus became an integral part of the USSR and the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic⁶⁹.

Andrzej Wierzbicki, of the University of Warsaw, found at least three elements when trying to explain the fractures related to such different public and political perceptions regarding the day of September 17th. The *first dispute*, wrote Wierzbicki, concerns that entry of the Red Army into the territory of the Republic of Poland on September 17th, 1939 as a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. From the Polish perspective, this was an aggression committed by the USSR. That event is interpreted by Belarusians in a completely different way: on September 17th, 1939, the Red Army began its march of liberation to the west. According to Belarusian historians, on that day, Western Belarus was united with the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic⁷⁰. The *second historical problem* resided with the actions of the Red Army in the Eastern Borderlands of Poland (Pol.: *Kresy*) and in the Belarusian terminology of “Western Belarus” and *the third*, concluded Wierzbicki, is their relationship to the end of the World War II. In Belarusian historiography, this is seen as a “victory over fascism” and the “liberation” from German occupation⁷¹.

Joanna Bugajska-Więclawska wrote that in a Polish-Belarusian dispute

⁶⁷ Aliaksandr Smalianchuk, “September 1939 as a ‘Site of Memory’ for Belarusians. Soviet Attack on Poland and Its Consequences for Belarus”, *Polish History*, <https://polishhistory.pl/September-1939-as-a-site-of-memory-for-belarusians/>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ A. F. Velikiy, “Territorial Status of the Western Belarusian Lands in the Soviet-Polish Relations During The World War II and the Great Patriotic War”, *Journal of the Belarusian State University. International Relations* 1 (2017): 57.

⁷⁰ Andrzej Wierzbicki, *Polish-Belarusian Relations. Between a Common Past and the Future* (Warszawa: Nomos, 2018), 96.

⁷¹ Ibid., 97-98.

about September 17th, 1939, Poles adopt the criterion of historical borders, relying their justification on arguments evidencing a continuity of statehood in a given area in line with international law. Moreover, Poles draw attention to the lack of a precise definition, in the Belarusian historiography, of a territorial area known as ‘Western Belarus’ and included the Eastern Borderlands (*Kresy*), a generalization of the areas of ethnic Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and south-eastern Latvia⁷². Kamil Klysiński and Wojciech Konończuk argue that the Polish interwar rule in the Belarusian territories (‘Western Belarus’) is branded by Belarusian official politics of memory as “occupation”, “national oppression” and “economic, political, and spiritual exploitation”. Poland is presented as a state that persecuted national minorities on a mass-scale and strived for their denationalization⁷³. Belarus has still not developed a fully sovereign politics of memory, concluded Klysiński and Konończuk, and this process faces numerous internal and external limitations. The two most important ones are the influence of the Russian factor and the nature of the present regime of Alyiaksandar Lukashenka⁷⁴.

The dispute between Poland and Belarus regarding the historical content and the memory of the day of September 17th, 1939 is both a scientific controversy and an expression of the geopolitical orientation of the Minsk regime, in the sense of its survival within ideological frameworks similar to the ones of Russian regime. President Lukashenka admitted this when he appealed to the memory of the “tragedy” of the demise of the USSR: “If the Soviet Union had existed until today, we could have avoided all kinds of conflicts in the world, the Minsk leader claimed in an interview. For me, it was a tragedy. The collapse of the Soviet Union is a tragedy”⁷⁵, he said in the context of the launch of the Russian armed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

For the political regime in Minsk, the theme of the valorization of the memory of September 17th, 1939 is fundamental in terms of achieving

⁷² Joanna Bugajska-Więcławska, “Between Monuments of Winners and Graves in Rural Cemeteries’. Poland-Belarus. Reflections on Historiography”, *Studia Białoruskie* 14 (2020): 74.

⁷³ Kamil Klysiński and Wojciech Konończuk, *Opposites Put Together: Belarus’s politics of Memory* (Warszawa: Center for Eastern Studies, 2020), 51.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷⁵ G4Media, „Lukașenko: ‘Prăbușirea Uniunii Sovietice a fost o tragedie. Dacă URSS ar fi existat până în ziua de azi, am fi putut să evităm tot felul de conflicte din lume. M-am născut și am trăit în acea țară. Am fost membru al Partidului Comunist”, 19.03.2022, <https://www.g4media.ro/lukasenko-prabusirea-uniunii-sovietice-a-fost-o-tragedie-daca-urss-ar-fi-existat-pana-in-ziaua-de-azi-am-fi-putut-sa-avoidam-tot-felul-de-conflicte-din-lume-m-am-nascut-si-am-trait-in-acea.html>.

ideological and institutional stability and continuity. The historical struggle with neighboring Poland (and with Lithuania), Russia's benevolent support and the future of the Belarusian nation on a path aimed at exceptionalism (neither alongside Europe, nor annexed by Russia) are just some of the favorite themes of the political discourse regarding the memory of the “union” between Western Belarus and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) on September 17th, 1939, after the Red Army had invaded Poland.

IV. World War II: The Main Ingredient of Belarusian Memory and National Construction

The theme of the World War II has become one of internal politics in Belarus, as it represents a fundamental imprint of the historical memory of the foundation of the Belarusian nation and statehood and is a formidable propaganda tool used in the relations with its neighbors from the European Union (Poland and Lithuania, in particular). The conflict between the USSR and Nazi Germany, which in Belarus is called the Great Patriotic War, caused immense destruction and the death of a third of the nearly 10 million inhabitants that the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic had before June 22nd, 1941. By using this historical fragment in its domestic and foreign policies, the Minsk regime managed to obtain an ideological legitimization of the state's evolution between the West, perceived as hostile, and Russia, permanently heralded as fraternal.

Culturally and linguistically, the historical development of Belarus in the 20th century was characterized by significant heterogeneity caused by several internal and external factors that had prevented the nationalist idea from becoming the indisputable and generally accepted basis for state building. One internal factor could be seen in the lack of support for the nationalist agenda among the population. From outside, Belarusian territory after World War I served as a theater for its two neighbors, most ambitious to exercise their influence: resurrected Poland and the newly formed Soviet Union⁷⁶.

According to Timothy Snyder⁷⁷, in his exploration of the World War II,

⁷⁶ Ivan Posokhin, “Soft Belarusization: (Re)building of Identity”, 59. Andrew Savchenko, *Belarus. A Perpetual Borderland* (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 69-70, 226.

⁷⁷ Timothy Snyder, *Tărâmul morții. Europa între Hitler și Stalin* (București: Editura Humanitas, 2012).

Holocaust and genocides in Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania and Eastern Poland, this region was a *Bloodland*. Snyder concluded in one of its editorials in *The Guardian*, from 2010, that the region of Europe most touched by the war was triply-occupied eastern Poland: first, by the Soviets; then, by the Germans; then, by the Soviets again. It was here that the Soviet NKVD made more arrests than in the entire remainder of the Soviet Union in 1940, and here that the Holocaust began in 1941⁷⁸. In Eastern Europe, Snyder wrote, the major atrocities of both Nazis and Stalinists were committed in the lands between; occupation by both Germany and Soviet Union was worse than occupation by Germany alone⁷⁹. Jan T. Gross argued that by 1943 something like one-quarter of the Volhynian population had experienced national violence in one form or another, as victim, accomplice or both. Triple occupation, concluded Gross, not only exposed these lands to both Nazi and Soviet occupation policies, it made them the site of intense competition between the two systems⁸⁰.

Official World War II policies emanate from Kremlin’s institutions, with Russia being the one which inspires, develops, and protects them. They cover, as the Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy admitted, Soviet propaganda: “This propaganda, said Plokhy, is used over and over again because the most powerful myth of the Russian regime is that of the great victory against the Nazis”⁸¹. Simon Lewis argued after 1994 that expensive renovations of Soviet-era museums, combined with new memorials and monuments, have contributed to an expansion of the commemorative arsenal, whilst the state has also gradually adapted its practices to fulfill a nationalizing agenda: the war myth has become less Soviet and more Belarusian, but the sacralization of partisan heroes is largely unchanged⁸². We are talking, as Kathleen J. Hancock observed, about a “semi-sovereign state”, given that the Belarusian people have demonstrated a weak commitment to a nationalism⁸³.

⁷⁸ Timothy Snyder, “Echoes from the killing fields of the east”, *The Guardian*, 28.09.2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/sep/27/secondworldwar-poland>.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland’s Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 200.

⁸¹ Luis Lidón, “‘La amenaza para Putin nunca vino del exterior, sino dentro, de su propia población’. Serhii Plokhy, el historiador ucraniano más reconocido internacionalmente, explica lo que el president ruso quiere hacer con Ucrania”, *La Razón*, Madrid, 21.05.2022, <https://www.larazon.es/internacional/20220521/zvpe3a7suravjg62fdmmwhgu.html>.

⁸² Lewis, “The Partisan Republic”, 385-386.

⁸³ Kathleen J. Hancock, “The Semi-Sovereign State: Belarus and the Russian Neo-Empire”,

The discourse which glorifies the 1941-1945 war can also be found in other post-Soviet spaces, such as the Republic of Moldova, for example. In Chișinău, ever since the end of 1990, the Supreme Soviet (Parliament) adopted a Decision establishing May 9th as “Victory Day and the day of commemoration of fallen heroes for the Independence of the Motherland” (Article 2, Paragraph 5)⁸⁴. Every month of May, wrote Vitalie Ciobanu, in Moldova, by tradition, is reserved almost entirely for the competition of myths, symbolic battles, confrontations of ideologies⁸⁵. Authorized scientific voices draw attention to the logical, historical, and moral contradictions of celebrating May 9th in the Republic of Moldova. Historian Ion Varta explained that “it is totally illogical to celebrate Victory Day in the Great War for the Defense of the Motherland as, in this case, you are denying the legitimacy of the Declaration of Independence of August 27th, 1991, thus undermining the state of the Republic of Moldova. Thus, put in layman’s terms, for the general public: if the USSR was our ‘Motherland’, then what good did we do by declaring our independence in August 1991?”⁸⁶ Additionally, Ludmila Tikhonov underlined the fact that “May 9 is the Day of Commemoration of Heroes, the day when peace should be marked, not victory”⁸⁷.

Tatiana Zhurzhenko explains that the use of the official memory of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 has for the Minsk regime at least three essential functions in terms of its legitimization and in terms of the construction of domestic and external political instruments: 1) restoring the legitimization of the Soviet heritage (including a similar political and social regime); 2) suppressing the memory of the Gulag and of the Stalinist repressions; and 3) consolidating a collective identity by shaping a supranational one in the spirit of the “Soviet people”⁸⁸. However, Alexandra Goujon stresses that, the specific

Foreign Policy Analysis 6 (2006): 132.

⁸⁴ Sovietul Suprem al Republicii Sovietice Socialiste Moldovenești, „Hotărâre nr.433/26.12.1990 cu privire la zilele comemorative, zilele de sărbătoare și la zilele de odihnă în Republica Moldova”, https://legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=130924&lang=ro.

⁸⁵ Vitalie Ciobanu, „Despre memorie și simboluri”, *Radio Europa Liberă Moldova*, 02.05.2018, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/despre-memorie-și-simboluri/29204365.html>.

⁸⁶ Loredana Buzdugan and Milena Onisim, „Lecția de istorie. Ce a fost pe 9 mai 1945 și ce s-a întâmplat cu R. Moldova după război?”, *Ziarul de Gardă*, Chișinău, 09.05.2022, <https://www.zdg.md/importante/lectia-de-istorie-ce-a-fost-pe-9-mai-1945-si-ce-s-a-intamplat-cu-r-moldova-dupa-razboi/>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Geopolitics of Memory: Rethinking World War II and the Fight for Hegemony in the Baltic-Black Sea Region”, *Crossroads Digest*, no. 6 (2011): 119. See also: Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Concluding Remarks: Geopolitics of Memory”, in *Broken Narratives. Post-Cold War*

propagandistic and ideologic role of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic during World War II was highlighted before Piotr Masherov, a Soviet partisan awarded Hero of the Soviet Union Status, who became the first secretary of the Belarusian Communist Party in 1965⁸⁹.

David R. Marples put forward many narratives and official Belarusian school texts attesting to the idea that liberation from Nazi occupation in 1944 was the main tool of historical memory institutionalized by the regime of President Lukashenka⁹⁰. This was also possible because, unlike other European Soviet republics, the Byelorussian SSR lacked an organized dissident movement. *Perestroika* and *glasnost* arrived late in this conservative republic, which political scientist Andrew Wilson has dubbed as the “*Vendée* of Perestroika”⁹¹.

Following the domestic crisis in the summer of 2020, in which opponents challenged the new election victory of President Lukashenka, the regime decided to build even stronger external enemies in order to divert the meaning of the protests and frustrations. For these enemies, who could only be their neighbors from the European Union (Poland and Lithuania), historical and legal narratives were composed that support the complicity of their collaboration with the Nazi occupation troops in 1941-1944 towards the annihilation of the Belarusian civilian population and the killing of prisoners of war of the Red Army. Several conclusions of the institutions of historical memory in Belarus formed hazardous accusations against a former state leader (President of Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus), Polish anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet resistance organizations (*Armia Krajowa* / Home Army), communities of local people, intellectual and military personalities with anti-Soviet public views, national paramilitary units which operated on the territories of the former Baltic republics in the years 1941-1944.

In April 2021, the General Prosecutor’s Office of Belarus announced the opening of a criminal case related to the “genocide of the Belarusian people in World War II”. Belarus has evidence about more than 400 former members of the Nazi SS, resident in 17 countries, who participated in the genocide of its

History and Identity in Europe and East Asia, ed. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 239-253.

⁸⁹ Alexandra Goujon, “Memorial Narratives of WWII Partisans and Genocide in Belarus”, *East European Politics and Societies* 24 (2010): 7.

⁹⁰ David R. Marples, *‘Our Glorious Past’. Lukashenko’s Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2014), 194-203.

⁹¹ Rudling, “Unhappy Is the Person Who Has No Motherland”, 2017, 75.

people during World War II, commented Prosecutor-General Andrei Shved⁹². The Prosecutor General wanted to point out that Belarus is the only country in the post-Soviet space which launched such a “complete investigation into the genocide during the Great Patriotic War”, recalling the questioning of more than 12,500 people and the inspection of 300 mass graves. “The magnitude of what happened in our country during the Great Patriotic War has not yet been seriously considered”⁹³, stated Andrei Shved at the beginning of 2022. In June 2022, Shved publicly claimed that the Belarusian General Prosecutor’s Office signed a cooperation agreement with the similar institution in Russia as more than 90% of the documents of the investigation are in Moscow’s archives⁹⁴. “It is important not only to get all the information about the facts of the atrocities, but also to establish the names of all the executioners, trace their fate if possible, and raise the issue of bringing those, who live on the territory of other countries, to justice”, Shved declared⁹⁵.

The Belarusian Prosecutor General’s Office admitted that the legal reconstruction of the historical memory regarding the participation of the Nazis and their collaborators against Belarusians in 1941-1944 is directly related to the 2020 mass protests against President Lukashenka. There were “unconstitutional efforts to seize state power” by “elements” that were allegedly “orchestrated and financed by certain Western European states, including those involved in the mass killing of Belarusians in World War II”, affirmed Prosecutor General Andrei Shved on April 9th, 2021⁹⁶.

After this, in the summer of 2021, Shved put forward a version according to which in the period 1941-1944 several Lithuanian paramilitary organizations operated on the territory of Belarus, arresting and killing locals (including Jews) in the Nazi camps of Trostenets and Ozarichi⁹⁷. Minsk officials

⁹² TASS, “Minsk know names 400 Nazi SS members still alive who killed Belarusians during WWII”, 28.10.2021, <https://tass.com/world/1355317>.

⁹³ Марія Дадалка, “Прэзідэнт прыняў з дакладам генеральнага пракурора Андрэя Швэда”, *Звязда*, Minsk, 24.01.2022, <https://zviazda.by/be/news/20220124/1643016827-prezident-prynyau-z-dakladam-generalnaga-prakurora-andreya-shveda>.

⁹⁴ BelTA, “Belarus, Russia agree on joint investigation of criminal cases regarding genocide”, 23.06.2022, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/belarus-russia-agree-on-joint-investigation-on-criminal-cases-regarding-genocide-151264-2022/>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ BelTA, “Criminal proceedings opened over genocide of Belarus’ people during WW2”, 09.04.2021, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/criminal-proceedings-opened-over-genocide-of-belarus-people-during-ww2-138933-2021/>.

⁹⁷ BelTA, “Belarusian prosecution request legal aid from Lithuania as part of genocide investigation”, 02.06.2021, <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/belarusian-prosecution-request->

launched allegations regarding the collaboration between Nazi occupation forces and Lithuanian nationalist paramilitary groups, claiming that they have “sufficient data” so as to prove the killing in 1941 of 1,750 Jews in the Berezino district and 4,166 prisoners in the Minsk ghetto, respectively of over 7,000 other civilians in the Belarusian capital (in October 1941).

The Prosecutor General also indicated the names of the commanders of these forces: Antanas Liudviko Impulevičius - Impulėnas (referred to as the “Butcher of Minsk”) and Voldemaras Hubertas Laimutis Adamkavičius, both refugees together with the Nazi troops in 1944, in the West⁹⁸. The latter, claimed the Belarusian official, then changed his name to Valdas Adamkus and returned to Lithuania after 1990⁹⁹. Valdas Adamkus (born 1926) was the president of Lithuania for two terms: 1998-2003 and 2004-2009. These allegations caused a stir in Lithuania. The former Lithuanian President Adamkus dismissed the Belarusian accusations as “nonsense”. “I don’t even know that such organizations existed, I’ve no understanding of what they did and who these people are. I hear about it for the first time”¹⁰⁰, Adamkus told the Lithuanian media in June 2021.

The political and ideological rewriting of the most important chapter of the Belarusian identity and national construction – the events of the World War II covering the period 1941-1945 – is a fundamental objective of the Minsk regime. President Lukashenka and his supporters are guiding state interests by using reasonings that come from the propaganda that makes up the layers of collective memory, using all the specific institutions and writing important chapters which systematically revise the historical facts.

[legal-aid-from-lithuania-as-part-of-genocide-investigation-140486-2021/](https://www.delfi.lt/en/politics/ex-president-adamkus-dismisses-belarus-suspicious-as-nonsense.d?id=87364737).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Delfi.lt. “Lithuania’s former president Valdas Adamkus on Wednesday dismissed as ‘nonsense’ Belarusian law-enforcement’s suspicious that he played a role in the ‘genocide of the Belarusian people’”, 02.06.2021, <https://www.delfi.lt/en/politics/ex-president-adamkus-dismisses-belarus-suspicious-as-nonsense.d?id=87364737>; Baltic News, “Adamkus about the Belarusian suspicion: this is nonsense”, 02.06.2021, <https://baltic.news/2021/06/02/adamkus-about-the-belarusian-suspicious-tis-is-nonsense/>.

V. Conclusions

The creation of an alternative world, through the political instrumentalization of memory, legitimizes the Minsk regime and helps its ideological and administrative longevity. At the same time, the historical narrative intensely shapes the relations with the neighboring states, both in the sense of establishing the reasoning regarding the foundations of the Russia-Belarus Union, as well as regarding the antagonism towards Poland and Lithuania, but also towards Europe, as a whole. The historical discourse, autochthonous and politically instrumentalized, is the one that doubles the propaganda of the regime in terms of revealing essential ideas, such as the birth of the Belarusian nation and statehood through the act of September 17th, 1939 or the annulment of the common heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, which also included Belarus and Ukraine, by framing it as a negative example of “oppression” and “denationalization”.

The power of attraction of the “Russian world”, instituted by Kremlin, manifests in Belarus not only by promoting soothing common traditional values, which refer to the Russian and Belarusian uniqueness, but also, at the same time, by denying the ties and common memory space between Belarus and Poland. The idea that the Soviet aggression of September 17th, 1939, a fulfillment of the secret Additional Protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, is a turning point and a founding moment of the Belarusian nation (even though it involved the dissolution of Polish statehood) is a relevant aspect of the political and ideological use of memory by Alyiaksandar Lukashenka’s regime.

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