

# Epilogue



# Public History, Popular Culture, and the Belarusian Experience in a Comparative Perspective

## A Conversation

---

*Aliaksei Bratachkin in conversation with the editors*

*In recent decades there has been a worldwide boom in the didactic and educational promotion of national history, which since the 1970s became known in English as 'public history'. State or privately sponsored institutions, museums, schools, universities started to engage in memory culture, sites of memory, monuments, and also TV stations and internet platforms began to broadcast specific programmes, documentaries, series or movies dedicated to historical topics. What is the role of public history in Belarus today? Can we observe a similar boom?*

Public history in my understanding is not only what different institutions and political actors do with historical material, but also how history is perceived by ordinary people, who are also participants in public life. In the last thirty years, Belarus has undergone a number of important changes, first of all, related to the way post-Soviet public life has evolved and the way history is perceived and consumed.

Firstly, in the early 1990s, the state lost its exclusive right to interpret historical events. Back in the mid-1980s, the communist regime's monopoly on the interpretation of history was ensured through control over traditional media, control over the school education system, museums, political censorship of historical research, etc. After the collapse of the USSR, new modes of publicity began to form in Belarus, and the beginning of this new post-Soviet publicity coincided with the revision of interpretations of Soviet history – the problem of Stalinist repressions was raised, the national narrative began to be constructed. History became a subject of debate for ordinary people, not just historians.

In the late 1980s and mid-1990s, we see a real boom in the dissemination of historical materials of both a professional and popular nature. The 'public history' of the late 1980s-early 1990s in Belarus became a search for a new collective identity, for example, the first disputes about 'colonialism' applied to Belarus took place, attempts were made to deal with the traumas of the Soviet past, a wave of renaming Soviet street names changed the symbolic landscape, a democratisation of the very idea of history was set in motion. In

this atmosphere, people wanted to discover the history that ‘really was’, it was a search for ‘truth’.

The second important change is the emergence of new media channels for the dissemination of historical materials. During the collapse of the USSR, everything was quite traditional – historical fiction and academic literature were published in mass circulation, there were many publications in newspapers, debates were held on state television, etc. In a number of cities (not only in Minsk) something like debate clubs appeared during the perestroika period. These channels of distribution were quite easy to control centrally even in the early 1990s, until independent media (newspapers, radio and TV channels) began to gain more influence.

More radical changes in the 2000s were associated with digitalisation, the spread of the Internet, the emergence of new media and social networks. Large online news portals appeared (such as Tut.by, which appeared in 2000 and was closed for political reasons in 2021), which also began to publish historical materials. From the mid-2000s the Live Journal platform, then social networks like Facebook or VKontakte (until it was censored), the development of Wikipedia, YouTube, and later Telegram channels created a new public and social infrastructure that also affected the representation of historical knowledge and the visibility of personal views on history significantly. Since the 1990s, the commercial distribution of historical knowledge and, for example, the book market also developed its own logic.

After the establishment of the authoritarian regime in 1994 in Belarus, some of the new freedoms, as well as historical debates, were restricted again. However, there has been no complete return to Soviet practices, although the authoritarian regime has tried and is trying to regain ‘total’ control over the interpretation of history. Describing the situation in Belarus today, we can speak about the so-called ‘authoritarian public sphere’, which is characterised by a peculiar hybridity. On the one hand, the authoritarian regime controls most of the media, controls the education system, research institutes and universities, at the same time there are phenomena that can be referred to as counter public spheres. Independent publishing projects, magazines, conferences, educational projects, independent researchers still exist.

This situation is dynamic and depends largely on political factors. For example, after the Euromaidan events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the authoritarian regime of Aleksandr Lukashenko [Lukashenka] pursued a more ‘liberal’ policy. Thus, in 2015–2019 we see a large number of historical projects and initiatives of an activist, grassroots type, which have a significantly expanding audience, also because it coincides with the development of digital technologies and new media in Belarus. These initiatives undermined, to some extent, the official narrative focused on the history of World War II, the Soviet past, the selective acceptance of pre-Soviet history, and the legitimisation of authoritarian institutions after 1994.

But after the mass protests of 2020 and the attempts to suppress them, the authoritarian regime turned its memory policy into an important instrument of political control, and a series of laws were passed, by means of which – through labelling them as ‘extremist’ or ‘rehabilitating Nazism’ – certain interpretations of history are persecuted. All independent media outlets have been shut down, and independent publishing houses

have been banned. Digital platforms are also controlled – for example, YouTube channels, websites, or Telegram channels are declared extremist.

The regime is trying more actively than before to impose specific interpretations of history on society, for example, by promoting the idea of a “genocide of the Belarusian people”.<sup>1</sup> This idea is promoted in school education, museum and exhibition activities, and the media. The regime’s ideologists are also trying to master such platforms as YouTube, posting propaganda materials there and encouraging the population to comment on them. My colleague Gundula Pohl, hinting at the fact that the regime actually avoids all kinds of participation, has aptly and ironically called this phenomenon “participatory propaganda” (Pohl 2023). This approach, well known from the USSR, is achieved, for instance, by filming and releasing propaganda fiction films about life in interwar Belarus like *On the Other Side (Na drugom beregu, 2023)* with funds from the state budget, ensuring box office income with the help of administrative resources. Newly erected places of memory connected with the contradictory sides of history of World War II are destroyed in the public space for example, memorial signs or the graves of the members of the Armia Krajowa (“Home Army”) are destroyed. This anti-Nazi Polish resistance movement, which during German occupation operated within the borders of Poland, which in 1939 included Western Belarus, was already disparaged during Soviet times, because given its anti-Bolshevik orientation it did not collaborate with the Soviets. Nowadays, this negative attitude to the Armia Krajowa is renewed by the ruling regime for its anti-Western and anti-Polish propaganda.

Thus, within the last three years of the aggressive official memory policy everything that characterised ‘public history’ so far has been destroyed – all the narratives which allowed it within the public space to see the variability of Belarus’ history from the perspective of different actors and communities. Because, in the last 10–15 years the appropriations of history including the Holocaust, women’s history, local history, history of different ethnic groups (Tatars, Roma, etc.), queer history or urban landscape studies from the perspective of forgotten “places of memory” have become much more differentiated than before. If in the early 1990s, when the construction of a national narrative began, we spoke mostly about the dominant cultural group, the Belarusians, now, for example, we speak about the Jewish culture within Belarus of the 20th century. A Belarusian-Jewish festival has started to be held, translations of Jewish writers of the interwar period are published, including repressed ones, such as Moïshe Kulbak (1896–1937). All this has been made possible not only by civil society activists and historical initiatives, but also by the fact that state officials occasionally cooperated. Now all this pluralism is clearly under threat.

---

1 In 2022 the law “On the Genocide of the Belarusian People” was adopted, which defines genocide as “systematic physical destruction” of “Soviet citizens” living in 1941–1951 in Belarus committed by “Nazi criminals and their accomplices”. This definition ignores the Stalinist repressions and the history of 1939–1941, and blurs the memory of the Holocaust.

*How does this conflict over 'public history' in Belarus relate to popular culture? In particular among the post-Soviet Eastern European states the Soviet past has become a widespread topic also in popular culture formats, beginning from tabloids and social media to popular songs, music or comics. Would you confirm such a boom also for the Belarusian case and do you see differences to the cultures of remembrance in neighbouring countries like the Baltic states, Poland, Ukraine or Russia?*

The authoritarian regime established in Belarus in the mid-1990s relied exclusively on the Soviet experience in the first years of its existence. This created a different dynamic, for example, for the memory of the Soviet or the use of references to 'the Soviet' in popular culture. The lack of critical reflection on the recent past led to the fact that throughout the whole of society tropes of Soviet culture, elements of the former everyday life were incorporated into the new, westernised reality and culture, forming bizarre collages. We see such collages in the visual language of urban space, where fast food advertising signs overlap with Soviet mosaics and metaphorical sculpture monuments to the proletariat, in the combination of modern digital technologies with the language of 1930s-1970s propaganda in state media, or the attempts to combine the Bologna educational system with old, barely reformed Soviet university education.

In Belarus, there was no symbolic break with the Soviet past also on a political level, because the initial democratic reforms were replaced already in the second half of the 1990s by authoritarian rule and a re-Sovietisation of politics and, subsequently, by the reestablishment and instrumentalisation of a Soviet memory and history policy on the part of the ruling regime since the early-mid 2000s. However, I do not share the thesis that Belarus remains 'Soviet', we see a more complex configuration. The state violence of the years 2020 to 2023 in Belarus is often compared to the repressions of the Stalinist period, but even here I believe we should see the uniqueness of what is happening.

We did not pass decommunization laws like in Ukraine in 2014–2015. There was no such radical distancing from the Soviet experience as in the Baltic states immediately after the collapse of the USSR and directly before it, when the concept of two 'occupations' – Soviet and Nazi – appeared. Also, in neighbouring Poland the Soviet period was shorter and different and accordingly is remembered in a different way. In neighbouring Russia, Soviet history was also transformed in a very specific way. Here a peculiar hybridisation of Soviet history with the history of the Russian Empire took place, although everything that happened after 1917 was once denoted by Soviet propagandists as the complete opposite of the imperial history of Russia before the October Revolution.

Belarus is still connected with post-communist Russia through a common space of information – Russian-language Russian media (newspapers, radio, television) broadcast the Russian agenda and there is also a transfer of Russian (post-Soviet) culture. For some time, the 'Soviet past' in Belarus played a similar role as in Russia – in the mid-1990s, both in Russia and Belarus there was the first strong wave of nostalgia, symbolised by the TV musical shows *Old Songs about the Main Things* (*Starye pesni o glavnom*, 1995–1998), offering a kind of remake of Soviet 'popular' culture in new conditions. Perhaps, we can say that this wave of nostalgia, on the one hand, stressed a certain crisis of cultural production (the new westernised culture could not displace the former Soviet cultural codes in any way), on the other hand, it functioned as a kind of reconciliation with the past after the political mobilisation of the perestroika era and the collapse of

the USSR, one could even say, it enabled a certain 'depoliticisation' of this past and of the attitude to it.

Later on, nostalgia about the Soviet, as well as critical reflection about Soviet history followed different dynamics in Russia and Belarus. This was due to the diverging political context, market transformation of the economy, etc. In Belarus, the process of defragmentation of the Soviet experience was much slower, and, I think, this slow and, to some extent, more 'natural' gradual death of Soviet cultural forms due to generational change and globalisation processes created certain opportunities for society and researchers.

I rather tend to believe that in Belarus the Soviet 'outlived' and outlives itself in a rather peculiar way, not by means of radical negation, but rather, as one scholar once noted, by gradually establishing the hegemony of the subject over the discourse itself, which no longer evokes feelings of oppression but became a subject for reconfiguration. This confident approach to the past is supported by such details as the rather low prevalence of representations of nostalgia that reproduce 'the Soviet' as an everyday living condition.

The first signs of such a new approach to nostalgia, already quite far from the desire to restore the USSR, can be observed in Belarus around the turn of the 2000s-2010s. This manifested itself in the opening of cafes or bars with a 'Soviet atmosphere'. One of the first cafes in this style was the "Tovarishch café" ("Comrade café") in Minsk, placed in the basement of the 1950s building of the Palace of Culture of Veterans, which retained the 'classical' pretensions of Stalinist architecture, which was followed by attempts to create such cafes also in some other cities. However, these were mostly designed more for tourists and did not turn into particularly successful or iconic projects.

By the end of the 2010s, the 'Soviet' was being appropriated and digested by hipster culture. Media, for instance, reported about the opening of a brow-bar (beauty salon for eyebrows) called Brezhnev or a barbershop with the name Chekist. The opening of the latter caused a political scandal and raised ethical questions about the 'consumption' of history. Similar reactions were provoked by the partial restoration and inauguration in 2005 of the so-called Stalin Line, a barrier of defensive military installations built in the 1930s on the western border of the USSR near Minsk. Despite the protests of a part of society, the Stalin Line memorial near Minsk, exploiting narratives about the Great Patriotic War, turned eventually into a commercial attraction for tourists.

Similar to the Soviet narrative but much earlier, the new 'national' narrative began to be promoted already in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s and quickly became part of popular culture. Specific representations of national history even became forms of kitsch. This was also due to the fact that the 'national' was already present in the culture of the late Soviet era. Rock scene, art, literature, academic environment – everywhere there were people, activists promoting 'Belarusianness'. For example, in 1990, the Pahonia association was founded within the state Union of Artists, which was closed in 2023 for political reasons. The project of 'national revival' became part of the public discourse in the late 1980s – mid-1990s, in the course of the political struggle of that time. Of course, this was also visible in the field of popular culture. References to the national history of the pre-Soviet period were also used by state structures in attempts to create commercial cinema. For example, the 2003 film *Anastasia Slutskaya* tells the story of events that took place in the early 16th century, when the lands of the Grand Duchy of

Lithuania were attacked by Tatars, and the defence of one of the towns, Slutsk, was led by the wife of the dead prince, Anastasia.

However, different versions of collective national identity competed in the public space, including references to different historical narratives and the use of the Russian or Belarusian language. The state actually discriminated against speakers of the Belarusian language despite the adopted laws to preserve it, and this all the time influenced additionally the dynamics and political meanings of cultural phenomena. For example, after another dispersal of protests in December 2010, many activists came to the conclusion that public politics was impossible, but it was possible to shift some of the activity into the sphere of cultural projects.

This activity coincided with digitalisation and the acceleration of Belarus' inclusion in a more global context. The processes of marketisation of the economy also played a certain role. In the period of 2013–2019, commercially successful projects in the Belarusian language appeared, which were no longer situated solely in the field of independent culture and activism and promoted the 'national idea' in new ways, for example, through the production of clothing brands referring to Belarusian history and identity. In part, one can speak of a specific 'commodification' of Belarusianness. But in times of a relative 'liberalisation' of the regime the very same projects and activists also tried to influence the political agenda, and were the organisers of events like the 2018 celebration of the centenary of the formation of the non-Soviet Belarusian People's Republic (BNR). During World War I, when the German imperial troops occupied the territory of Belarus, then part of the Russian Empire, in March 1918, representatives of the Belarusian national movement proclaimed the BNR, which existed until December 1918. In the USSR, the history of the BNR was not recognised, and in the historical narrative under Lukashenko's regime, the BNR was also not considered a state for a long time, until this changed around the year 2018.

*What does this 'commodification' of history, in which there are various commercial and state appropriations of the past, mean for the conflict between the authoritarian regime and the opposition movements? What role does the Great Patriotic War, but also the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic of 1918 or the Grand Duchy of Lithuania play in these controversies? To what extent is this conflict over competing images of history also played out in popular culture and mass culture?*

The conflict you are talking about was rather characteristic for the culture of remembrance in Belarus in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. This split was formed and intensified after Lukashenko came to power and a certain re-Sovietisation of the historical narrative in official memory policy took place. Over the last ten to fifteen years at least, we can see a gradual convergence of two narratives – the official narrative oriented towards the Soviet past and the memory of the Great Patriotic War with the competing narrative referring to the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (13th–16th centuries), the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (16th–18th centuries), and the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic in 1918.

The sociologist Aliaksei Lastoŭski, who describes this merging of the two narratives, when official historians and regime ideologists even appropriated the oppositional nar-

rative, as a process of convergence and proposes the thesis that in Belarus, finally, an understanding of a “long genealogy of statehood” was established. According to this new genealogy history is no longer limited only to the Soviet period, a phenomenon which is typical for nation-building and the construction of the national narrative in Eastern Europe (Lastouski 2019). This merging of narratives accelerated after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, when Lukashenko tried to balance between Russia and the European Union, which also affected the official politics of remembrance.

Even now, when Lukashenko practically gave up the country’s independence in exchange for Russia’s support during the events of 2020, this tendency of building a “long genealogy” of the history of Belarus persists. But it can also be said that this narrative minimises critical reflection on the relationship between Russia and Belarus during the Soviet period; it is more a history of state power and institutions than a history of society, its social groups, resistance and divergent behaviour. One of the goals of this narrative is to legitimise the authoritarian institutions of power in Belarus. Perhaps, we can say that the split of the memory culture of the mid-1990s was transformed into a new phase in which the conflict has become more complex.

To what extent this merging of the two national narratives will have an impact on popular culture in the future is difficult to say. But in the 30 years since the early 1990s, references to the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the BNR have become more extensive and stable, also because these references to ‘Europeanness’ underline the non-Russian context. However, now the regime is trying to reverse this process.

*But if popular culture is defined as a specific way of appropriating some cultural products, formats, topics or symbols, which gains a certain popularity among people, as we do in our book, can we then speak at all about ‘popular culture’ within Belarus today, where the state aims to control all channels of public communication and representation?*

We can still talk about ‘popular culture’ in Belarus today, if only because there is no longer an iron curtain, there is YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and other social media. Until 2022 when the sanctions started to take effect, film distribution worked without interruptions, Hollywood blockbusters were shown, and so on. All cultural industries were functioning. However, all this coexisted alongside two phenomena – the renewed old authoritarian aesthetics and also attempts to censor and ban this or that cultural product for political reasons. Also important in the cultural field were the lines of division around the political struggle which took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s and were mainly concentrated on the problem of language use and the support for a ‘Belarusianisation’ of national culture. Today we can talk about another problem – the problem of forced emigration after 2020, and the emergence of new lines of division within society – those who left and those who stayed.

But authoritarianism in Belarus has also produced its own aesthetics, which claims to become part of popular culture – it is not only about mass spectacles inherited from the USSR associated with state holidays and parades, or official festivals, such as the Slavianski Bazaar, a music festival that has been held since 1992, in which musicians from

Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine have participated. Often attended by Lukashenko and officials from Russia, the festival is seen as a political event, not just a cultural one. In 2022, representatives of Ukraine refused to participate in the festival. But also in literature or propaganda cinema we can of course find this authoritarian aesthetic, which on the verge of thrash or kitsch presents history in a pseudo-democratic manner for 'ordinary people'. We can observe here a kind of cultural populism that mirrors authoritarian political populism. Yet, authoritarian aesthetics has so far not matured to a specific style in Belarus.

Authoritarianism in the period of its liberalisation also tried to appropriate popular culture in order to demonstrate its own 'achievements' – like in sport – outside and inside Belarus. Thus, partly due to personal interference by Aleksandr Lukashenko, the ideologists of the regime participated for some time in the local selection of contestants for the Eurovision Song Contest. And winning places at the children's Eurovision or adult Eurovision were regarded as almost a political success; they were even mentioned in the sections of school history textbooks dedicated to culture. A similar phenomenon can also be observed in the film industry. On the one hand, the state retains control over film production (Belarusfilm studio) and finances some obviously ideological projects, on the other hand, there are sporadic statements about the need to create commercially successful products.

In the late USSR there was an official culture committed to Socialist realism with its institutions of censorship and control, and there was an underground culture, which developed according to its own logic, often staying outside the public space. Nowadays authoritarian control over culture, which has been reestablished in Belarus since the mid-1990s, in a way resumes this late Soviet situation: there are so-called 'black lists' of representatives of other cultural spheres (musicians, artists, writers, etc.) who for political reasons are not allowed to perform in public in state media or at various event venues and clubs. This situation worsened drastically after the mass protests of 2020, when all blacklists were updated. Some representatives of the art scene, theatre, literature, etc. were forced to emigrate. Those who participated in the protests but stayed in the country were mostly dismissed from cultural institutions, the absolute majority of which are state-owned. Some independent cultural institutions were closed and destroyed, such as the Ź Gallery in Minsk which had a long history or a number of creative spaces and independent galleries in other cities of Belarus like in Brest or Hrodna.

Another important aspect is the language in which this or that cultural product is made. Until the mid-1990s a policy of 'Belarusianisation' dominated the cultural sphere. In 1995 this was stopped, and although it was prohibited by law, those who spoke Belarusian were discriminated against, for example, when educational programmes in it were significantly reduced. Only in the independent culture scene did Belarusian continue to prevail, and people started to describe this increasingly isolated use of the Belarusian language metaphorically as existence in a 'ghetto' because authoritarian aesthetics mainly represented itself in Russian, also in popular culture.

However, in the 2010s this whole configuration started to change slowly. We see the professionalisation of independent culture that I already mentioned, which uses new ways of marketing and makes Belarusian more popular. Belarusian was increasingly used for advertising to mark distinctive styles or acquire symbolic value. Some authors tried to work for the Russian-speaking market as well, but at the same time insisted on

their belonging to an independent Belarusian culture. Even Russian-language media started to use Belarusian expressions. The Russian-language sector was still larger in terms of consumption, but the more exciting things seemed to happen in the sector of Belarusian language culture, a tendency that nowadays has practically been stopped inside Belarus.

Some people left Belarus after 2020 and are trying to make cultural products and build up new institutions outside the country within a completely different cultural environment. These works of new emigrants are made in the Belarusian language and there, of course, the question arises of how to work in a commercially successful way and of how to attract the target audience.

*If we take this tension into consideration: on the one hand, the digitalisation and professionalisation of cultural production in the last decade, on the other, the massive emigration since 2020: Are there any particular historical events, figures or motifs from the Soviet past that play a special role for appropriating, rewriting or deconstructing history by certain state actors or independent institutions? How would you assess, for instance, the role of the Soviet-Belarusian partisan in the field of popular culture? Are there other figures that could compete with him?*

Late Soviet and post-Soviet official projects of collective identity in Belarus were built largely on the memory of the Great Patriotic War. Representations of this subject in popular culture, media, education system, etc. fulfilled an important political role. The metaphor of the “partisan republic”, images of ‘partisans’ in particular, as described by Michael E. Urban (2008) and Simon Lewis (2017), were not only a successful project to combine ‘national content’ with an overall Soviet identity, but also represented a colonial construct, imposing a new identity and also acting as a defence against the trauma of the actual war. In the 1990s – 2010s in Belarus, one can observe a specific dynamic of remembering World War II and its functioning in the public sphere: the ‘nationalisation’ of the Soviet discourse of remembrance by the authoritarian regime led to a certain gamification of war images in popular culture and at the same time to the emergence of various counter-narratives and images in social media and publishing projects.

The mass protests against Lukashenko’s regime in 2020 and the beginning of Russia’s war in Ukraine in 2022 reinforced the reframing of World War II by different actors. Inside Belarus, on the part of the repressive regime, the idea of a genocide of the Belarusian people perpetrated by the Germans is instrumentalised, references to Nazism and fascism are manipulated, memorials of the Armia Krajowa are physically destroyed, and critical analyses of World War II are criminalised. Instead, a certain militarisation of history and a synchronisation of propaganda in Belarus and Russia can be observed.

Because of this dynamic, I think the widespread image of the Soviet partisan has also changed in popular culture. For example, one of Artur Klinau’s most famous projects, an art magazine and publishing project in Belarus was named *PARTizan*, but at the same time there existed also an edition in this series called “Partizanka” which was an attempt to review the art field from a feminist perspective. And also during the 2020 protests, a hacker group called Cyber Partisans emerged that paralysed government websites. All

these new appropriations of the partisan figure vary widely from the Soviet discourse on the topic.

Is there a competing figure to the partisan in popular culture today? I would say that for quite a long time the image of Kastus Kalinoŭski, one of the leaders of the anti-Russian uprising of 1863–1864 in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, has been quite popular. A programme for students and teachers repressed in Belarus was named after him, the reburial of the remains of Kalinowski and other rebels in Vilnius in 2019 became an important event. After the protests of 2020 and the beginning of the war in Ukraine a Kalinowski regiment was formed by Belarusians, fighting on the side of Ukraine. By the way, official Russian historians-propagandists like Aleksandr Diukov tried to deconstruct this popular Belarusian image of him for quite a long time, focussing on his biography and personal views (Diukov 2021).

Other images of the Soviet (or anti-Soviet) couldn't compete so far. Pre-war history for many is the history of Stalinist repressions. The history of such absolute evil is for instance depicted in the comic strip *The Last Vampire* (*Poslednii vampir*, 2019) by Andrei Skurko and Filipp Kokosha, which deals with the late Stalinist era in Belarus and was printed in the popular history magazine *Nasha istoriia* (*Our History*). Military history is also actively exploited by the authoritarian regime, whereas post-war history is still only beginning to be actively discussed. One could even say that there is almost an empty space between 1945 and the 1986 disaster in Chernobyl with regard to the representation of post-war Soviet Belarusian history in mass culture.

Recently the TV series *For Half an Hour to Spring* (*Za polchasa do vesny*, 2022), which tells the history of the most successful musical group in Soviet Belarus, *Pesniary*, was released. Its leader, Uladzimir Muliavin, started his career in Soviet Belarus in 1963, having moved from the Russian part of the USSR. The *Pesniary* ensemble performed Belarusian folk songs in modern arrangements and rock compositions which had huge success in the 1970s–1980s. The series caused controversial reactions and was suddenly subjected to unexpected political censorship because one actor took part in the 2020 protests against Lukashenko's regime who was therefore removed from a number of scenes.

In my opinion, the place Lukashenko's image occupies in mass culture is also interesting. He was the subject of anecdotes, caricatures, satire. Within the authoritarian culture, a specific cult of Lukashenko's personality even began to form. The 2020 protests strongly deconstructed this authoritarian image of the 'leader'.

*This aspect of a certain 'personality cult' around Lukashenko, even in satirical and critical popular culture, is interesting. Because it points to the fact that popular culture always works very strongly with emotions, channelling hatred and anger, but also longings and empathy, providing symbolic form and stories for feelings. How is this 'emotionalised' relationship with history being dealt with officially these days? Does this also affect the role and function of history museums and (school) textbooks in Belarus today? Or is there a specific aesthetics or mode of representation that differs from global developments? Are there frictions and diversions within this discourse and imaginary?*

More than twelve years ago, Tatsiana Ostrovskaya's first study on school history textbooks in Belarus was published, which analysed how they had been rewritten three times since

independence due to political changes (Ostrovskaya 2010). By today we can already speak about a long “tradition” of textbook rewriting and instrumentalisation of history in independent Belarus under the authoritarian regime. After the mass protests of 2020, a new stage of this rewriting has come. Among the authors of textbooks we find not only historians and methodologists from the National Institute of Education, but also representatives from state authorities and the General Prosecutor’s Office. This concerns, first of all, textbooks for pupils of all ages about the “genocide of the Belarusian people”, in which the contemporary protesters are accused of links with the legacy of the Nazi collaborators during World War II. We can observe here a process of ‘securitisation’ of history politics – control over interpretations of the past becomes the main task of “security” for the regime.

The school system of historical education and museums in Belarus are financed and controlled by the state. School teachers, including history teachers, are appointed as members of election commissions, and many of them, either under duress or consciously, become participants of political manipulations and falsifications. Using school buildings for polling stations and teachers for election commissions, is still a Soviet tradition. But we have to bear in mind that history textbooks used by teachers and children are the same throughout the whole country and are compulsory. The curriculum as well as lists of additional, extracurricular literature on history have to be approved by the Ministry of Education. Of course, there are always exceptions and people who have the courage to teach critical thinking, but this is not the rule and the goal of this system is oriented towards political loyalty.

This systematic monitoring and controlling of all aspects of the past is not a unique Belarusian phenomenon, also in Russia we can observe such an “affective management of history” (Oushakine 2013) to emotionally connect new generations to a national collective, but in Belarus this practice has its own peculiarities. Back in 2010, the Russian-Belarusian film *The Brest Fortress* (*Brestskaia krepost’*, also known as *Fortress of War*) was released in mass distribution, in which naturalistic, even hyperrealistic scenes of Nazi crimes ensured an instant emotional connection to the lived experience of the past events in June 1941 shortly after the German invasion. The film’s distribution was quite successful, but at the same time, the way of representing the historical events of the Brest Fortress defence against the Nazi aggressors followed the typical Soviet narrative that has been established since the late 1950s. In fact, the film updated this construct of distorted memory, which omitted many historical circumstances, for new generations.

As it seems to me, in today’s Belarus, the emotional modes of connecting to the past, if we are talking about the official politics of memory, are as distanced as possible from any critical reflection. In the case of the film *The Brest Fortress* this can be somehow explained by the logic of mass cinema and its particular artistic demands, such an excuse however does not work if we speak about school history textbooks or museum exhibitions. In the latest editions of school textbooks, we find for instance photos of excavations of the remains of Nazi genocide victims, but the corresponding descriptions of the crimes are not aimed at working ‘with sensitive topics’, but propaganda. It’s ‘affective mechanism’ aims not at explaining the past but at legitimising the present.

There is no Holocaust Museum in Belarus, but a special type of various museums, which are dedicated to different groups of victims, to the mechanisms of genocidal prac-

tices, to trauma, to the problem of political responsibility for history. Large museum projects, such as the Museum of Modern Belarusian Statehood, which was inaugurated in 2011, or the new Museum of the Great Patriotic War, which opened in 2014 with the relocation of part of the exhibition, rather work as obvious political and ideological projects that use modern equipment, but they themselves are archaic in a certain sense, as their task is not to act as independent institutions that stimulate debates about memory and history, but to represent quite specific official interpretations of historical events.

Museums in Belarus are not autonomous and independent in their activity. But in the 1990s, part of the state museums' exhibitions changed, they became more modern, topical, and until recently, museums employed people who tried to promote some new ideas which were even partly implemented during the period of political liberalisation in 2015–2019.

The last 10 years were a time when some museums began to work orientated on the principles of participatory museums, but after mass dismissals of museum workers who participated in the 2020 protests or allowed this freedom, the situation has worsened, political control and censorship of exhibitions leave almost no opportunity to act creatively. Outside Belarus today we see attempts to create independent museum institutions. Such as, for example, the Museum of Free Belarus in Warsaw, which emerged after 2020 and is focused on collecting documents and artefacts of the protest movement. However, there is a problem of identity of such institutions – for whom are they intended: for Belarusians inside Belarus, for Poles, for those Belarusians who emigrated?

*Let us come back to the more general questions that concern us in our volume. One thesis is that the global trends in popular culture with regard to the appropriation of history find a very specific form within the post-Soviet condition of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. This is shaped in particular by a widespread distance or scepticism to official state-supported representations of history and its ideology, inherited from the distance to the uniform Marxist-Socialist hegemonic history narrative. Would you confirm this thesis for the Belarusian case?*

I would rather agree with this thesis than oppose it. Perhaps, I will supplement it a little, looking from the Belarusian context. The collapse of Soviet Marxism (if we speak about Belarusian historiography) does not coincide with 1991, it is a slower process, the language of many researchers and their optics are often still influenced by the old methodological habits. But in general, yes, distrust in the public sphere towards the way historical knowledge was and is produced in Belarus exists, and it is connected with the long-lasting manipulations of the Soviet period. Even though historians once started their struggle for a national narrative. This distrust is also reinforced by the participation of some historians in the creation, promotion and legitimisation of propaganda narratives of Lukashenko's authoritarian regime.

It is important, perhaps, to think about the implications of this scepticism. On the one hand, we see the coexistence in the public sphere of both the professional work of historians and its reception by a broader audience, along with the entire different spectrum of popular representations of history, which include conspiracy narratives, more or less marginal alternative versions of history and all kinds of mythologies and propaganda

stories, but also the widespread publication of various forms of ‘folk-history’, fulfilling the mass demand for books dealing with national identity. In this context we see also how non-fiction, such as Svetlana Alexievich’s books on the Soviet past, which are not documentary studies, play the role of ‘sources’ on Soviet history for mass readers.

On the other hand, I have a hypothesis, which I am now trying to confirm or refute in my own research, that in the case of Belarus, but also in a broader context of authoritarian regimes in general we can still speak about peculiar manifestations of ‘citizen science’ and the phenomenon of ‘shared historical authority’. I mean with this the phenomenon that when public, civil pressure is exerted on the authorities and academic institutions, many nevertheless feel obliged to work honestly, to conform to standards, to refuse the manipulation and instrumentalisation of scholarship.

In this sense, the struggle for the memory of the victims of Stalinist repressions in Belarus, which started in the late 1980s, or the political and environmentalist struggle after the Chernobyl accident in 1986, the consequences of which were silenced – all this shows how the mechanisms of power and knowledge function in the Belarusian context, how people try to re-establish ‘science’ in terms of ethics, responsibility, etc. This is, of course, a very contested, very slow process, and often does not say anything good about science itself, but it is still worthy of attention. In the context of our conversation, it also means that popular culture in Belarus, public history outside the academy, can also be analysed from this perspective. Scepticism towards manipulation does not mean rejecting the notion of history as a science.

*But is there not another aspect to this conflict? Can we see here – as in many other post-Socialist states – also a sort of longing for constructing one’s own ‘national history’ which is promoted by state institutions but also finds wide resonance in the population and especially among nationalist groups. How would you describe this constellation with regard to the extremely polarised political situation in Belarus?*

Belarus has its own trajectory here, if we talk about the construction of the national narrative and collective identity after the collapse of the USSR. Researchers tried to define it in various ways, mostly pointing to a kind of ‘lack’ of national identity both within the society and among the politicians who came to power in the mid-1990s. Or by labelling the existence of several collective identity projects at the same time. The picture of history and identity from below is quite diverse.

Such a ‘search for identity’ (and for legitimacy) is also characteristic of the authoritarian regime: at some point in time, references and reliance on Russian support were less, the regime even used references to Europeanness, and in 2015–2019, some media experts announced a ‘soft Belarusification’ and that in this way the historical narratives of the political opposition were about to become mainstream. This was because, as I have already mentioned, in 2018 the authorities gave permission to celebrate the centenary of the non-Soviet version of Belarus’s statehood – the Belarusian People’s Republic. And in the same year, an official monument to the victims of Stalinist repressions was finally erected near Minsk, in Kurapaty.

Since 2020, this trend towards a soft Belarusification seems to be over. The authoritarian regime and other groups, including those with a nationalist agenda, have different political resources. At the moment, the Lukashenko regime controls the public space, supports Russia's war in Ukraine, and these are all signs that the historical narrative will be minimally 'national', at least within official history policy.

*Could you elaborate on this highly intriguing aspect of how the 'search for identity' penetrates the mainstream within an authoritarian regime with a concrete example?*

As an example, I would like to talk about a case study from 2015. In Minsk, on 7 November the most important Soviet holiday, October Revolution Day, which is still celebrated in Belarus, the opening of the Leningrad shopping centre took place on Lenin Street. This street adjoins Kastrychnitskaia vulitsa/Street, the gentrification of which quickly became an example of new processes in Belarus, where offices, creative spaces, cafes opened inside old Soviet factory buildings, etc. In 2014, the same street started hosting a street art festival with the participation of foreign artists called Brasil Street, thus making the street a hangout for the city's flaneurs.

When the Leningrad shopping centre was opened, they invited an actor portraying the leader of the world proletariat Vladimir Lenin, hung a Soviet flag, portraits of Stalin, and arranged a 'solemn meeting'. On 9 November the BBC website published an article "Soviet-themed shopping centre opens in Minsk", which ironically commented on the opening (BBC monitoring 2015).

Indeed, the opening of such a private enterprise was impossible in Soviet Belarus, just as it is ironic that "Soviet marketing" is used to promote capitalist values. The reaction to this Soviet opening in the media and social networks was quite negative, and then expert interviews were published, which criticise this 'Sovietisation' of brands and nostalgia in Belarus. However, a number of brands have remained from the Soviet era, but generally references to the Soviet era do not play a big role in the market, on the contrary, there is a process of 'Belarusification' of names, replacing them with local or Belarusian-language names that also refer to history. From all this history we can only draw the conclusion about how interestingly and asynchronously different historical narratives are combined in contemporary Belarus, but also notice that we are moving away from the Soviet past.

*To conclude, let us move on from this peculiar conflation of a 'Belarusification' of history and a simultaneous 'Sovietisation' of contemporary consumer goods to a more general question. How would you describe this partly antagonistic condition in a broader global context? Where are the common trends, where do you see disruptions and exceptions? How important is history nowadays for political developments, be it democratic upheavals or state repression? How do you envisage the development of public history and its appropriations in popular culture for the near future?*

Such representations of the Soviet past in the Belarusian context are to some extent in line with global trends. Together with other countries in the eastern part of Europe, in

the late 1980s-early 1990s we went through a period of active political mobilisation and active criticism of the Soviet and state socialist experience. We then faced different types of nostalgia about the Soviet, which can be “reflexive” or “restorative”, as Svetlana Boym put it (2001). Then we saw a process of defragmentation of the Soviet and its “commodification”, turning it into a material for “consuming history”, as Jerome De Groot writes (Groot 2015). Eventually, attempts at the museification of the Soviet began, although this process was very slow in Belarus, and a number of exhibition projects took place, showing and displaying Soviet things, posters, and everyday life.

Of course, the specificity of Belarus is the preservation of authoritarianism and, due to this, the absence of open and large reflection about the Soviet period with clear political decisions, also on the societal level. But, perhaps, this gave a chance for greater preservation of the Soviet material heritage, which, from a distance, can now be treated differently than in the early 1990s. Also, the term “Soviet” still evokes associations with state violence, the responsibility for which has not been fully formalised and discussed.

If we talk about the future, much depends on whether and how our society will be able to get out of authoritarianism. For example, will the Soviet in mass perception be associated with its continuation in the form of Lukashenko’s regime and intensively destroyed (for example, at the level of monuments, is it possible that we will repeat the Ukrainian decommunisation, etc.) or will there be some other configuration? In any case, if we talk about public history in Belarus in the future, we should, first of all, talk about a new democratisation of the public sphere and an open dialogue about history.

*The conversation by Aliaksei Bratachkin with Nina Weller and Matthias Schwartz took place in December 2023.*

## Filmography

*Anastasiia Slutskaia (Anastasiya Slutskaya)*, dir. Yuri Yelkhov, Belarus 2003.

*The Brest Fortress [also known as Fortress of War] (Brestskaia krepost’)*, dir. Aleksandr Kott, Russia/Belarus 2010.

*For Half an Hour to Spring (Za polchasa do vesny)*, dir. Stepan Korshunov et al., Belarus 2022.

*Old Songs about the Main Things (Starye pesni o glavnom)*, dir. Leonid Parfēnov/Konstantin Ėrnst, Russia 1995–1998.

*On the Other Side (Na drugom beregu / Na drugim beragu)*, dir. Andrey Khrulyov, Belarus 2023.

## References

BBC monitoring (2015): Belarus: Soviet-Themed Shopping Centre Opens in Minsk, 9 November 2015 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-34768381>) [20 December 2023].

Boym, Svetlana (2001): *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic.

- Diukov, Aleksandr R. (2021): *Neizvestnyi Kalinovskii. Propaganda nenavisti i povstancheskii terror na belorusskikh zemliakh, 1862–1864 gg.*, Moskva: Fond “Istoricheskaia pamiat”.
- Groot, Jerome de (2015): *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions*, London/New York: Taylor & Francis Ltd.
- Lastouski, Aliaksei (2019): “Return of the ‘Long Genealogy’ to School Textbooks on the History of Belarus.” In: *Ideology and Politics Journal* 2/13, pp. 185–197.
- Lewis, Simon (2017): “The Partisan Republic: Colonial Myths and Memory Wars in Belarus.” In: Fedor, Julie/Kangaspuro, Markku/Lassila, Jussi/Zhurzhenko, Tatiana (eds.): *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ostrovskaia, Tat’iana (2010): “Genealogiia istoricheskoi pamiati belorusov v kontekste obrasovatelnykh praktik.” In: *Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies [biss]*, 20 October 2010 (<https://belinstitute.com/be/article/genealogiya-istoricheskoy-pamyati-belorusov-v-kontekste-obrazovatelnykh-praktik>) [20 December 2023].
- Oushakine, Serguei (2013): “Remembering In Public: On The Affective Management Of History.” In: *Ab Imperio* 1, pp. 269–302.
- Pohl, Gundula (2023): “Participatory Propaganda? The YouTube Project ‘Dialogue with the Prosecutor’ as a History-Political Practice in Belarus.” Report [not published] on Workshop “A Short History of Digital Publics at War” 1–3 May 2023 in Berlin, organised by FernUni Hagen.
- Urban, Michael E. (2008): *An Algebra of Soviet Power. Urban An Algebra of Soviet Power. Elite Circulation in the Belorussian Republic 1966– 86*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.