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HISTORICAL TREATMENT OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN POST-SOVIET BELARUS: SACRALIZATION OF THE COMMUNIST MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

Belarus, a unique post-Soviet state has fully adopted the interpretation of both the Communist and today's political authorities on the fundamental role played by the Second World War in the construction of historical narrative, memory and national identity. Modern Belarusian historiography can be divided into two major discourses: a Soviet and a nationalist discourse. In this configuration, the Soviet view of history dominates with the support of the political authorities, which have monopolized the majority of social sources. The Second World War memory was articulated as the fundamental event for Belarusian history serving to *sacralize* the communist memory and to legitimate the present political system anchored in the communist legacy. Educational system, commemorations, toponymy, museums aim to transmit the official interpretation of a sacred role of the Second World War for Belarus.

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INTRODUCTION

THE SECOND WORLD WAR - A FUNDAMENTAL EVENT IN BELARUSIAN HISTORY

The historical treatment of the Second World War in Belarus, a post-Soviet state with a unique history and a unique history treatment, is extremely complex. The "most Soviet of the USSR's Republics" (Karbalevitch, 1999), Belarus, has fully adopted the interpretation of both the communist and today's political authorities on the fundamental role played by this event in the construction of historical narrative, memory and national identity.

The politics of memory deployed by the Soviet government articulated the Second World War (known in the former USSR as the Great Patriotic War) as the key event in the development of the Belarusian national consciousness.

In the USSR, victory in the Second World War became a unifying myth for the Soviet people. The Second World War was presented as a glorious event where all the peoples of the USSR joined forces in the fight against Nazism. Heroism, patriotism, and devotion to Soviet ideals under the leadership of the Communist Party led the Soviet people to victory. This victory was presented as an affirmation of the superiority of the communist system in relation to the Western model, and was widely used by Soviet propaganda. Both the Soviet government's responsibility for the war, nor the numerous crimes perpetuated against the army and the civilian population on the eve, during and after the war by the Soviets were revealed.

Nowadays when attending the parades on Victory Day, grandiose celebrations of the most important event in Soviet history, it is difficult to believe that the sacred date of the commemoration of the Great Victory - May 9 - was introduced into the Soviet calendar only in 1965. For twenty years after the victory in 1945, May 9 was a regular working day in the USSR, a fact that the history books never

mention. Even Belarusian historians ignore or conveniently forget this fact because everything is done to naturalize the articulation of this fundamental event in the history of Belarus.

In Soviet historiography, the history of Belarus begins only in 1917. The Belarusian people was able to consolidate and begin its existence as a nation state only through the framework offered by the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), a part of the USSR created in January 1918. The Belarusian government is a Soviet creation and the Belarusian people is primarily a Soviet people. The history of Belarus is the story of the BSSR. For this reason, the major event in the history of the USSR, the victory in the Second World War, is accepted as a fundamental myth in the memory of the Belarusian people, who have few competing myths. Even if alternative myths exist on the margin of the society, they are too weak to challenge the main communist myth.

Every Belarusian knows by heart the number of 1418 days - the period between 22 June 1941 and 9 May 1945 - that corresponds to the duration of the Great Patriotic War in the USSR. Several generations of Belarusians assimilated the idea that the sacred event and foundation of the history of the Belarusian people is the Great Patriotic War. Cities and villages are dotted with monuments to the war. Many schools have a museum dedicated to local history and to war veterans and partisans who lived and fought in the neighboring villages or towns. The victory celebrations are always pompous. Meetings with war veterans are held regularly in all schools. Educational policy and official ideology continue this Soviet tradition.

HISTORY OF THE WAR IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

The school system is a powerful tool for transmitting collective memory, for building a sense of belonging to a nation state and a national community, and reinforcing the acceptance of an institutional order. Textbooks are an effective way of transmitting historical narrative concerning national identity. History teaching and history textbooks for schools are extremely powerful and effective tools in shaping national identity in education for many reasons. First, the compulsory character of primary and secondary education for children and adolescents must be stressed: no one escapes the educational system of the countries in which they grow up. Secondly, in the specific Belarusian context, the state educational system has few concurrent agents of education: even the family often delegates its educational function entirely to the school system. Textbooks constitute a powerful force of integration since they "are diffused in hundreds of thousands, taken over several generations even in millions of copies: their texts, illustrations, and typography have been common references... for a long time" (Thiesse, 1999). The role played by history textbooks in the construction

of national identity is very important. The content of history textbooks relates directly to questions of national identity. It teaches us to be and think nationally through interpretation of the events of a particular national history and brings information about the distinction between “us” and “the other” to schoolchildren and young adults in the context of the country in which they are educated.

Many political authorities of different countries and different periods have been aware of the power of history in the formation of the consciousness of citizens, a fact proved by the resolution "On the teaching of history in secondary schools of the USSR" adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on May 16, 1934, approved personally by Stalin. This resolution stated that "the teaching of history should no longer refer to abstract patterns of the evolution of sociopolitical formations, but the history of the Soviet state must be presented in a lively and interesting way" (Staline, 1934, pp. 83-84)

The present Belarusian administration is also aware of the role of education in weaving social ties and building identity: "history teaching is also a struggle for the minds and souls not only of individuals but also of nations." (Loukachenko, 2010) The government tends to overcome the shortcomings of education within the family in the context of a dramatic decline in the general level of the education of children, to the degree that "textbooks are probably the only books which many children lay their hands on." (Loukachenko, 2010) At the same time, the school system plays an almost exclusive role in the training of young citizens. Textbooks are the preferred and often the sole instrument of the transmission and legitimization of the particular interpretation of history and narrative of national identity, which a political administration aspires to convey.

To illustrate how the Soviet myth of the Great War was created at an academic and scholarly level, it is advisable to refer to the section devoted to the Great Patriotic War in the only textbook of the history of the BSSR published in Belarus during the Soviet period (Abetsadarski, 1968). The unique textbook of the history of the existed in the BSSR from 1960 to 1992 reflected the official discourse on the Second World War. The section devoted to the Second World War in the textbook occupies 6 percent of the editorial surface of the textbook. The interpretation of the war is only partial. The paragraph begins with the dogmatic assertion as follows: "On 22 June 1941, Nazi Germany attacked the USSR. Upon the call of the Communist Party, the whole people stood up to fight against the Nazi invaders." A subparagraph concerning the partisan movement entitled "The partisan war of the whole people" occupies half of the chapter on the war, and this movement is described in glowing terms. Three elements are highlighted. Firstly, the partisan war was a war of the whole people of Belarus. Secondly, the direction of the movement was provided by the Communist Party. Thirdly, the success

of the partisan struggle is emphasized, no mention of failures or crimes committed by partisans is made. The following sentences quoted from the only textbook of Soviet Belarus illustrate the writing of the history of the Soviet partisans: "From the first days of occupation, workers in Soviet Belarus started the war of the whole people. Brigades of partisans were created everywhere. Their number increased daily. The organizer and leader of the partisan movement was the Communist Party." The semantic and stylistic construction of the text are revealing. Short sentences and a dogmatic tone meet the objectives of communist propaganda: to point out that the information provided by the textbooks is an ultimate and indisputable truth, while objective criticism were leveled by nationalist historians at these postulates of Soviet interpretation of the war.

In 2004, when Belarus celebrated the 60th anniversary of the victory in the Second World War, a special course on this event was introduced for students in the final year of high school and the first year of university. Specific textbooks were published as a didactical support for these courses. These textbooks present a Soviet version of the war and scarcely evoke the crimes of Soviet leaders and the complex issue of collaborationism, and reduce the role of the Allies in the victory to a minimum. The Molotov - Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol are mentioned, but without explanation: "On August 23, 1939, a German-Soviet agreement of non-aggression was signed (the Molotov - Ribbentrop Pact). At the same time a secret protocol was signed (Kovalenia and Stachkevitch, 2004)." The Stalin's biography presented in the textbook is glorious: "Under Stalin's direction, the Soviet people won a victory over Nazi Germany". Numerous errors of the Soviet government, the high price in terms of human lives scarified for the victory, the occupation of the Central European countries after the war are not mentioned in the textbook.

In the same textbook a preface written by the Belarusian president (who has a degree in history) reads:

"Some pseudo-academics try to rewrite the history of the Great Patriotic War, diminishing the role of our grandfathers and rehabilitating traitors, collaborators, and slaves of the Nazis. Young people are the main target of these lies. I have confidence in your clear minds and the honesty that allow you to distinguish between truth and falsehood. The living memory of the past will help us to build the future. To know the history of our homeland is a sacred duty of every citizen. Patriotism is the foundation of the courage and heroism with which the Belarusian people has survived all its wars and defended its independence."

This quotation proves that the collective memory of the Second World War as a glorious and victorious event is a source of pride for the people of Belarus. No alternative vision is tolerated. To

underline the importance of the commemoration of Victory day in Belarus, it should be noted that the celebrations take place according to a distinctly Soviet model. During the parades on May 9, the same "techniques" and the same spectacles are enacted as in the Soviet era: columns of people are dressed to represent state symbols, while in Stalin's time parades often figured a portrait of Stalin made out of people in costume. Gymnasts and athletes were part of all Soviet parades, and gymnastic performances in the same Soviet style feature today in Belarus on Victory Day.

THE STATE MONOPOLY OVER THE SECOND WORLD WAR MEMORY

More than twenty years after the fall of the communist regime, the Great Patriotic War is a still sacred event in the history of Belarus. Political discourse underlines the heroic role of the Belarusian people, which "together with the peoples of the USSR saved Europe from Nazism (Loukachenko, 2003)." This is a winners' version of events; no mention of the victims of the War is possible. In official rhetoric, the Great Patriotic War is thus presented as a sacred event at the base of Belarusian history, and divergent interpretations are erased.

The current socio-political system is making significant efforts to impose the communist vision of the Second World War as a holy heroic war of the whole people. To defend the alternative version (less heroic, focused on victims and collaborators) of the war alternative resources are required, which are almost non-existent in Belarus. Only academics who are able to conduct historical research in institutions located outside Belarus, such as the European University, the Independent Institute of Socio-economic research and policies, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, which are all exiled in Vilnius (Lithuania), or those placed under the patronage and protection of foreign bodies (such as the "History Workshop" in Minsk) can afford to challenge the official discourse. In Belarus, in the context of a system, which derives its legitimacy from the Soviet legacy, the defense of an alternative interpretation of the war is extremely problematic. Besides costing a great deal, the ability to protest and to defend an alternative interpretation of history is conditioned by how much influence the person protesting is able to exercise. There are very few historians who feel able to influence the writing and teaching of history, which inhibits the protest (Hirschman, 1970). The alternative research is published abroad - in Poland, in Lithuania, in Germany (CHIARI, Bernhard, *Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollabrations und Winderstand in Weissrusland 1941-1944*, Droste Verlage, Dusseldorf, 1998 Lindner, Rainer, *Historiker und Herrschaft. Nationsbildung und Geschichtspolitik in Weißrußland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, München, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1999 among others...) and it is impossible to buy these books in Belarusian libraries, only at oppositional political parties'

headquarters. The alternative to the Soviet-style vision of the war, the nationalist interpretation of this event is mobilized by oppositional political forces. The glorification of the Second World War is relating to the Soviet legacy and links with Russia, contested by political opposition.

Among the few alternative institutions, which can escape the official historiographical dogmas outside the system, we have already cited the "History Workshop" in Minsk, a Germano-Belarusian institution. The Second World War is the central area of research of the workshop. The Workshop, located in the territory where the Minsk ghetto was situated, is trying to reveal the "white spots" of the war and of Nazi occupation, including the destiny of the Jewish community and collaboration. The protection of a diplomatic institution facilitates access to German sources for researchers and guarantees a certain flexibility and freedom of expression.

Political intervention in history writing in the twentieth century and today has affected the independent functioning of historiography and the narrative proved by historiography, as well as methods of history research. The role of history in the USSR has often been reduced to that of producing ideologies to legitimize political power concentrated in the hands of a single political party.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, historians were asked to debate and justify a new historical discourse and the political project of an independent Belarus, diametrically opposed to the communist project (Snyder, 2003). New history textbooks were written on political control in the post-Soviet countries at the beginning of the 1990's. Most Soviet republics conducted a selective inventory of their histories, searching for historical facts and "useful" events, which could be mobilized in order to build and to legitimate an independent state and national identity (Bassin and Kelly, 2012). The highlighting of certain events, such as victory in the Second World War, necessarily entails the treatment of other related issues, such as the responsibility of the Soviet government for the war, the purges on the eve of the war, and the occupation of liberated territories by the Red Army, including the Baltic countries. Such a reduction of history, a "happy eclecticism (Berger, 2007)" is problematic not only from the standpoint of historical research, but it creates significant political and diplomatic tensions visible in the example of the complex relationship between Russia and the Baltic countries (Lisovskaya and Karpov, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Present Belarusian historiography and remembrance of the past are divided into two competing interpretations of history, two approaches to producing historical narrative: the nationalist and the

Soviet versions. Each of these projects mobilizes and articulates facts and historical events in order to legitimize a political discourse and a narrative of historical identity.

In current Belarusian historiography a clear imbalance exists between the historical narratives in favor of Soviet doctrinal and dogmatic narrative. The history of the twentieth century witnessed the misuse of history in the USSR, and the use of history in the justification of crimes, exterminations and reprisals. A single perfect historical narrative, a unique historical consciousness, a single way of interpreting the past cannot exist, but this narrative must be plural, open, without dogma and without monopoly, which is not the case in Belarus today.

The red-white-red flag, used by the Nazis during the occupation and reintroduced in 1990 when Belarus became independent, was replaced by the Soviet flag in 1995. The main reason for the replacement was the use of the flag by Nazi collaborators during the Second World War. The propagandist film "Hate. Children of lies", representing a very partial and very biased use of Belarusian nationalists' symbols, particularly the red-white-red flag, by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War was broadcasted repeatedly on Belarusian television. The majority of Belarusians have not done any research into complex sociopolitical phenomena, but the image of the white-red-white flag was destroyed, because it remained forever linked to Nazism in the discourse assimilated by Belarusian citizens (Fedouta, 2005).

The nationalist discourse of historical consciousness and national identity, opposed to the official Soviet interpretation of the war is condemned to obscurity by its lack of opportunities for transmission and legitimization. The only model for historical consciousness and national identity for Byelorussians is the communist model defended and promoted by the authorities. The problem of the lack of a regular and stable point of reference is the absence of a necessary consensus on national identity.

Communist historical dogma, and in particular the cornerstone of the communist legacy - the glorification of the Second World War - has marginalized other historical interpretations. Thus, ideas of Belarusian national identity are once again based exclusively on the negative and destructive reference of war in specific communist interpretation of this war. Remembrance of the past and historical discourse, where it relates to national identity, should have an open, peaceful, pluralistic and discursive basis and should transcend controversial issues like wars and conflicts. Current definitions of Belarusian identity cannot be sustainable and will always be weak and susceptible to political manipulation because they are based on destructive historical references.

The acceptance of the official discourse on the memory is due to the marginalization of other discourses. The formative influence of the state -controlled politics of memory is powerful in Belarusian context, which generates the idea of historical truth and reinforce the belief in the commemorated history.

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