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The Borderline State

The Belarusian Frontier in the Memory Wars

For many Europeans, Russia's invasion of Ukraine meant the end of the world as they knew it. But for the Belarusian society, 24 February 2022 was just the next stage in the disintegration of the world that for them began in August 2020. Then, a peaceful protest, the largest in the nation's history, triggered by a rigged election, was brutally crushed by the Belarusian administration, with help from the Russian regime. The ensuing crackdown left at least twelve people dead, over 1,500 incarcerated, and some 200,000 to 500,000 Belarusians (two to five per cent of the total population) were forced to flee the country during the three years after the repression began¹.

The protest signalled the end of a long-standing alliance of Belarusian society with its autocratic president Aleksandr Lukashenko, who had seized power in 1993, soon after the Soviet collapse, winning the support of a large part of the population with his pledge to preserve Soviet virtues. The upheaval initially raised hopes of a national awakening and drew unprecedented numbers to the idea of stepping away from the local authoritarianism kept alive by the support of the Russian regime. With growing national self-confidence, the protesters of 2020 challenged the entrenched status of the country as the "last Soviet republic"; for the first time in the history of the independent Republic of Belarus, significant parts of its population had the courage to imagine their country entering a new political era and finally breaking the ties with its Soviet past and its Russia-dependent present. The expectations of national revival, shared by many protesters, triggered a surge in anti-Russian sentiment in the country and sparked debates on decolonisation and national identity.

And yet, iconoclasm against Soviet monuments, which became a notorious feature at events of social agitation across the post-Soviet realm, did not occur in Belarus. The only such event documented by the media during the last few years took place in

the capital Minsk prior to the onset of the protests. It affected not a Soviet, but a Russian memorial: a monument to Alexander Pushkin, a kitschy gift from the Moscow city council to Minsk in 1999 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Russian poet's birth. The bronze seated figure of Pushkin, captured in a moment of inspiration, was installed in a sheltered park location in the city centre, on the bank of the river Svislotch. In January 2020, a political activist painted the lifted hands of the poet red, symbolising the role the Russians played in the maintenance of the autocratic Belarusian regime. The activist, a member of an oppositional political organisation, was caught and later prosecuted by the authorities, but enjoyed wide support in the creative community². Soon after the perpetrator's arrest, in late January 2020, a prominent Belarusian performance artist and the namesake of the poet, Ales Pushkin, appeared at a public book launch event in Minsk with his hands painted red (fig. 1). In a symbolical gesture, the artist Pushkin (who was later arrested on political charges and died in prison in 2023) presented his book project *Prison Album* at an event that was also attended by the human rights defender Ales Bialiatski, a later Nobel Peace Prize winner (who is currently serving a prison sentence of ten years)³.

The most obvious explanation for the lack of any iconoclastic action is the pervasive police surveillance in the public spaces of the republic, along with the physical absence of politically active citizens, many of whom have fled the country. However, as the following examples demonstrate, the lack of iconoclasm does not mean that the monument struggle within the polarised and politically charged society is totally absent or suppressed. On the contrary, the de-Sovietising Belarusian protest movement resorted to a very unusual mode of dealing with the legacy of Soviet monuments: instead of objecting to these monuments' right to exist, protesters claim their right to use



Fig. 1: Performance artist Ales Pushkin with his hands painted red in an act of solidarity with the arrested perpetrator of the defacement of the Pushkin monument in Minsk, at a book presentation on 31 January 2020. Photographer unknown (courtesy of the Human Rights Centre Viasna).

those monuments for their own political cause, along with the collective memories they stand for.

The article examines the contested legacy of Soviet mnemonic practices between the Belarusian government and segments of society that have revoked the social contract with it. By analysing events which have been widely publicised on social media platforms or reported in mass media, it traces the manifestations of this contestation across the Belarusian political spectrum and follow their evolution from the onset of the 2020 protests to the present day. The article observes the significance (or the lack of it) of aesthetic, historical, ideological, and emotional values in the contestation's trajectory. Furthermore, the article seeks to outline the reasons for the enduring acceptance of Soviet monuments and memorials in Belarusian society, irrespective of political affiliations. It delves into the intricacies of Belarusian national self-narration and its entanglement with Soviet memorial practices, which exert significant influence on contemporary approaches to the legacy of these practices.

Victory Obelisk in Minsk: On Whose Side is Victory?

A unique phenomenon, the Belarusian contestation involves no iconoclastic hostility to the Soviet monuments common in the usual post-Soviet emancipatory events. The contenders seem to target not the physical presence of Soviet materialisations of collective mnemonic practices, but the ability to associate those practices with their own political cause. The manifestations of this struggle accompanied the Belarusian political drama from the onset of the protests in 2020, marking their most seminal occasions.

Indeed, the shocking brutality of the protests' suppression in 2020 for many observers eclipsed the subtle yet meaningful fight for the central *lieux de mémoire* of the Belarusian capital, which erupted at the beginning of the upheaval. The very start of the Women's Marches in August 2020, which continued through the next three months and became the driving force of civil resistance⁴, was an initiation ceremony in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Belarusian nation: at the Victory Obelisk on Victory Square in Minsk (fig. 2).

On 12 August 2020, the third day of the fateful protests, around thirty women gathered in front of the eternal flame on Victory Square⁵.

The eternal flame was lit at the base of the Victory Obelisk in 1961, on the 17th anniversary of the liberation of Minsk from the Nazi German occupation. The Victory Obelisk and the solemn environs of Victory Square commemorate the national *Stunde Null*, the sacralised struggle of the people against the evil Nazi occupation, which a wide consensus of the society considers the birth of the nation. The monument is in the centre of square, designed by the Belarusian masters of Stalinist eclecticism Vladimir Korol and Georgy Zaborsky in 1954. The obelisk, a granite column 38 meters high sheltering the Sacred Sword of Victory at its base, is crowned by a mosaic-covered replica of the Soviet Order of Victory. Bronze reliefs on four sides of the pedestal, created by the sculptors Zair Azgur and Andrei Bembel in the tradition of Stalinist Socialist Realism, present iconic images of the Soviet Belarusian national narrative: Victory Day on 9 May 1945, the Soviet Army during the Great Patriotic War, Belarusian partisans, and the Heroes who Sacrificed Their Lives for Liberation. Four bronze wreaths, symbolising the four victorious Soviet liberation fronts, flank the obelisk on each side⁶. The obelisk, the eternal flame and the wreaths are enclosed by a traffic roundabout, with two residential buildings curving along its western side to provide a Stalinist classicist backdrop for the monument. The buildings are topped by a glowing script stretching the full length of both facades, which reads “The heroics of the people will live for centuries”.

The female protesters, gathered in front of the eternal flame on 12 August 2020, were dressed in white, with their hair loose and their feet bare. In a spontaneous ceremony, they sang songs in Belarusian to celebrate their readiness to sacrifice themselves for the next national victory, and to encourage their compatriots to “open their eyes” and act heroically for the sake of the nation⁷. Framed in the context of the memorial for the national *Stunde Null*, this action symbolically marked the fight for a renewed Belarus at the heart of the nation’s memorial iconography. The monumental backdrop and the immense national significance of the place provided the improvised ritual with

a sacral meaning in the eyes of the participants and observers. Widely shared on social media, the action marked the powerful beginning of the Women’s Marches, the major driving force behind the protest movement for the next Belarusian liberation.



Fig. 2: Women’s ceremony at the eternal flame on Victory Square in Minsk, 12 August 2020. Photographer unknown (courtesy of Radio Svboda, RFE/RL).

Struggle over the Minsk Hero City Memorial

While the Stalinist Victory Obelisk on Victory Square became associated with the beginning of the mass protest movement, a newer memorial site, erected during the period of socialist modernism, became an object of fierce contention during the protests’ next stages. The Minsk Hero City Obelisk was designed by a team of architects led by Vladimir Kramarenko and inaugurated in 1985. As the name indicates, the site commemorates the status of a heroic city, which Minsk received in 1974: the dynamically outlined 45-meter concrete obelisk lifts the golden star of the award and a golden laurel branch high in the Minsk sky, while a granite book informs visitors in bronze writing about the commemorated event. On the obelisk’s right side, the large bronze female figure of Victory Herald (sculptor Valentin Zankovich) steps forward triumphantly, stretching her right arm horizontally with palm turned up while pointing at the sky with a trumpet held in her left hand⁸.

The complex tops Victory Park, a generously landscaped park stretching along the shores of the dammed Lake Komsomolskoe, the opening date of which – 22 June 1941 – coincides with the day of the Nazi German invasion of the Soviet Union, a fact that

contributes a fair share of World War II mythology to the ensemble. On the south, the Hero City memorial borders on a large transport junction, where two major arterial roads of the city cross. The complex of the obelisk and the Victory Herald figure is encompassed within the amphitheatre of the entrance area of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War (originally founded in 1944 at a different location), for which a new building was commissioned in 2005, twenty years after the inauguration of the Hero City memorial⁹. The addition of the museum to the existing memorial promoted the location of the *lieu de mémoire* of upmost national importance for Belarusians.

It was this site that, on 16 August 2020, four days after the ritual at the eternal flame, became the destination of the largest demonstration in Belarusian history, the Freedom March, which attracted over 200,000 participants (fig. 3). The Victory Herald figure, wrapped by the protesters in their white-red-white banners, was turned into a visual background for the images of the female leaders of the opposition movement, whose hand signals of love, perseverance and victory were broadcast via numerous social media channels following the events to audiences all over the world¹⁰. However, the situation was quickly reprogrammed by the riot police who gained control over the memorial site. The museum area became one of the most heavily guarded places in the republic; the bronze Victory Herald, now in the service of the regime forces, signalled the imminent victory of the dictator, possibly foreshadowing a future milestone in state commemorations¹¹ (fig. 4).



Fig. 3: Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk as the destination of the Freedom March, 16 August 2020. Video still (courtesy of Radio Svoboda, RFE/RL)

All Quiet on the Western Front? Soviet Memorials Re-valued

The contested legacy of Soviet commemoration practices, prompted by the mass protests of 2020, continued during the years following the protests' suppression. The official effort aimed to emphasise selected aspects of the inherited war narrative. In the wake of the upheaval, state funds were allocated for the renovation of Soviet war monuments and memorials across the republic. The choices of the memorials for renovation by city and regional councils provide clear evidence of the ideologically driven rationale of their assessment by the administrative bodies, which resulted in a preferred treatment of certain areas of commemoration. In the political fight for collective memory, the ideological nature of the memorials and monuments clearly triumphed over their aesthetic or historical values, becoming the main guideline in the revamping of the symbolical landscapes.

A significant example of the prevalence of the ideological rationale in the official assessment of a monument's value was the renovation and extension of a memorial site in the village of Gai in the Mogilev district of eastern Belarus. This artistically mediocre war monument of the modernist period, erected in 1980, was chosen by the authorities due to its special commemorative profile: dedicated to a composite battalion of soldiers and Soviet police, the memorial has helped to improve the image of unpopular law enforcement officers by highlighting their historical association with the heroic epos of World War II¹². The memorial site is now also used as a distinguished place



Fig. 4: Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk recaptured by regime forces, 2020. Photo: Lesya Pchelka (courtesy of the photographer).

for police ceremonies and events of patriotic education of the youth, teaching them respect for law enforcement.

Particularly striking cases can be found in western parts of Belarus. In 2022 a strategic factor supported the decision to renovate the Monument to the Soviet Soldiers-Liberators in Brest, on the border with Poland, renewing its base and replacing its granite finishing¹³. A serial obelisk of the first post-war decade was first erected on this mass grave of the Soviet soldiers killed in World War II, both during the Soviet fight against the German occupation between 1941 to 1944, and in 1939, when the Red Army acted as an ally of the Wehrmacht, invading and dividing Poland in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The celebrated renewal of the memorial by the Brest city council helped the city administration gain control over an uncomfortable historical truth, which has often been instrumentalised by the opposition in its attacks on the official historical war narration.

Not only did state-owned monuments and memorials become parts of this state-led campaign claiming the legacy of Soviet war commemoration for the current administration. State media have also reported on and popularised civic initiatives of regime supporters who have participated in the preservation of war monuments. For example, state media have raised to prominence a businesswoman from Brest, Natalya Il-nitskaya, who started privately collecting monuments dedicated to the Red Army which were dismantled or neglected in neighbouring Poland after the law on de-communisation of public space was passed there in 2017. She has enjoyed the full support of the city council and other administrative bodies, who have not only formally backed her activities, but have also added to her collection: the Brest city administration presented her with a war cannon, and the local military division, deeply moved by the woman's dedication, donated a tank¹⁴.

Neither the artistic nor historical value of the salvaged artefacts seem to have been considerations in the assessment by Il-nitskaya or her supporters. The massive effort put into finding, transporting, mounting, repairing and maintaining her private sculpture park, Alley of Remembrance, near Brest (currently displaying twenty exhibits) have resulted in a random compili-

on of objects, ranging from the creepy to the bizarre. However, the mere fact of its existence generates powerful emotions, which are eagerly utilised by the propaganda apparatus, not only locally and nationally, but also internationally. The state-owned mass media use this as a sanctimonious example of a "highly moral" self-sacrificing Belarusian attitude towards the sacred memories of the victory over Nazism, and especially to juxtapose it to the "vandalism" against such memorials ubiquitous in other post-socialist countries¹⁵. Furthermore, in 2021, the collector became a part of a transnational propaganda campaign, further strengthening the connection between Belarus and Russia through a narration of a shared glorious military past: the Belarusian collector received a Badge of Honour of a Compatriot from the Russian foreign minister¹⁶.

Oppositional Practices of Intervention

The parts of Belarusian society on the other end of the political spectrum, forced into hiding or exile after the suppression of the protests, are severely limited in their options, yet they do not refrain from actions entirely. Due to their restricted access to tangible memorials, their engagement with the legacy of Soviet war commemoration has shifted to the intangible. Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the more determined parts of the Belarusian opposition have resorted to appropriating and re-enacting guerrilla practices of Soviet Belarusian partisans, like their forebears, risking their lives and freedom.

These actions are interventions that go way beyond the artistic. For instance, in a nod to the venerated activities of Soviet partisans during World War II, members of a clandestine Belarusian network of railway workers, hackers and dissident security forces – involving, accordingly, three main groups: the Community of Railway Workers in Belarus¹⁷, the Cyber Partisans, and the BYPOL – commit themselves to the tactics they claim their partisan heritage: they engage in railroad sabotage, aiming, and often succeeding, in distorting and disrupting the infrastructural support of the Russian war effort by the Belarusian administration¹⁸. In addition, a unit of military volunteers, named

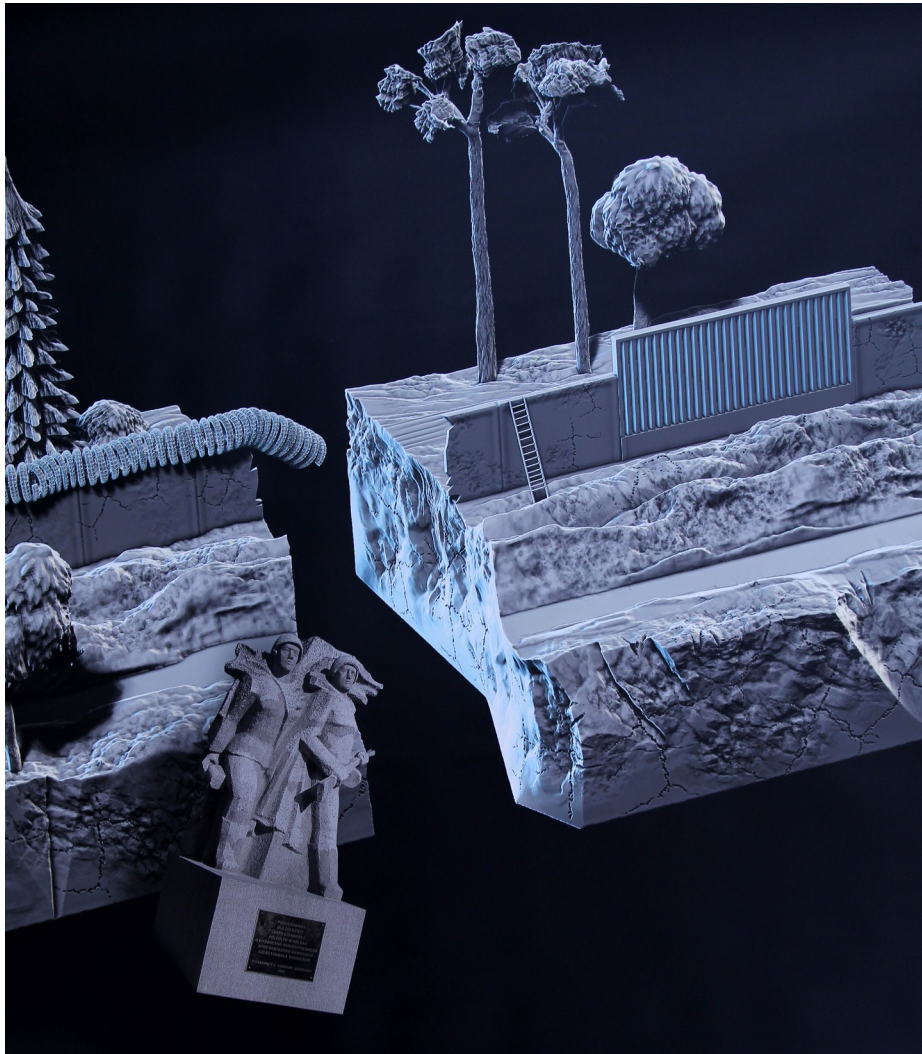


Fig. 5: Fragment of the artwork by Uladzimir Hramovich *All That is Forgotten is Buried in the Ground* (2023), depicting Belarusian border fortifications, which are accompanied by images of Polish war monuments salvaged from across the border by a Belarusian pro-government activist (courtesy of the artist).

after a national hero and the namesake of a World War II Soviet partisan brigade, Kastus Kalinowski, are fighting on the Ukrainian side. The Belarusian government in exile (the transitional cabinet of the coordination council) have voiced unwavering support for and approval of the (para)military actions of the “partisan” railway network operating within the country, and of the Belarusian unit of volunteers in Ukraine. In doing so, it re-interprets rituals routinised by the Soviet hagiographic habitus, swearing to never forget their heroic deeds and raising to hero status those fallen in the fight against the enemy¹⁹.

A more peaceful manifestation of the engagement with Soviet war commemoration practices among the Belarusian opposition involves the artistic endeavours

of exiled Belarusians. The 2023 artwork *All That is Forgotten is Buried in the Ground* (fig. 5) of the currently Berlin-based Uladzimir Hramovich, who was forced to flee in 2020, offers a poignant example of the appropriation of the legacy of Soviet war remembrance by means of its documentation and intense critical examination. In his work, Hramovich juxtaposes the rescue of Soviet war monuments, popularised by the regime-owned mass media, with the contemporary Belarusian manifestations of “war monuments”: the fortifications installed on the Polish-Belarusian border to limit the entry of Middle East migrants, who have been deployed by Lukashenko’s administration as political pawns²⁰.



Fig. 6: View of the installation by Uladzimir Hramovich *Holding a Hedgehog with Your Bare Hands*, at the exhibition *The Repeating Clock* held at The Left Place in Reims, France (2023), curated by Patricia Couvet (courtesy of the artist).

In another series, Hramovich has addressed the legacy of the satirical periodical *Vozhyk* (Belarusian for hedgehog), which started as a motivation poster titled *Crush the Fascist Vermin* at the beginning of World War II. In a series of site-specific installations across Europe, with stations in Polish Poznań, French Reims and in Berlin, Hramovich has translated the expressive graphics of this Soviet war periodical into contemporary murals, establishing a connection between the nimble tactics of urban guerrillas and the Belarusian fight against dictators of any persuasion, showing both the historical continuity of the Soviet tradition and its present vitality²¹ (fig. 6, 7).

Even positions that are critical of the omnipresent public commemoration of national traumas and of their propagandist misuse get seduced. Ironically, Ali-axey Talstou's video installation *If the Past Never Ends* (2020) ascertains a World War II-themed publicity stunt, staged by Russian ideologists in Eastern Ukraine in 2014²². The symbolism-laden tale of a tank IS-3, which allegedly left its pedestal to protect the Russian-speaking population of Donbass from the

new "fascists" (i.e. Ukrainian government), was initially certified as genuine²³. Facing the memorials of Brest, the Belarusian artist's poetic video monologue perpetuates the tale without questioning its dubious origins, and thus unwittingly affirms the Russian propagandist narration of the "two wars" fought against fascism²⁴.



Fig. 7: View of Hramovich's installation *Holding a Hedgehog with Your Bare Hands* at the exhibition *АЗБУКА STRIKE* at the Pickle Bar in Berlin, Germany (2022), curated by Patricia Couvet (courtesy of the artist).

Conclusions: Inheriting the Borderline State

As the above examples demonstrate, Belarusians on both sides show high levels of emotional attachment to the inherited Soviet iconographies and practices of commemoration. One of the major reasons for such profound ties is the nature of the collective memories connected with these practices. They are dominated by the remembrance of the nation's exceptional suffering and its contribution to victory in World War II: Belarus is believed by many to have been more negatively impacted by the global conflict than any other nation. In international recognition of its extraordinary position, Soviet Belorussia (as the territory of the present Republic of Belarus was known in the Soviet Union) became a founding member of the United Nations in 1945, along with the USSR. Within the republic, the message of the nation's exceptional sacrifices was conveyed by all available propaganda means, with monuments and memorials playing a leading role. Sacralised by the enormous sacrifice of human life and internalised as a result of the memorials' omnipresence in public space, the war narrative has thus been inscribed in the national psyche and still enjoys a nearly unconditional acceptance across the polarised political spectrum.

Among other reasons for the enduring popularity of Soviet monuments and memorial practices across the political divide, the coherence of the national self-narrative as a "borderland" appears to be of particular significance. The persistence of this narrative is traceable to the early days of Belarusian attempts at nationhood. The definition of Belarus as the north-west "fringe" of the Russian Empire (*Severo-Zapadnyi kraj*) has been propounded by the Russian administration since the early 19th century, helping to downplay the forceful annexation of the former territories of Rzeczpospolita by presenting them as part of the natural growth of the Russian state²⁵. Belarusian nationalist thinkers followed up this imperial definition with their own notion of a contested "frontier"²⁶. The image of Belarus as a border republic was further developed by Soviet propaganda during the interwar period: a border guard assisted by a dog (German shepherd) and a local young person has become the symbol of the republic²⁷, constantly popularised in the print media and during mass events.

During World War II, the image of a border protector received a paramilitary overhaul due to the scale and success of the partisan operation, which significantly contributed to the victory of the Allied Nations over Nazi Germany. Besides, under the Nazi occupation, the major post-war political force was forged in the Belarusian forests, the "Partisan Faction", which would control the republican development for nearly two post-war decades²⁸. Its members learned, as leaders of Belarusian partisan brigades, to operate according to Moscow's guidelines and yet maintain a certain degree of autonomy. Coming to power after the war, they advanced the national project, but sought to do so in compliance with the central Soviet ideology. As a seminal part of that effort, the republic developed an elaborate culture of commemoration, conveyed through various cultural media, from literature and the fine arts to theatre, music, film and architecture. Conforming with Soviet ideological imperatives, and yet distinctively Belarusian, works from all spheres of culture developed emotional expressiveness and critical positions far outside the Soviet mainstream.

Most of those works evolved along two main tropes, commemorating national sacrifice or celebrating the Belarusian prowess in self-defence: the immense war losses and the partisan movement were established as major national identifiers. The engagement with both tropes profiled the most distinguished representatives of both the official and alternative cultures, and brought to such authors as Vasil Bykau, Ales Adamovich and Svetlana Alexievich all-Soviet and international acclaim.

Furthermore, the commitment of the Belarusian political elites to the commemoration of World War II events led to the creation of new sacral places of nationhood, of which the Khatyn Memorial, located about 50 km north of Minsk, deserves particular mention (architects Yury Gradov, Leonid Levin and Valentin Zankovich, and sculptor Sergey Selikhanov, 1969; fig. 8).²⁹ The choice of the village – one of nearly 200 Belarusian villages whose inhabitants were burned alive – probably had a political basis: as Norman Davis has suggested, the Khatyn massacre in Belarus was exploited by the Soviet authorities to cover up the Soviet massacre of over 20,000 Polish military officers

and intelligentsia in the Russian village of Katyn. Nevertheless, the memorial, which commemorates the inhabitants of the small village of Khatyn burned alive by the Nazis, became the clearest example of linking a general Soviet narrative of German war crimes to a particular Belarusian location, personifying Soviet war victims by giving them Belarusian names, and thus turning the commemorated tragedy into an intimately Belarusian event³⁰. The memorial's iconography – one missing birch in a set of four, symbolising every fourth Belarusian being lost in the war, and the towering figure of an old man holding in mute despair the body of a dead boy – has become an intrinsic part of the national identity. In other words, while the reason for erecting the monument is open to speculation, the major position it now occupies in the Belarusians psyche is beyond doubt³¹.

While benefiting from its alignment with Soviet propaganda guidelines during the Soviet times, the Belarusian national narration, focused on the commemoration of World War II, had unexpected consequences after the USSR collapsed. The war narrative centred on the trope of Belarus being a borderland – a liminal space, a geopolitical margin, the fringe of an empire – became a part of the epistemic doom loop of national self-understanding, which Belarusians have still failed to escape³². The concept perpetuates and naturalises the Belarusian state of dependency: a borderland attribution implies the existence of an external centre, inherently denying Belarus sovereignty. Largely unchallenged, this epistemic durability facilitates the seemingly irreconcilable: it accommodates the claims of primordial national distinctiveness by Belarusian national revivalists, while justifying the liminal position of the Belarusian nation and asserting its subjugated status.

Secondly, the intrinsic intertwining of the Belorussian and the Soviet in Belarusian national self-identification became one of the major enablers for the dictator Lukashenko to seize and sustain power for so long. The long-time ruler of the “last Soviet Republic” capitalised on this entanglement of Soviet memory practices with Belarusian national self-narration, winning the support of a large part of the population with a pledge to preserve Soviet values. He maintained power not least by the virtue of appropriating, adap-



Fig. 8: The centrepiece of the Khatyn Memorial: the bronze figure of the Unconquered Man by the sculptor Sergey Selikhanov, erected in 1969. Khatyn village in the Minsk region. Photographer unknown (Open Source, CC-BY-SA-4.0 by Zala).

ting and expanding the mnemonic practices inherited from the Soviet period. The intricacy of the narrational embroilment of the national and the imperial, of dependency and sovereignty, of subordination and exceptionalism, accompanied by a deep emotional attachment to inherited commemoration practices, resulted in the emergence of the current Belarusian phenomenon: the idiosyncratic contestation of the legacy of Soviet memorials, which affects all segments of the society split apart by the ongoing crisis.

Endnotes

- The estimates are according to the data from the Belarusian Human Rights Centre Viasna, the Council of Europe and BelSat, the Polish public television channel aimed at Belarus ("As of December 1, 1447 Persons in Belarus Are Considered as Political Prisoners", in: Human Rights Centre Viasna, 1.12.2023, <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/>; "Belarusians in Exile: An Overlooked Issue Addressed by the Parliamentary Assembly", in: Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 25.1.2023, <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/8955/belarusians-in-exile-an-overlooked-issue-addressed-by-the-parliamentary-assembly/>; "At Least 15: Deaths Linked to Post-election Protests in Belarus", in: BelSat, 27.5.2021, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/27-05-2021-at-least-15-deaths-linked-to-post-election-protests-in-belarus> (all links last accessed 1.12.2023).
- "Перформанс Пушкина, откровения Скребца и Кафка от Борщевского. Фоторепортаж" [The performance of Pushkin, the revelations of Skrebets and Kafka by Borshevsky. Photo reportage], in: The Human Rights Centre Viasna, 31.1.2020, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/95879> (last accessed 1.12.2023).
- Ibid.
- The phenomenon was widely reported in the local and international media, e.g.: "Belarus Election: Women Form 'Solidarity Chains' to Condemn Crackdown", in: BBC, 13.8.2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53761747>; "Women-only Protests in Belarus", in: Human Rights House Foundation, 29.10.2020, <https://humanrightshouse.org/interviews/women-only-protests-in-belarus/>; "The Female Face of Belarusian Resistance", in: International Politics and Society, 6.3.2023, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/the-female-face-of-belarusian-resistance-6554/> (all last accessed 1.12.2023).
- See "Искусство народного неповиновения: Дмитрий Строев о феномене белорусского протеста" [The art of popular disobedience: Dzmitry Strotsev on the phenomenon of Belarusian protest], in: colta.ru, 10.12.2020, <https://www.m.colta.ru/articles/specials/26156-dmitriy-strotsev-fenomen-belorusskogo-protesta> (last accessed 1.12.2023).
- For details on the monument and its creators, see Яков Алексейчик, *Имя на Площади Победы* [Yakov Alekseychik, *Name on Victory Square*], Minsk 2018.
- Искусство... 2020.
- Г. Ярмоленка, "Минск – город-герой" [Minsk – Hero City], in: Архитектура Беларуси, Minsk 1993, p. 312.
- Belarusian State Museum of the Great Patriotic War History, s.a., <http://war.museum.by/en> (last accessed 1.12.2023).
- E.g. "Tens of Thousands Gather in Minsk for Biggest Protest in Belarus History", in: The Guardian, 16.8.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/16/belarus-prepares-for-biggest-protest-yet-after-week-of-anger>; "Belarus Protests Eclipse Rally in Defense of Defiant Leader", in: The New York Times, 16.8.2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/16/world/europe/belarus-protests-lukashenko.html>; "Tens of Thousands Hold Big-gest Protest Yet, Lukashenko Defiant", in: Aljazeera, 17.8.2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/17/tens-of-thousands-hold-biggest-protest-yet-lukashenko-defiant> (all last accessed 1.12.2023).
- The suppression of the largest protest, which ended at the Hero City memorial, reached its pinnacle when Lukashenko, who stayed in his residence located next to the memorial, resorted to direct action and picked up a weapon himself. See e.g. "Belarus: Lukashenko Brandishes Rifle as Thousands of Protesters Demand His Resignation", in: EuroNews, 23.8.2020, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2020/08/23/belarus-opposition-holds-protest-demanding-lukashenko-s-resignation> (last accessed 1.12.2023).
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 24. In addition to its triumphant presence in the pro-Russian media, a token coin depicting the tank was produced, with inscriptions in Russian and Ukrainian (e.g. "Liberation of Ukraine from the Fascist Occupants"), as part of a series dedicated to the armed formations of Donbass. See "Жетон Московского монетного двора 'Две войны ИС. (2 войны ИС-3). Танк'. Нейзильбер. ММД. Россия, 2014 год" [Moscow Mint token "2 wars IS-3. Tank". Nickel silver], in: *ozon*, s.a., <https://ozon.by/product/zheton-moskovskogo-monetnogo-dvora-dve-voyny-is-2-voyny-is-3-tank-neyzilber-mmd-rossiya-2014-god-155251414/> (last accessed 5.2.2024).
 25. The contemporary historiography, dominated by the self-colonisation school, provided a scientific rationale for considering the conquered territories – among them Belarusian – not as Russian colonies, but as the new Russian lands. Cf. Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonisation: Russia's Colonial Experience*, Cambridge 2011, p. 70.
 26. See e.g. the writings of Ignat Abdzirulovich, rediscovered by Belarusian national revivalists in the 1990s: *Ігнат Абдзіраловіч, Адвечным шляхам [On the eternal path]*, Minsk 1993 [1921].
 27. The All-Soviet Agrarian Exhibition (VSKhV), which opened in 1939 in Moscow, became the major official manifestation of the republic approved by the Soviet administration. See e.g. Greg Castillo, "Peoples at an Exhibition: Soviet Architecture and the National Question", in: *Socialist Realism without Shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgenii Dobrenko, Durham 1997, p. 91.
 28. See Michael Urban, *An Algebra of Soviet Power: Elite Circulation in the Belorussian Republic, 1966–86*, Cambridge 1989.
 29. See Khatyn: State Memorial Complex, s.a., <https://khatyn.by/en/>. For a personal account of the memorial's creation by its architect Leonid Levin, see Леонид Левин, *Хатынь: Автобиографическая повесть [Khatyn: An autobiographical novel]*, Minsk 2005.
 30. Norman Davis, *Europe: A History*, Oxford 1996, p. 1005.
 31. See e.g. Simon Lewis, "Overcoming Hegemonic Martyrdom: The Afterlife of Khatyn in Belarusian Memory", in: *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015, pp. 367–401.
 32. E.g. Simon Lewis, "The 'Partisan Republic': Colonial Myths and Memory Wars in Belarus", in: *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, eds. Julie Fedor et al., London 2017, pp. 371–396, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-66523-8_13.

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Abstract

The article examines the recent phenomenon of the Belarusian politics of memory, focusing on its unique mode of dealing with the legacy of Soviet memorials. This mode diverges significantly from the reaction usually associated with the post-Soviet region. The catalyst for this phenomenon was the fraudulent August 2020 election, which sparked unparalleled mass protests in Belarus, historically considered the "last Soviet republic". For the first time in the Belarusian history, a great number of Belarusians felt courageous enough to embrace the vision of a de-Sovietised future. However, the segments of Belarusian society challenging the "Soviet" status quo did not follow the typical post-Soviet trend of iconoclastic actions against Soviet monuments. Instead, they positioned themselves as contenders for the legacy of Soviet remembrance practices, leading to their contestation across the Belarusian polarised political spectrum. By analysing events which were widely publicised on social media platforms or reported in popular periodicals, this article examines manifestations of this struggle, tracing its evolution from the onset of the 2020 protests to the present day. Furthermore, the article seeks to reveal the reasons for the enduring acceptance of Soviet monuments and memorial sites, which persist in Belarusian society irrespective of political affiliations. It delves into the intricacies of Belarusian national self-narration and its entanglements with memorial practices forged during the Soviet era.

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