

BELARUS

The authorities in Belarus had a negative relationship with the issue of protecting historical and cultural heritage for the entire period of Communist rule. Only at the start of the 1920s, during the brief period of 'Belarusianisation' and due to the status of many important scientists, was there success in organising research and officially recording the most precious historical and cultural monuments. The result of this work was the establishment of the first State list of historical, artistic and natural monuments, which included 94 buildings and was approved in 1926. At the start of the 1930s, when the policy of 'Belarusianisation' started to be restricted and repression of the Belarusian intelligentsia began, work focusing on research, care and protection of cultural heritage came to a total halt. Before the beginning of World War II, many unique examples of sacred and garden architecture and archaeological sites were even destroyed on the direct orders of the party leadership of the BSSR.

After the end of World War II, the policy of the authorities to cultural heritage apparently shifted. Work on the surveying of architectonic monuments was very well financed. In the years 1946–1948, true scientific expeditions were organised which included many important specialists. The work was intended to ascertain the most valuable architectonic monuments, carry out research on these buildings and issue them with documents setting out their basic characteristics, and to study their technical condition. In 1947 new State lists were prepared and approved for historical and cultural monuments with significance for the BSSR, the entire Union and the entire Republic.

Monument Destruction

Such a great interest on the part of the party leadership of Belarus in the fate of the historical and cultural heritage was primarily associated with gaining compensation from the Germans for

destroyed and damaged monuments. A special file was put together for each of the destroyed or damaged buildings in which the level of costs needed for its renewal and restoration was given. The amounts were not insignificant. For example, the party leadership demanded from Germany the payment of 3 million gold roubles at the exchange rate valid in 1913 for the restoration of the Dominican Monastery in Minsk. However, after the completion of reparation documentation, at the direct order of the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party most of these historical buildings were eliminated from the records and then destroyed, including the 17th-century Minsk Dominican Monastery. The same fate was shared by the grand baroque complex of the historical centre of Vitebsk and by many other buildings.

There was another wave of destruction of monuments at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s. At that time, many unique monuments were removed from the records without any scientific justification. It was at this time that the Vitebsk Church from the 12th century and the late-Gothic Catholic cathedral in Grodno were blown up.

Improvement and Legislation

In the 1960s, public pressure forced the authorities to make certain concessions. In 1966, permission was granted for the foundation of the Belarusian Voluntary Association for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments. Despite strict party control, the association managed to unify the splintered scientific and cultural forces and those of the creative intelligentsia and started to have an active influence on the process of care and protection of monuments. In 1967 Special Scientific-Restoration Workshops were founded, and in 1969 the first Belarusian law 'Concerning the Protection of Cultural Historical Monuments' was passed.



Catholic church in Smolyany (18th century), Orzhansky district



Remains of the Palace in Smolyany

Catholic church in Guli Myadelskij (16th century), Minsk district



At the end of the 1980s the situation improved in many respects. On the basis of a survey of the entire territory of the Belarusian Republic by experts from the Academy of Sciences, a basic List of Monuments was published, which was given the status of an official state document. At the same time, lists of archaeological, historical, urban and architectonic monuments were approved that contain more than 16,000 sites.

In 1988, the Society for the Protection of Monuments and the Belarusian Cultural Fund prepared a list of especially valuable monuments in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture that were recommended for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The list included many old Belarusian churches (the 12th-century Preobrazhensky Church of Salvation and the Cathedral of Saint Sofia from the 11th-18th century in Polotsk, Vitebsk district; the 12th-century Blagoveshchensk Church in Vitebsk; the 12th-century Church of Boris and Gleb in Grodno); many defensive mediaeval buildings (the 13th-century stone tower in the Brest district; the defensive church of the 15th-16th century in the village of Synkovichi and the defensive church from the start of the 16th century in the village of Murovanka in the Grodno district; and the Church of John the Baptist in the village of Komai in the Vitebsk district); the palace and garden complex of the 16th-20th century in Mir, Grodno district, Grodnenska oblast; the palace and garden complex of the Jesuit church from the 16th-18th century in the town of Chesvish in the Mink district; the historical centre of Grodno from the 12th-20th century. Unfortunately only two buildings in Belarus have been included on the List of World Heritage so far – Beloveshska pushcha and the chateau complex in Mir – because the State authorities have not yet presented the World Heritage Committee with a complete list of sites of cultural and natural heritage recommended for inclusion on the World Heritage List.

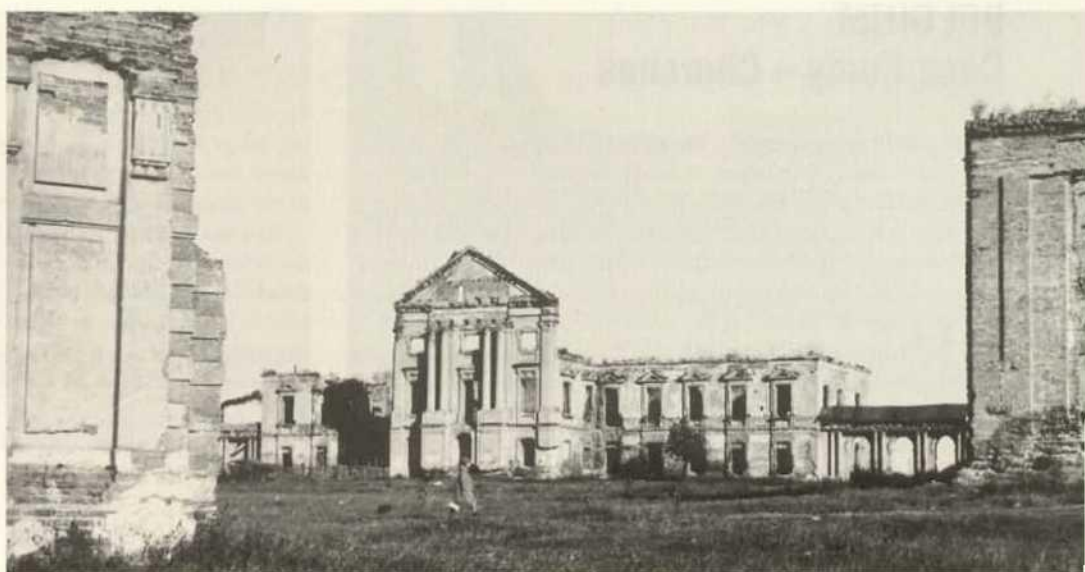
Post-Independence

After the declaration of independence in the Belarus Republic in 1991, the adoption of new laws for the protection, care and use of historical and cultural heritage that would correspond to the generally accepted international standards became an urgent issue.

The Belarusian parliament adopted a new law 'Concerning the Protection of Historical and Cultural Heritage' in 1992. Unfortunately experience has shown this law to be ineffective, it has many flaws and it does not enable the creation of an organised legislative system for the care and protection of historical and cultural buildings.

The establishment of the authoritarian regime after the election in 1994 had an impact on all spheres of life in Belarus. Relations between the Committee for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Heritage headed by D. Bubnovsky, which was founded in compliance with existing legislation, and the social structures and scientific institutions dealing with research and protection of historical and cultural buildings were severed completely. The Committee attempted to have a ban imposed at the State level on the activities of the Belarusian Voluntary Association for the Protection of Cultural Monuments. In the situation that has arisen, any monument may find itself threatened with destruction.

Natural factors present the smallest threat to historical buildings, but not even these can be excluded completely, as is the case of the 12th century Kalozhsky Church in Grodno, which was recommended for inclusion on the World Heritage List. Most buildings are threatened as a result of human activities. The most significant factor here is the carrying out of unqualified restoration work, which is primarily the result of the loss of traditional



Palace in Ruzhany, Pruzhansky district

restoration schools from the 1970s and 1980s, the non-existence of a system of preparation and improvement of qualifications of restorers and their isolation from sources of information. Moreover, State bodies grant licences giving authorisation to carry out restoration work to organisations and persons who do not have the necessary qualifications. As a result, many monuments have lost their authenticity following this type of restoration work. Here it is necessary to mention in the first place the 12th-century Blagoveshchensk Church in Vitebsk, which was also recommended for inclusion on the World Heritage List. The one architectonic building included on the World Heritage List – the Radziwil Chateau in Mir – also lost many of its original features as the result of restoration work and the wholly original tower from the 17th century was damaged. A similar danger also threatened the most valuable palace and garden complex in Belarus – the Nesvizhsky Radziwil Chateau from the 16th–18th century.

The historical centres and ancient towns, which are not protected as historical phenomena by Belarusian law, are also threatened by total collapse. Today, under the guise of restoration work, new buildings are being erected on a massive scale, and whole city areas of historical buildings are being demolished. Ancient towns such as Minsk, Grodno, Brest and others are worst off. Cultural landscapes and archaeological sites requiring care of a special cat-

egory are not recognised at all under Belarusian legislation. Over only the past 10 years Belarus has lost hundreds of archaeological objects.

Many historical cemeteries and mass graves from the time of the Communist Terror also face destruction. Work has begun on a new motorway through the notorious area of Kuropaty, where lie the remains of thousands of victims of the Stalinist repression during the 1930s and 1940s. This site has the status of a historical-cultural monument of the first category. In Minsk, the historical graveyard of Calvary, where the remains of many famous personalities from the world of science and culture are interred, is gradually being destroyed. Unfortunately it is not possible to hope for an improvement in the situation in the area of protection of historical and cultural heritage. Immediately after the presidential elections, the Council of Ministers of the Belarus Republic adopted a directive at the instigation of D. Bubnovsky rescinding the State protection of more than 15,000 archaeological, historical, urban and architectonic monuments.

Vladimir Denisov
 Presidium Vice-Chairman
 Belarusian Voluntary Society of Historical and Cultural
 Monuments Protection

Mass graves in the area of Kuropaty affected by roadworks

