Chapter 7:

Partisan, Anti-Partisan, pARTisan, Party-Zan, Cyberpartisan

On the Popularity of Partisanhood in Belarusian Culture

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1. The Partisan Myth

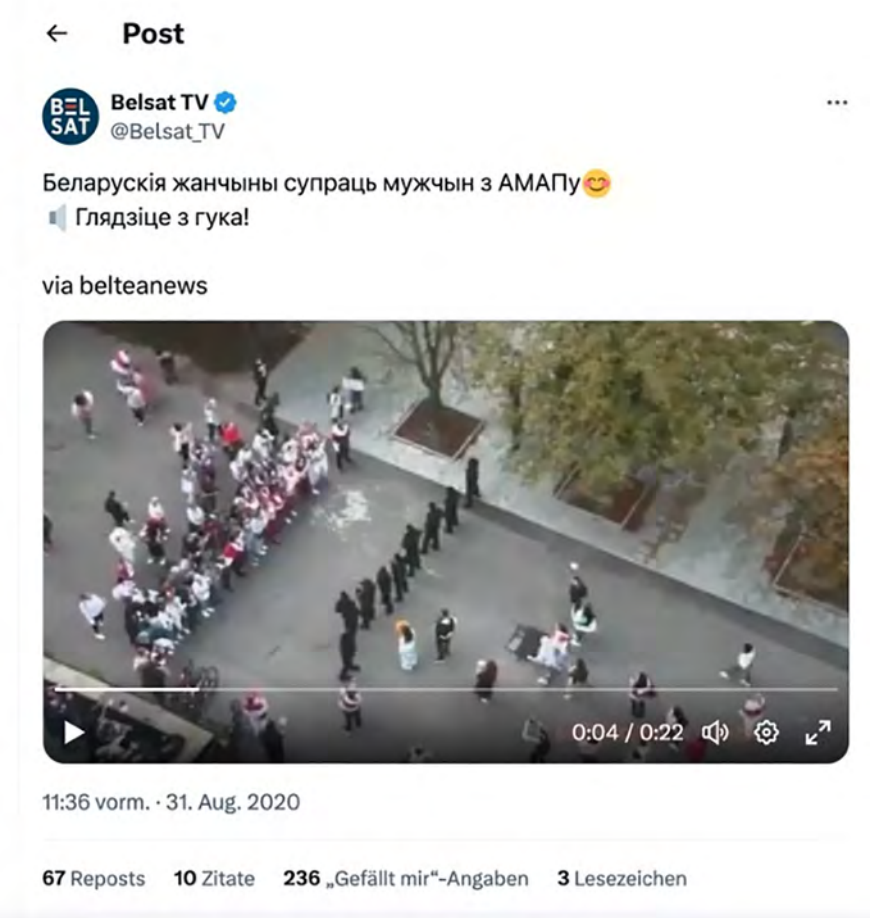
In August 2020, an amateur video circulated on Belarusian social media that had been recorded from the window of a private flat in Minsk during protests against the Lukashenko [Lukashenka] regime. The video shows a group of OMON riot police clad in black balaclavas,[1] who form a chain across a wide street, attempting to block protesters from passing. They do not get very far with this effort, however, because numerous seemingly random passers-by unexpectedly encircle them from all sides and push them away, rendering them incapable of action. With music playing in the style of a silent film, the sped-up film reel conveys amusement about the fact that this 'partisan tactic' was able to foil the state authorities at least temporarily.[2]

As a pattern of resistance action, partisanhood always refers to the unequal relationship between mighty power structures and their weaker opponents, between the dominance of 'regular' forms of combat and the undermining of it through 'irregular' combat strategies. As irregular fighters, partisans defend the territory defined as their own which lies within a space occupied by the other. Since the publication of Carl Schmitt's book *Theory of the Partisan*, the partisan struggle has been defined primarily by decentralised action, mobility, surprising shifts between attack and retreat, and political (never purely personal) motivations for their engagement (Schmitt 1963).

1 OMON (*Otriad mobilniy osobogo nasnatchenia*), also known in Belarusian as AMAP (*Atrad militsyi asobaha pryznachennia*) is a special unit of the militia.

2 Cf. video on BelsatTV channel on X-Twitter: https://twitter.com/Belsat_TV/status/1300366799985356810 [30 September 2023].

Figure 7.1: Screenshot from Belsat-TV on X-Twitter: "Belarusian women against men from riot police"



Partisan tactics as strategies of resistance against an opponent occupying one's own territory are characteristic of Belarus in the 20th and 21st centuries. Partisan fighting on the territory of present-day Belarus dates to the 19th century. But it was not until the Soviet-Belarusian partisan struggle against the German occupation in the 'Great Patriotic War' (World War II) – which became culturally entrenched in the 1960s as a national myth and to popularise and legitimise Soviet-Belarusian state politics of memory and history – that the partisan became a central point of reference in Belarusian discourses of identity. Yet for decades, partisan tactics have also informed the Belarusian population's resistance to the increasingly totalitarian Lukashenko regime, which culminated in protests in August 2020 against fraudulent elections, with protesters demonstrating for democratic change and against repressive violence. Since the beginning of the large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, partisan tactics have for the first time since World War II again become relevant in a concrete state of war, in the sense that self-proclaimed partisan groups are together resisting Russia's great power ambitions.

The partisan is, in line with Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, a figure through which, in Belarusian culture, history is transformed into everyday mythologies and a simulation of the past is completed which can always be reproduced and transformed anew for the present day. In Barthes' understanding, the success of the mythology lies in the fact that its message is never directly questioned, but rather is taken for granted, and its unconscious collective meaning is constantly reinforced by new material, through which the myth fundamentally reproduces itself continually (Barthes 2006 [1957]).[3] This also holds true for the partisan myth. I will discuss this below by tracing how the myth of the heroic partisan and of Belarus as a 'partisan republic' has been, and continues to be, shaped and generated by media and repeatedly transformed in popular culture in ever-shifting forms of appropriation, recoding and counter-mythologising.

2. "Partisan Republic": The Partisan as National Myth

In Belarus to this day, the central pillars of official war remembrance are the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany and the Belarusian civilian population's tragic experience of violence and annihilation during World War II.[4] After the war, the embedding of these experiences and memories in the collective work of commemoration created official places of remembrance and of personal and familial grief, but also always served to stylise the war as a struggle in defence of the Soviet homeland.[5] It is well known that during World War II, Soviet partisans also fought against the Nazi occupiers in the Ukrainian and Baltic Soviet republics, in Crimea, in the Caucasus and in Russia. However, it is only in Belarus that the overarching Soviet cult of the Great Patriotic War came to focus so strongly on the partisan struggle as a patriotic justification for an autonomous national identity.[6] Thus emerged the mythology of the partisan republic, which continued to be cultivated after 1991 as a *raison d'être* (Lewis 2017: 377) and a "calling card" (Sitnikova 2008: 413) of the country.

This myth essentially rests on three ideological conditions: first, the idea that resistance against the occupiers was sustained by the unity of all the Belarusian people; second, the idea of the selfless heroism of the partisan fighters; and third, the idea that all Belarusians made an unparalleled sacrifice for the Soviet fatherland[7], and that this sac-

3 On the connection between myth, history and the political in popular discourse, cf. also Pfister (2015).

4 During World War II, one in four to one in three Belarusians lost their lives; the number of victims was estimated at 2.2 million, of which 1.4 million belonged to the civilian population. Some 290 towns and 9200 villages were destroyed in the course of the German occupation and extermination policy (cf. Sahm, 2010: 43; Goujon 2010: 6–12; Marples 2012, 2014).

5 Cf. for more detail: Rudling 2008; Goujon 2010; Marples 2012 and above all Lewis 2017, who wrote the first seminal article on the significance of the partisan myth in Belarusian culture in the 1990s-2000s.

6 This development is at best comparable to the Yugoslavian partisan cult, which also reaches from socialist culture far into contemporary popular culture (cf. Jakiša 2015).

7 "Vsenarodnost'"; "Samootverzhennyi geroizm"; "Bespretsedentnaia zhertvennost'" (cf. Sitnikova 2008: 413, 424).

rifice made a crucial contribution to victory.[8] However, the notion of regional partisan identity existed long before World War II. It can be traced back to the concept of Bolshevik nationalities policy which was essentially developed by Lenin during World War I in response to the nationalism of the workers, a concept which demanded along with the proletarian revolution a national liberation of the nationalities that had been repressed in the 'prison of nations' of the Tsarist empire; this included the Belarusians. The White Ruthenian Democratic Republic proclaimed under German occupation in 1918 was famously short-lived; however, by early January 1919, after the collapse of the German Empire, the Bolsheviks proclaimed the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, which was to become a founding member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922. In the first years of the Soviet Union, the young republic enjoyed a relatively large degree of autonomy, which was intended, in the spirit of Bolshevik "affirmative action policy", to foster the national liberation of the people on the path to socialism through comprehensive language and cultural education (Martin 2001). In the context of this nationalities policy[9], the figure of the Belarusian partisan, who from 1918 to 1921 had fought alongside the Bolsheviks in the civil war and especially in the Polish-Soviet War[10], proved to be an ideal projection surface for developing the notion of the Belarusian people as fighters for a bright socialist future. In 1929, for example, the partisan motif was one of six guiding themes of the Third All-Belarusian Art Exhibition. Many of the paintings exhibited there were devoted to the theme of the partisan as a specifically Belarusian topos, including famed paintings by Gavriil Vier [Gaŭvril' Vier, Gabriel Wier] (1927), Mikhail Ėndė (1928) and Valiantsin Volkaŭ (1928), all of which were entitled *Partizany*.[11] The art historian Siarhei Kharėŭski notes that these works display an established canon of iconography, showing "men in farmer's attire with an ammunition belt slung across their shoulder, weapon in hand, carrying an axe in their belt" against the backdrop of a stereotypical landscape, most often a forest in winter (Kharėŭski 1999, as cited in Sitnikova: 2008: 398). While cinema and literature of the interwar period focused more on the Polish-Soviet War or the resistance against the Polish occupation, in visual art the opponent or occupier against whom the partisan struggle was directed remained vague in most representations in the 1920s (Sitnikova 2008: 400).[12] Kharėŭski therefore refers to exemplary representations of a "Belarusian partisanhood that defends itself against outsiders" (ibid.). This non-specific representation of the Belarusian partisan, however, soon took

8 The fact that the partisan movements on Belarusian territory were anything but uniform and that there were also Belarusian national partisan groups fighting against the Soviets was and is largely excluded from the official discourse (cf. Chiari 2001; Musial 2007, 2009).

9 A phase of language and cultural Belarusification was followed by a change in the party line in the early 1930s and a campaign to combat 'local nationalism', as a result of which the Belarusian intelligentsia were subjected to a repressive policy of persecution (deportations and mass shootings).

10 On earlier partisan battles on Belarusian territory, cf. Akudovich 2013:58-69; cf. Artsimovich 2016 [2021].

11 Cf. Kharėŭski 1999; Arcimovich 2016 [2021].

12 According to Dar'ia Sitnikova, this was also due to the fact that it was unclear which country could be considered one's own and who was to be defined as a "foreigner" and "outsider" (whether Poles, Germans, White Guards or even Soviet Russia itself) and thus as an "opponent", which is why the Belarusians tended to play the "role of a spectator without a voice" (Sitnikova 2008: 401).

on a significantly more political cast in films, and the figure of the village activist, filled with Bolshevik ideals, who fights for a new classless society against imperial German and Polish oppression, began to appear with increasing frequency.[13] This also represented a shift in the image of partisans themselves: "in place of the 'insurgent masses of the people', a 'heroic (Belarusian) people' was needed. A new war was needed, so that the fable could finally become a myth" (Sitnikova 2008: 412).

This new war arrived with the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941: during the period of war and occupation, the Soviet press imbued the figure of the partisan with heroic and mythological traits. Ekaterina Keding uses representations of partisan warfare in the newspaper *Pravda* from July 1944 to show how it was now presented as a "particular expression of popular ingenuity, of agility, of slyness, of unstoppable courage and plotting" (Keding 2013: 82).[14] The German invasion was understood as an "attack on the historical right of the Belarusian people to their own statehood" and the partisan war as an expression of the "remarkable qualities of the Belarusian people, their bravery and their heroism" (Lindner 2005, as cited in Artsimovich 2016 [2021], cf. Richter 2014).

After the end of the war, references to the partisan struggle served, as Keding emphasises, "above all a function in the post-war society of integration, legitimization and mobilization": "The partisan was supposed to unify a people divided between resistance and collaboration and to mobilise the Belarusian people for the work of building the Soviet Union and for socialist ideals" (Keding 2013: 82, 85). At the same time, national rhetoric now receded, while the overarching popular myth of the Soviet Union as a whole came to the fore: the Belarusian partisans were presented as part of the collective struggle against fascism of all peoples of the Soviet Union, who in turn would not have been able to operate so successfully without the support and solidarity of the simple people in the countryside, who had given them shelter, food and support.

The 1960s saw the phase of constituting the partisan myth, which now referred almost exclusively to World War II, while earlier imagery and stories from the civil war faded into the background: in the Brezhnev era, according to Nina Tumarkin, the Great Patriotic War became a "sacrosanct cluster of heroic exploits that had once and for all proven the superiority of communism over capitalism" (Tumarkin 1994: 5). For the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, this meant large-scale glorification of the partisan struggle, including in public spaces. Piotr Macherov [Mashėraŭ], who became the first secretary of the Belarusian Communist Party in 1965 and who himself had fought as a partisan in World War II, played a crucial role in this project. There was already a Belarusian Museum of the

13 For example, the films *Tale of the Woods* (*Lesnaia byl'* 1926, directed by Iuri Tarich), an adaption of the novel *Svinopas* by Mikhas Charot; *The Pines Are Noisy* (*Sosny shumiat*, 1929, directed by Leonid Molchanov), an adaption of the novel *Dva* (1925) by Anatol Volnyi; the play *Partisany* by Kondrat Krapiva (1937); the film *11 July* (*11 Iulia*, 1938, directed by Iuri Tarich) cf. Sitnikova 2008: 400) as well as the novel *Dryhva* (*The Quagmire*, 1934) by Iakub Kolas in which a Soviet partisan (Ded Talash) from the era of the Polish-Russian war in 1941 rejoins the partisans and is supposed to testify to the fact that the entire Belarusian people joined the partisan struggle (cf. Gorbunov et al. 1961: 454, quoted by Lewis 2017: 378).

14 The medal "To the Partisan of the Patriotic War", introduced in 1943, also indicates the important role the partisan struggle played in Soviet propaganda already during the war (cf. for more detail Keding 2013: 82).

Great Patriotic War and a victory monument dedicated to Soviet soldiers and partisans had been erected on Victory Square in Minsk in 1954. Now, however, numerous streets in Minsk and throughout the country were renamed after war heroes and additional monuments to partisans and victory were built in almost every city (Lastoŭski et al. 2010: 266). This era also saw the creation of major national memorials with an almost sacred character, such as the Khatyn Memorial complex (Memorialnyi kompleks Khatyn,1969), the Mound of Glory (Kurhan Slavy, 1969) and Brest Hero Fortress (Brestskaia krepost'[Brestskaia krepost'],1971). Additionally, in 1978 Minsk became the last of a series of Soviet cities to be bestowed the title 'Hero City'.

Even after the end of the Soviet Union, this tradition of official war memorials and heroes' memorials was carried on: along with the creation of numerous new war memorials, an outdoor-adventure memorial theme park was opened outside Minsk, on what was dubbed the 'Stalin Line'[15], in 2005 for the 60th anniversary of the war's end. The new theme park included a Stalin memorial and tourist attractions featuring military technology.[16] This new 'Stalin Line' shows that critical engagement with Stalinism is officially unwelcome under Lukashenko. Additionally, this positive framing of Stalin broke a taboo in post-Soviet commemoration practices, given that in 2005, creating new Stalin memorials, let alone placing them in a context of entertainment and leisure, would (unlike today) most likely have caused a scandal even within Russia (even the renaming of Volgograd as Stalingrad since 2013 has taken place only temporarily on the occasion of war remembrance days). In 2014, Lukashenko had a new museum of the Great Patriotic War built, which was intended to symbolically represent an independent Belarus's own perspective on war remembrance by taking up the Soviet narratives but adapting and modifying them to fit the national discourse. The Soviet representation of the heroic partisan struggle thus continues to this day to inform official state initiatives for the formation of national memory in Belarus, as attested to by the traditional cult of heroism that is evident on days of remembrance and in history books, museum presentations of partisans, and multimedia projects commemorating World War II.[17]

15 The "Stalin Line" is the name of the Red Army's western defence line, which ran from Karelia to the Black Sea and along the former USSR's border with Poland. In contrast to Western Europe, where similar fortifications were demolished, much of the line remained or was largely ignored after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Remains of the fortifications of the Stalin Line can be found today in Belarus, Russia, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

16 Official site of the Stalin Line Park: https://stalin-line.by [30 September 2023].

17 E.g. shifting the National Day of Remembrance from 27 July (Independence Day) to 3 July (the day of the end of the German occupation in 1944); the newly built Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War, built in 2014; the representation of partisan images in public spaces to mark "Victory Day"; the multimedia project "Belarus Remembers" ("Belarus pomnit"), produced to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the war: http://storyofvictory.sb.by/ [30 September 2023], etc.

3. "Partizanfil'm": Partisans and their Heroism in Post-War Film

Post-war Soviet cinema played an important role in popularising the figure of the partisan as a war hero and folk hero. Along with literary non-fiction, memoirs and novels[18], (war) film was *the* medium that played an essential part in canonising the myth. The state film studios produced so many war films that the Belarusfilm studio, founded in 1926, was ironically dubbed the Partizanfil'm studio for its perceived high output of partisan films. It was alleged that one out of every two films produced there after the war was devoted to the war; this claim was in fact greatly exaggerated.[19] Most of the 17 partisan films created in total were produced between the end of the Khrushchev Thaw and the early 1970s, after which the studio's interests shifted towards mainstream genres such as comedy, melodrama and adventure films.

One of the first films produced by Belarusfilm in the post-war era was *Konstantin Zaslonov* (1949, directed by Aleksandr Faintsimmer and Vladimir Korsh-Sablin), which defined the format for the aesthetic treatment of the war theme in Belarusian cinema for years to come (Sitnikova 2008: 426; Lewis: 2017: 377).

The film tells of the legendary resistance activities of the real-life figure Konstantin Zaslonov, who commanded Soviet partisan units between 1941 and 1942 in the Orsha region. He appears in the film as a flawless fighter for the Soviet cause, who takes a stand both for country-wide resistance and for the Party line. This highly ideological film, which was awarded the third-class Stalin Prize in 1950, is one of few works to pass muster with the censors at the peak of post-war Stalinism and the Cold War.

The film *The Clock Stopped at Midnight* (*Chasy ostanovilis v polnoch'*, 1959, directed by Nikolai Figurovskii) likewise conveys the notion of the 'nationwide partisan war', now narrated through the more complex expressive possibilities permitted to films in the Khrushchev Thaw era. The plot centres on a real-life event: the September 1943 assassination of Nazi official Wilhelm Kube, the *Generalkommissar* of the *Generalbezirk Weissruthenien* region of occupied Belarus and the *Gauleiter* of occupied Minsk. The film stylises two partisans who carried out the attack while disguised as maids, Ganna Chërnaia [Hanna Chernia] and Marina Kazanich, as heroes of the people. The film thereby introduced two female protagonists to the partisan myth for the first time; however, it was not solely due to their individual achievements, but above all through the invoking of the collective

18 E.g. collections such as Unconquered Belarus: Memoirs and Articles about the Nationwide Partisan Movement in Belarus during the Great Patriotic War (Nepokorennaia Belorussiia. Vospominaniia i stati o vsenarodnom partizanskom dvizhenii v Belorussii v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. 1941–1945 gg., 1962), The Nationwide Partisan Movement in Belarus during the Great Patriotic War. June 1941–1944 (Vsenarodnoe partizanskoe dvizhenie v Belorussii v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Iun 1941-Iul 1944), 1967–1982); Memoirs of partisan commanders such as Partisan Chronicle (Partizanskaia khronika, 1961) by Aleksandr Vaupshasov, Partisan Republic (Partizanskaia respublika, 1964) by Petr Kalinin or Faithful to the End and Special People (Veren do kontsa and Liudi Osobogo Sklada, 1973) by Vasili Kozlov among others.

19 Daria Sitnikova has pointed out that the numbers were different in reality: among the 250 Belarusfilm productions from 1946 to 1983, there were ultimately only 18 partisan films (including children's films), i.e. only slightly more than 7 per cent, in which the partisans were the main or key theme (Sitnikova 2008: 425).

struggle of the people as a whole, which transcended boundaries of gender and education, that they could be presented as heroes. The film attracted 34.8 million viewers (Kudriavtsev 1998: 419), making it a Soviet blockbuster and showing how much its subject matter resonated with audiences at the time.

Figure 7.2: Film poster for the film Konstantin Zaslonov *(1949)*

The Film also played a major role in shaping the image of the partisan struggle as a matter of intergenerational identification. Other extremely popular post-war films include *The Children of the Partisan* (*Deti partizana*, 1954) and *Girl Seeks Father* (*Devochka ischet ottsa*, 1959), both directed by Lev Golub, which expanded the partisan myth to the younger Soviet generation by focusing on children and young people.

Figure 7.3: Film posters for the films The Children of the Partisan *(1954) and* Girl Seeks Father *(1959)*

The Children of the Partisan, the first Belarusian colour film, is set in the post-war era, with a plot centred on honourable remembrance of partisans: the children of two partisan fighters who died in service of the fatherland are lured into a trap by a former Nazi collaborator who fears being exposed. But with the help of their grandparents, the children escape and bring the villains to justice; in the end, the rightful order is restored. The film *Girl Seeks Father* tells the story of the young daughter of partisan commander Bat'ka Panas. The girl is taken into the care of an old forester, then is captured by the Nazi occupiers, who want to use her to force the partisan leader to capitulate. A heroic sabotage operation by the shrewd partisans thwarts the Nazis' plan. Both films illustrate the intergenerational power of the partisan myth. The films' use of the myth brought enormous success, especially for *Girl Seeks Father*, which became one of the most popular children's films in the Soviet Union with some 35 million viewers (Kudriavtsev 1998: 418, 420) and was also well-received internationally (Beliaev 2023).[20] This success was surely due in part to the film's linking of the partisan theme with adventure motifs (searching for the father, freeing the girl from the Nazis' clutches) and was also related to the fact that in the Soviet

20 Cf. the list of the most successful Soviet films between 1940 and 1989, compiled and annotated by cinema critic Sergei Kudriavtsev on the basis of statistics. According to this list, *Girl Seeks Father* is, along with the film *What Is It, the Sea?* (*Kakoe ono, more*, 1964: Ėduard Bocharov), one of the two all-time most-viewed children's films in the Soviet Union (Kudriavzev 1997: 410–442). The film critic Vadim Beliaev lists the film as one of the top 10 Belarusian box-office hits and, referring to data from Goskino, rates it as a highly successful film internationally, with releases in 75 countries. Unfortunately, Beliaev's further information on Goskino, among others, is currently not available (Beliaev 2023).

Union, entire school classes and Young Pioneer groups collectively attended showings of films that were considered especially important ideologically and educationally. Through this, the film became widely known and made an essential contribution to the production of the myth.[21]

4. "The Cinematic Partisan": The Psychological Turn in War Films (1960s-1980s)

The partisan film peaked near the end of the Khrushchev Thaw period, amidst the entrenchment of the Soviet war myth in history and politics under Brezhnev and Masherov. In this era of "Kinopartisanstvo" (Sitnikova 2008: 426), the partisan myth developed a particular allure, as its cultural function was twofold: it was not only a projection surface for heroic Soviet-nationalist war memory, but also served as a site of individual and psychological grappling with traumatic experiences of the war and the occupation.[22] On one hand, this period saw the making of a number of "showpiece films" (*paradnyi*), which were marked by an epic "fusion of Stalinist placard heroism and mass tragedy" (Sitnikova 2008: 430).[23] They include works such as *Father* (*Bat'ka*, 1971, directed by Boris Stepanov), *Flame* (*Plamia*, 1974) and *The Black Birch* (*Chernaia berëza*, 1977, both directed by Vital' Chatsverykoŭ [Vitalii Chetverikov]), as well as the first made-for-TV works, such as the miniseries *Time Has Chosen Us* (*Vremia vybralo nas*, 1976–1979, directed by Mikhail Ptashuk). They typify the reproduction en masse of an entrenched partisan myth in these years.[24] A second direction evident in this period is the psychological partisan film, which more starkly centres the individual experience of war in its plot. Like the so-called 'lieutenant prose' of this era, these works explored personal dimensions and morally ambiguous victim-and-perpetrator stories that went beyond simplistic friend-or-foe constellations. One of the pioneering 'psychological' partisan films is Viktor Turov's *Through the*

21 Another indication that the film was produced with some effort is the fact that, according to Beliaev, around 900 children tried out for the role of little Lenochka. The role was played by the later well-known actress Anna Kamenkova, who had caught the eye of a crew member in the playground with her open-minded and dominant qualities (Beliaev 2013).

22 Regarding the psychological aspect, Sitnikova justifiably mentions in literature the widely distributed works of Vasyl Bykaŭ and Ales' Adamovich, and in art the famous paintings *Partizanskaia madonna* (1967) by Mikhail Savitskii (followed in 1978 *Minskaia partizanskaia madonna*) and *Belarus'-mat' partizanskaia* (1967) by the artist Mai Dantsig.

23 Cf. on the topic of public history and popular Soviet cinema as myth-maker Tumarkin 1994 and Youngblood 2001.

24 During this period the canon was expanded by historically and politically sacralised heroic places: numerous films from the 1970s contributed to the popularisation of the image of Brest as a place of heroic resistance against the German invaders in the first days of the Great Patriotic War, which only loosely corresponded to historical reality, such as the multi-part *The Ruins Are Shooting* (*Ruiny Streliaiut*, 1970–72, dir.: Vital' Chatsverykoŭ [Vitalii Chetverikov]) or the films *I Am a Fortress*, *I Stood my Ground* (*Ia – Krepost'*, *Vedu Boi*, 1972, dir: Izrail Pikman) and *Brest Fortress* (*Brestskaia Krepost'*, 1975, dir: Pikman). The partisan of the cinema and TV epics of the time had, as Sitnikova aptly diagnoses, been transformed into a "simulacrum", into a "monumental, decorative façade that no longer conceals a powerful imperial ideology of a totalitarian kind" (Sitnkokova 2008: 431).

Cemetery (*Cherez kladbishche*, 1964), which was the first such film not to place a party functionary at the centre of its plot as the leader of the people's resistance and to eschew exaggerated heroism and optimism. Instead, it showed internally contradictory characters, who acted out of doubt rather than conviction.[25] Such films were able to connect the presentation of the Belarusian people's resistance struggle and their suffering in war with existential questions without being accused of "anti-heroism" by party loyalist critics (Sitnikova 2008: 428). In the 1960s, this formed the foundation of a humanist hero ethos, to which later generations also felt connected.

Two additional films by Viktor Turov played a key role in the development: his screen adaptations of Ales' Adamovich's duology of novels *Partisans* (*Partisany*), comprised of *War Under the Roofs* (*Voina pod kryshami*, 1960) and *Sons Go into Battle* (*Synov'ia ukhodiat v boi*, 1963), which appeared in 1967 and 1969. The films tell of the fate of a mother and her two sons, who join the partisans during the war. Both the novels and their film adaptations are still anchored in a heroic mode of storytelling in that their plots follow the traditional narrative of the sacrificial struggle for survival and resistance which is borne by the partisans and the general population together. But they also use family and neighbourhood entanglements to show the irreconcilable moral dilemmas and human depths of war.[26] The popularity of the films and of Adamovich's books[27] was amplified by the casting of high-profile actress Nina Urgant in the role of the mother and by the fact that the film featured music by Vladimir Vysotskii, arguably the most popular Soviet singer of the era. Vysotskii remained a cult figure even after his death; he was well loved for his blissful songs about the Great Patriotic War and for his critical, ironic lyrics about everyday life in the Soviet Union. His song titled *Sons Go into Battle* (*Synovia ukhodiat v boi*)[28] played a major part in the popularity of the second film.

However, the psychologically nuanced characters, especially in the first film, which was released in 1967, met with harsh criticism from the authorities and the State Committee for Cinematography. Turov and Adamovich (who had written the screenplay for both films) were accused, among other things, of lack of heroic pathos, preference for traitorous characters rather than strong ones, and failure to designate clear villains.[29]

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25 In this film, "the individual stands above the social, the war and the occupation situation serve only as a backdrop to raise existential questions" (Sitnikova 2008: 427).

26 Adamovich's own mother served as a model for the psychologically illuminated fate of Anna Korzun, who actively supports the partisans despite the great risk and ultimately saves her sons from the Germans by joining the partisans together with them. The book and film represented a new look at the underestimated role of women in war and were to be a major inspiration for Svetlana Aleksievich's book *The Unwomanly Face of War* (*U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, 1985). Aleksievich's famous title goes back to Adamovich's introductory motto to *War Under the Roofs*: "War has no female face. But no memory of this war was stronger, more harrowing, more terrible and more beautiful than that of the faces of our mothers" (Adamovich: *Voina pod kryshami*. Minsk 1960, 5).

27 Their popularity is not so much reflected in large audience or sales figures (they do not appear on the lists of Kudriavtsev et al.), but rather in terms of their canonisation in the field of psychological partisan films, to which frequent reference is made to this day.

28 A video of the song with film images is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ounQy6JWQ00 [30 September 2023].

29 For the argumentation of the criticism against Turov and Adamovich, see in detail: Historiya kinamastatstva Belarusi. 1960–1985 (2002: 100–103), quoted in Sitnikova 2008: 429 as well as Shal-

For the 1969 second film, then, Turov and Adamovich had to make compromises in the direction of a more heroic depiction of the partisan struggle[30], which did not hinder the popularity of the two films or the long-term expansion of the partisan myth to include psychological dimensions.

Ultimately, however, this psychology-focused approach persistently chipped away at the partisan myth. Two films that became classics of Soviet-Belarusian film history show this particularly clearly in that they address violence, fear and doubt, and show the surmounting of these without any resolution, also connecting these themes with religious motifs. The first of these is *The Ascent* (*Vozchozhdenie*, 1976) directed by Larisa Shepit'ko and based on the story *Sotnikaŭ* by Vasyl Bykaŭ, which tells of complicated confrontations between partisans, villagers and collaborators. Its protagonist does not follow the code of loyalty, but rather – entangled in moral doubt and hope for rescue – betrays both his comrades and his ideals. Despite the authorities' misgivings about the film, it debuted on 2 April 1977, and although there were few copies of it, was seen by more than ten million viewers within the Soviet Union (Vasil'eva/Braginskii 2012: 313). It was the first-ever Soviet film to be awarded a Golden Bear at the Berlinale.

The second such film, Ėlem Klimov's *Come and See* (*Idi i smotri*, 1985), likely the best-known of all Belarusian-Soviet anti-war films, focusses radically on physical and psychological experience of the horrors of war. The film was made in 1977 but was censored by the Soviet authorities before it was completed and was blocked from release for years, due to accusations of, among other things, "simplification", "abstract humanism" and a perspective "not related to class" (as cited in Stiglegger 2020: 170). Ales' Adamovich had written the film's screenplay, and elements of his short story *Khatyn Story* (*Khatynskaia povest'*), which was published in 1972, were incorporated into it. Klimov rendered the story with disturbing images and intense sound collages. From the perspective of a teenage boy, the film recounts the partisan struggle and the horrific massacres of Belarusian civilians by German troops, transposing the presentation of the war onto a reality where everything – people, animals and nature alike – is touched by utter destruction and moral despair. Here, the partisan is no longer a heroic figure, but rather both victim and perpetrator, and above all a human being who is bound up in the inescapable atrocities of war. After years of censorship, the film finally reached cinemas in 1985 as a co-production of Mosfil'm and Belarusfilm; it found an audience of almost 30 million people in the Soviet Union alone. It remains the most internationally well-known Soviet-Belarusian war film to this day and was re-released in a restored Blu-Ray version in 2020. In the film, little remains of the heroic dimension of the partisan myth, but its radical depiction of the abject abyss of war from the perspective of a child partisan carries on the figure of the partisan with merciless realism.

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nuivski 1971, quoted in Sitnikova: 2008: 430 and in: Vse belorusskie filmy. Catalogue spravochnik. Vol. 1: Igrovoe Kino. 1926–1970 (1996: 222).

30 Cf. for more detail, among others Karpilava et al. 2002: 103.

5. Partisans in Films of the 2000s: Nationalisation, De-Glorification, Deconstruction

At the end of the Soviet Union, the heroism and psychology that had ultimately been two sides of the same mythological construction began to break apart. In the context of Belarus becoming an independent country, the partisan myth now took on its own dynamics: in the 1990s, film production at Belarusfilm, the country's only major film studio, largely collapsed, which was due in part to economic factors and the reorientation of the film industry and in part to the shift in the orientation of public discourses of history and memory. Other themes now came to the fore, such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as the foundational period for a new version of national history.[31] At the same time, the first publications by independent historians appeared, which sought to revise the partisan myth and also challenged the conventional narrative of the civilian population's unconditional support for the partisans (cf. Lindner 1999, 2001; Artsimovich 2021). The election of Lukashenko as president in 1994 brought an abrupt end to this shift in perspective in the public discourse of history.[32] While the state and those representations which conformed to the official politics of history took on the Soviet construct of nationality in modified form, others began to revise the partisan myth in various ways or even to reinvent it entirely. This trend became increasingly evident beginning in the 2000s and follows two strands in film.

The first strand recycles the partisan myth in a certain sense, along the lines of the alternative concepts to notions of 'nostalgia' or 'trauma' which Valery Vyugin proposes in this volume, according to which historical narratives are "reused and resold" as "a resource" and are shaped into new forms to fit current needs (cf. Vyugin, chapter 10 in this volume). Numerous publicly financed Belarusfilm war film productions of the 2000s carried on the traditional Soviet image of the Belarusian folk hero in a new patriotic guise and with updated film technology (Khatkovaskaia 2013: 435). Two examples of this are films that both represent the staging of official national politics of memory under Lukashenko as "memory events par excellence" (Etkind 2010: 4, as cited in Lewis 2012: 379): first, the war drama *Deep Flow* (*Glubokoe techenie*, 2005, directed by Margarita Kasymova and Ivan Pavlov), the first Belarusian film in Dolby Surround, which uses the example of a young commanding officer to tell of responsibly overcome difficulties of the partisan struggle early in the occupation period. Not coincidentally, the film is based on motifs from a 1949 novel of the same name by Ivan Shamiakin, which was celebrated by Soviet critics at the time as the first real partisan novel and was awarded the Stalin Prize.[33] The second example is the monumental blockbuster *The Brest Fortress* (*Brestkaia Krepost'*, also known as *Fortress of War*, 2010, directed by Aleksandr Kott), which was created in co-production with several major Russian studios. The film rehashes topoi of the Soviet war canon: the "heroic defence of Brest Fortress" and the tenacious Belarusian

31 Cf. Hansen 2008: 187–196; Krawatzek/Weller 2022: 27–40; Weller 2022: 59–74.

32 On the politics of history under Lukashenko, cf. Lindner 1999: 423–477; Goujon 2010; Rudling 2017: 77.

33 Inessa Khatkovskaia classifies the film as the first and only "true national" (partisan) film (Khatkovskaia 2008: 437).

resistance against the German Wehrmacht in June 1941. Despite the Soviet side's swift defeat at Brest Fortress, party ideologues constructed a heroic narrative soon after the war (Ganzer 2021) which connected the Red Army's defence of the Fortress with partisan resistance. It was not until the Khrushchev Thaw period, however, that this narrative became widely known through the books *Brest Fortress* (*Brestskaia krepost'*, 1957) and *Heroes of Brest Fortress* (*Geroi Brestskoi kreposti*, 1961), which were written by the famous war reporter and Lenin Prize winner Sergei Smirnov based on witness accounts and interviews, and which made the fortress a symbolic site of memory, particularly in Belarus (Lewis 2011: 379). The significance that the post-Soviet Belarusian state attached to the recycling of the Soviet partisan myth is also evident in the tremendous financial expenditure and organisational effort that was invested in the production and distribution of the two films. Both films were Belarusian-Russian co-productions and were produced under Lukashenko's patronage. According to Khatkovskaia, *Deep Flow* broke all records for state funding and was introduced by the President himself at its premiere at the October cinema in Minsk. As for *Brest Fortress*, its production costs totalled some eight million dollars, and the film's premiere was promoted as one of the most important events of the 2000s wave of war films. The premiere was laden with symbolism: timed to coincide with the 69th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the USSR, it was held on-site at the Brest Fortress memorial, as part of a grandiose memorial ceremony.

A second direction in recent Belarusian film, on the other hand, continues an individualised and psychological mode of narrating the war; these films de-glorify the partisan myth and in some cases deconstruct it. While the characters in the previously mentioned blockbusters display psychological nuance and internal conflicts, distinguishing them sharply from the epic works of the Soviet era, this ultimately serves solely to attest to the heroic pathos of the collective struggle. By contrast, newer adaptations of literary works by Vasyl Bykaŭ and Ales' Adamovich tie in with the late Soviet film adaptations of these authors' work, which address the bleak and brutal aspects of the partisan struggle from the perspective of the individual. These include *Franz + Polina* (2006, directed by Mikhail Segal), a film based on Adamovich's novel *The Deaf* (*Nemoi*, 1993), along with several films and a graphic novel based on Bykaŭ's story *Ours* (*Svaiaki*,1966), as well as the award-winning film *In the Fog* (*V tumane*, 2012) by Sergei Loznitsa, based on a story of the same name by Bykaŭ (1989). In the latter work, the Belarusian-Ukrainian director Loznitsa treats the partisan struggle as a mere backdrop for the unspectacular but existential conflicts of individuals in times of war: each of the film's three characters tries to follow their own moral compass, but none of them remain morally unscathed.

Mysterium Occupation (*Okkupatsiia. Misterii* [*Akupatsyia Mistèryi*], 2004) directed by Andrèi Kudzinenka, set a highly provocative new direction. Its radical aim of dismantling the heroic partisan myth opened a new chapter in Belarusian cinema (Khatkovskaia 2008: 469). Even the fact that it was not produced by Belarusfilm, but rather by the independent Navigator Studio, was a minor sensation.[34] The film not only rejects the

34 Other critical films about national historical themes and the Soviet past crimes –such as Igor Kuznetsov's TV-documentaries *Katyn'. After 70 Years* (*Katyn. Praz 70 gadoŭ*, 2010) – about the mass murder of thousands of Polish officers and intellectuals by the NKVD in April 1940) and *The Stalin Line on a Child's Palm* (*Liniia Stalina na dzitsiachai daloni*, 2015) – dedicated to the youngest members

heroic meta-narrative, but also radically dismantles the categories of moral value set forth in the Soviet-Russian canon.[35] In micro-histories, it shows how daily life in an occupied country is shaped by desires, irrational choices, instincts, violence and sadism, with nobody distinguishing themselves through any heroic acts. The Belarusian culture ministry therefore banned the film on the grounds that it was unpatriotic and destructive, denying it a distribution licence for years,[36] which only attracted more interest in it in Belarusian online spaces and at international film festivals.[37]

Figure 7.4: Film still from the film Mysterium Occupation *(2004)*

But *Mysterium Occupation* not only dismantles (neo-) Soviet partisan heroism; through the paratextual framing of the plot, it also accentuates a negative state of "Belarusianness" as the actual national catastrophe: such "Belarusianness" is the end, the non-existence of Belarusian culture, or, as Simon Lewis aptly puts it, "the postcolonial mourning

of the Stalinist terror) or Vasil Hryn's documentary oral history film *The Third Truth* (*Tret'ia Pravda*, 2010) – in which people from the Polesian region talk about their life during Polish and Soviet rule) could have been shown only in an informal setting in these years (Sahm 2010: 53).

35 For more details on the film, see inter alia Gusakovskaia 2008; Bekus 2010: 229–233; Lewis 2011.

36 The state press accused the film and its director of, among other things, "slandering the partisan movement", TV-Kanal Kul'tura, 24. 06.2004 [22 November 2022, link not accessible]. The Ministry of Culture justified its decision by arguing that: "The treatment of the partisan movement in the film contradicts the truth, can hurt the feelings of war veterans and can have a negative impact on the education of the younger generation and young people" (Khatkovskaia 2008: 439). The film was first shown in Minsk in 2010.

37 The film was first screened as a short film at Filmfest Rotterdam and was able to be extended to a 90-minute feature-length film thanks to an award from the Dutch Film Fund. The longer version of the film was shown at numerous international film festivals.

for a past that cannot return and a present that is in ruins" (Lewis 2011: 377). A text superimposed on the beginning of the film states:

> 500 years ago, they did not know they were Belarusians, but their country was the largest in Europe. When they realized this, they no longer had a state of their own, and others considered them to be either incomplete Russians or defective Poles. But there still were some Belarusians. They got lumped together with the Soviet people. And then the war and occupation started. After this there were very few Belarusians left. Now the Belarusians have their own state. But there are no more Belarusians. (*Mysterium Occupation*)[38]

Here, director Kudinenko is addressing another myth, one which traces Belarusian identity to the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuanian aristocratic culture as an anti-programme to the Soviet concept of nationalities. Inherent to this model, which was put forth by exponents of 'Belarusian rebirth', is the projection of national history backward onto the period of the Grand Duchy and onto the Belarusian Republic which existed for a few months in 1918 under German occupation. According to this model, Belarusian identity has always been formed in contrast to the dominant population group or in resistance to the occupying power.

But what is truly provocative about Kudinenko's interpretation is that he turns the paradox of this Belarusian identity into its essence: it is at the moment when the population are repressed and destroyed that they first gain an awareness of themselves as Belarusians. In this 'decolonial' reading, then, the existence of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic is also a period of non-existence, as it had no autonomy under Soviet power. Correspondingly, the re-founding of Belarus as a nation can only take place through a radical deconstruction of all that is Soviet and thereby also of the Soviet partisan myth. In the end, all that can remain of the myth is its mere form, 'partisanhood' as a form of resistance and a therapeutic model for grappling with the absence of Belarusianness.[39] In his 2007 book *The Code of Absence* (*Kod adsutnaci*, 2007), the philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich took up this notion, which Kudinenko had generated through direct engagement with the Soviet partisan myth, expanding it into a comprehensive concept of identity.

38 See the introduction to the film on Youtube, minute 0:00-0:52: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_s3_HqpVtSs [30 September 2023]. I quote the translation by Simon Lewis (Lewis 2012: 377).

39 "For Belarus, the occupation is the main theme of its existence because our country has always been under occupation … . We wanted to speak about a traditional theme for Belarusian cinema, but at the same time to do it in our own way. All Belarusians are partisans and the subject of partisans and war is a sacred theme for Belarus." Kudienko in interview at the Moscow International Film festival in June 2004 (Kudinenko 2004).

6. "I'm not there": 'Partisan Identity' and the Anti-Partisan

Since the early 2000s, the figure of the partisan has been increasingly present in independent Belarusian culture as a concept of identity that creates a sense of commonality and is directed against state appropriation of the Soviet myth. In this figure, the main topoi of the partisan have shifted: in particular, the topos of collective 'resistance' against the German occupation in World War II has been gradually expanded to encompass any kind of 'occupation' past or present (Oushakine 2013). Two conceptualisations of partisanhood have especially gained tremendous popularity with the consolidation of Lukashenko's authoritarian presidential system and of the resistance against his regime's repressive restrictions: firstly, Akudovich's notion of a specific "partisan mentality" as a concept of national identity, as set forth in his much-cited book *Code of Absence* (*Kod adsutnaci*, 2007). And secondly, the concept of the "partisan artist", which the artist Artur Klinaŭ outlines in his cultural project *pARTisan* and which is focused more on subversive artistic practice. What the two concepts have in common, and what has made them so influential in contemporary popular culture, is that they pointedly make reference to the Soviet partisan myth and understand it as the true deviation from the Belarusian national tradition, or, more precisely, as an artificial, imperial construct, something 'foreign' that was forced on the Belarusian people through Soviet-Russian colonisation. At the same time, however, they appropriate the figure of the partisan, which is at the heart of this myth, but which is now used on behalf of the idea of a national rebirth and an 'authentic' Belarusianness in opposition to the Soviet 'occupier'. This figure is imagined not as a heroic warrior, but as a fighter without a weapon in hand, who defends the homeland with tactics of resistance and perseverance. According to Akudovich, this figure is an almost sacred embodiment of the Belarusian people and is a form of anticolonial self-description. Partisan life in the underground and the background is reinterpreted to possess a special quality of 'active absence':

> For the Belarusians, the word 'partisan' has long possessed a sacred meaning, which even the Soviet myth of the partisan movement could not take away from it. The Belarusian is a 'partisan' by nature – in his private life and as part of history. … a partisan is someone who always hides. Hide-and-seek is probably the only national sport of the Belarusian people. A partisan always says: I'm not there. A partisan shows himself only in the interest of sabotage; afterwards, he hides again beneath his mask of 'I'm not there'. (Akudovich 2013: 68)[40]

Akudovich's alternative conception, then, adopts the form of the Soviet myth but reconstructs its content metonymically. He removes the partisan's two defining habits – hiding and sabotage – from their Soviet war context entirely; beyond this, he also postulates the original setting of the Soviet post-war myth –World War II era – as the real distortion

40 The original edition in Belarusian was published in 2007 under the title *Kod adsutnatsi. Asnovy belaruskai mental'nastsi* by the Minsk publishing house Lohvinaŭ. The translations into English are based on the German edition.

of history. He argues that the Soviet partisan struggle was forced on the Belarusian people as a foreign and ultimately self-destructive movement, and that the 'partisan' form of presence – acting in the background and adapting oneself – is ultimately far older (Akudovich 2013: 62, 170). This twofold revision enables him to transfer the qualities of the partisan as an ontological foundation for Belarusian identity backwards onto the entirety of its history and culture, which he claims shapes civilian everyday life to this day. Akudovich declares partisanhood to be the *conditio belarus*, a timeless and "sacred" habit that is to be found in all life situations and periods of history of the Belarusian people. And even where it completely invisible, he argues, it remains present, as the partisan mentality as a fundamental national habit is characterised by its disguising of itself. However, with this central part of his argument, Akudovich in turn takes up typically pan-Soviet habits of disguise, which – as Sheila Fitzpatrick has shown – spread throughout the country beginning in the 1920s and especially during the terror of the Stalin era (Fitzpatrick 2005).

Klinaŭ's conception of partisanhood is very similar to Akudovich's in its form but refers less to a national identity imagined to be timeless and more to a specific artistic strategy. For him, the Belarusian 'underground man' is someone who has, by retreating to a territory which he will defend and by defending his own culture from external influences, strategically adapted to his own country being ruled by authorities perceived as foreign (Klinaŭ 2014: 31). "For more than two hundred years, partisanhood has been an indispensable strategy of self-preservation, the only available survival technique for Belarusian culture" (Klinaŭ 2014: 26).

For Klinaŭ too, the Soviet partisan myth plays a key role: he defines it as the "Great Partisan" and sets it in opposition to the figure of the "anti-partisan". The latter fights not for heroic victories, but rather in the counter-world of the underground, against an authoritarian state regime and for his own survival and that of Belarusian culture.

> But the partisan is not just the heroic type with a weapon in hand, the fighter for the national cause. He is also a diagnosis: a pathological state of consciousness, with deep-rooted fears in response to historical trauma… From a psychological perspective, the Belarusian partisan is an underground man. His mission is not to triumph, but to survive. (Klinaŭ 2014: 28)

But for Klinaŭ, survival also means deconstructing the system of the Great Partisan in order to preserve the cultural code of Belarusian culture. In this, Klinaŭ's conception differs fundamentally from Akudovich's in that, while he too regards the Soviet myth as an aberration, he does not discard it entirely as a colonial construct foreign to Belarusian identity; rather, he recognises it as a national product of its own. He writes, for example, that the "development of the mythology of the Great Partisan" was "the most distinctive Belarusian cultural achievement of the Soviet era" (Klinaŭ 2014: 8). For him, the antagonism between what is one's own and what is foreign is not an ontological state of national identities, but rather a matter of succession: the Great Partisan figure that emerged from the 'colonial' Soviet context is supplanted by the anti-partisan or 'artist-partisan', who must subversively emancipate himself from the authoritarian and heroic legacy of his predecessor, becoming the true partisan (Klinaŭ 2014: 14–26).

7. *pARTisan*: TheArtist-Partisan as a Rebel against State Ideology

In the early 2000s, Artur Klinaŭ programmatically expanded his concept of the artist-partisan. For Klinaŭ, what was at stake was no less than the reconquest of the Belarusian cultural space and with it a comprehensive concept of partisan art that fought by subversive means to gain artistic autonomy. In works such as his installation *Partisan Mobile Shop (Mobil'nyi magazin partizana*, 2003), Klinaŭ shows that for him this was from the outset also a matter of differentiation from the official state partisan myth. In the installation, he displayed the retro-Soviet ideology of the Belarusian state as a cheap nostalgia article, like an exotic attraction.

But the cornerstone of Klinaŭ's project was the *pARTisan* art and culture magazine, which was founded in 2002 and sought to gather the independent arts scene together for the first time under the partisan label. In the first issue of *pARTisan*, Klinaŭ articulated the qualities ascribed to this rebellious partisan in a sort of 'partisan manifesto':

> The appropriation of spaces that the system is not able to penetrate constitutes the strength of the partisan. These spaces, the zones of the irrational, are inaccessible to the system, because the system a priori moves within the framework of rational discourse. At the same time, the partisan is superbly able to find his way in the labyrinth of the system. Because he knows the system's vulnerabilities, he can puncture it with pinpricks, then disappear into his safe haven on the other side of the mirror… (Klinaŭ 2014: 24)

For Klinaŭ and the *pARTisan* project, then, much more was at stake than creating exclusive spaces for autonomous art or, like the heroes of the film *The Matrix* (1999), of which the quote above is strongly reminiscent, solely retreating into subversive actions. Rather, the project represents the presence of independent creative artists in the spirit of an 'alternative partisanhood' as an "intellectual front", as also articulated by the philosopher Maks Zhbankoŭ: "It is very simple: partisans only appear in those places where an occupation has occurred. And in a country that has long been under cultural occupation, partisans of the intellectual front consequently appear" (Zhbankoŭ 2014, as cited in Strocaŭ 2014: 75).

One important point of reference for the *pARTisan* project was the programmatic multimedia photography project *Light Guerrilla Movement* (*Lëhki partyzanski rukh* [*Tikhoe partizanskoe dvizhenie*]), through which the artist Ihar Tsishyn [Igor' Tishin] had made a name for himself in 1997. A series of black-and-white photographs shows a man in partisan attire with a machine gun in his hand inside a typical hut like those seen in countless partisan films. One photograph provocatively shows the weapon in a dysfunctional state. The man does not hold the weapon at the ready to defend himself or to attack. On the contrary, he lies passively on a table and holds the weapon lackadaisically in his hand, like a useless object that has grown obsolete. Around him, time appears to stand still and the table to be the last safe refuge. In other images from the series, he starts moving, first inside the hut, then outside it, but nothing happens. In place of the hero of the Soviet and post-Soviet partisan myth, who is perpetually ready to fight, this scene is marked by a sense of excessive helplessness. Tsishyn's project was greeted by many as a manifesto

and his partisan as a metaphor for Belarusian artists, who found themselves at a point of absolute emptiness at the turn of the century: in the late 1990s, alternative cultural life had largely ground to a halt due to increasing repression under the Lukashenko regime. The partisan became a symbol of the artist whose world had shrunk to the dimensions of a 'dissident' kitchen table. In this period, Tsishyn and many other dissenting artists emigrated abroad, as they saw no future prospects for themselves in Belarus (cf. Arcimovich 2016 [2021]); Shparaga 2013: 7–10). Klinaŭ's *pARTisan* project represented an attempt to counter this trend by offering an alternative within the country.

Figure 7.5: Cultural magazine pARTisan, *2010/22*

During the 2010s, there were multiple phases in which state repression receded to a certain extent and small pockets of an alternative cultural life appeared to take hold within the few free spaces that the state authorities permitted. In a few scattered cases, the alternative and official cultural spheres even inched a bit closer to one another, for example, when rock bands that had previously been banned from performing were now able to perform even on state television (cf. Petz 2013: 2–7) or when critical artists re-

ceived public funding.[41] The clear boundaries between the state 'occupier' and the resistance 'partisan', which had been fundamental to Klinaŭ's and Tsishyn's models of the partisan, now appeared to be obsolete. Even Akudovich called for a change in strategy: "The war of those days is over. Because the war we chose ended long ago without us, we just didn't notice the end… That is why *pARTisan* needs a radical shift in strategy so that it can remain partisan" (Akudovich 2014: 154). This shift in strategy did indeed come to pass, albeit in a very different way than expected, when in 2020 the regime responded to declining support among the population by holding fraudulent presidential elections, which led to massive protests, which in turn again updated the Soviet partisan myth and appropriated it in a form that strongly modified some aspects of it.

8. Partisanhood Reloaded: Between Resistance, Protest and War

To understand the boom in partisanhood during the protests of 2020–2021, one must take into account that the Soviet partisan myth had been reappropriated in many ways not only in the alternative intellectual and art scene, but also in commercial popular culture, on major websites and on social media. For example, in the film *Party-Zan* (2016) by Andrėi Kurėichik, young actors provocatively parody the myth in a storyline in which some young people seize on the obsessive production of war films in Belarus and shoot their own partisan film as a moneymaking scheme.[42] As early as 1997, the rock band *N.R.M.* (*Nezalezhnaia Rėspublika Mroia*/*Independent Republic of Dreams*), one of the most popular groups in the alternative scene, released the song *Partyzanskaia* on their album *Made in N.R.M.* Beginning in the style of war partisan songs, then shifting to a hard rock sound, the song features Belarusian-language lyrics that express the speaker's aversion to the present-day occupiers, an unmistakeable reference to the Lukashenko regime.[43] In 1999, the poet and singer Andrėi Khadanovich wrote the humorous poem *Pesnia Belorusskikh Partizan* (*Song of the Belarusian Partisans*)[44], which uses absurd rhymes, a Belarusian-Russian hybrid language, and the rhyming of 'partisans' with 'Tarzans' to undermine the heroic pathos of the myth.[45] The theme was also taken up in performance art, too, such as in "I am not…", a 2008 performance action by the artist Mikhail Gulin, in

41 Such as Klinaŭ himself, who in 2011 participated in the Belarusian pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale, which was funded by the Ministry of Culture, and triggered critical discussions about whether independent art should be allowed to cooperate with a regime that extensively fights the idea of autonomous art (reference Petz 2013: 6, interview Klinaŭ).

42 Simon Lewis aptly speaks of "near-total carnivalization of the partisan trope, satirically mixing Hollywood-style comic debauchery with a mocking treatment of the country's traditional obsession with World War II" (Lewis 2017: 391).

43 See the refrain: "We are partisans, forest brothers. We are partisans, on familiar terms with war. We are partisans, we love our country. We'll cleanse our country from foreign bands." Translation by Lewis 2017: 387; Original song and full text on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSvwNjYsXgE [30 September 2023].

44 The poem was first published in the online edition of the magazine ARCHE (2/3, 1999), one of the most important independent platforms: https://arche.by [23 March 2023].

45 Cf. "O, Tarzans, forest Tarzans!, Long live the monkey King Kong! Off to camp went the Partisans, Off to faraway Hong Kong!" (Khadanovich 1999, translation by Lewis 2017: 387).

which he walked through Minsk and other cities with a sign on his chest proclaiming his non-identification with certain stereotypical attributes: "I'm not an amerikos" ("Ia – ne amerikos"), "I'm not gay" ("Ia – ne gei"), "I'm not a terrorist" ("Ia – ne terrorist"). He began the series with a sign written in German, which read "Ich bin kein Partisan" ("I'm not a Partisan"), evoking the German occupiers' punishment of Soviet partisans during World War II.[46] Gulin's work thereby inverts the historical form of public denunciation, making it into a personal reclaiming of public space (cf. Šparaha 2014).

Belarusian Partisan (*Belorusski Partisan*) [47], an independent media platform critical of the government which was founded in deliberate contrast to the state-sponsored platform *Partisans of Belarus* (*Partizany Belarusi*)[48], likewise made subversive use of the partisan myth, publishing information about events in the country that was omitted from the official news.[49]

All these widely divergent reappropriations of the partisan myth in popular culture, art and politics had the effect that during the dramatic events of summer and autumn 2020, the myth also played an important role in the protests against fraudulent elections, within a dynamic of recoding and reappropriation. For example, in a symbolically charged act on 16 August, in front of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War on Victory Square, a crowd of people wrapped the Minsk Hero City Obelisk and the Motherland statue (*Радзіма-маці*) in the white-red-white flag of the protests. Such impactful "acts of re-signification" (Bekus 2021) also appeared when subsequent demonstrations – fol-

46 Cf. Mikhail Gulin: "Ich bin kein Partisan": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olG701ZaE6w [30 September 2023].

47 Launched by Pavel Sharamet and a group of independent journalists in 2005, this platform was dedicated to uncensored information about events in Belarus, which is why it was repeatedly accused of "defiling the fatherland" and subjected to accompanying restrictions before it was declared "extremist" in November 2021 and closed down, including all channels on social networks.

48 This is a state database and educational project supported by the state-affiliated publishing house *Belarus Segodnia* and the *National Archives of Belarus*. In addition to the archiving and search function for historical data and individual fates, the platform is intended not only to keep alive the "memory of the Belarusian partisan struggle against Nazism", but also to cultivate the "patriotic education of the youth" and to explore an "expansion of the patriotic level of the population", which means that it is still clearly marked by the Soviet narrative. Cf. the homepage: https://partizany.by [30 September 2023]. Cf. the description of the project on the homepage: "The Partisans of Belarus project has been set up to perpetuate the memory of the Belarusian partisans who fought against the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War, to educate young people patriotically, to raise the civil and patriotic level of the population, and to intensify the search operations": https://partizany.by/about/ [30 September 2023].

49 The restrictions were justified by typical schemes of complaints from the population: state media published two letters of complaint from veterans' associations accusing "Belorusskii Partisan" of insulting all citizens of Belarus and the honour of veterans through their activity. Cf. "Griasnaia striapnia na saite 'Belorusskii partisan', oskorbliaet vsech zhitelei Belarussi." In: *News.21.By*, 30 March 2010: https://news.21.by/society/2010/03/30/524231.html [30 September 2023)] and "Ne oskorbliate veteranov." In: *Belarus Segodnia*, 26 February 2010: https://www.sb.by/articles/ne-oskorblyayte-veteranov.htm [30 September 2023]. Between 2010 and 2021, despite a change of server, the site was blocked several times, prosecuted, and declared extremist in November 2021, and thus discontinued all activities.

lowing a ban on demonstrations at Victory Square – were moved to Partisan Avenue and renamed a "Partisan March" ("Partizanskii marsh").[50]

However, tactics such as those used in the street action described at the beginning of this paper and used in coordinating protest actions via the Telegram channel *Nexta* played an even more prominent role in the protest and resistance movement. Referring to the protest movements of the 2010s, the sociologist Almira Usmanava [Ousmanova] defined such tactics as follows:

> The art of coming from ten different directions to gather at a specific spot, striking as planned, then scattering as quickly and inconspicuously as possible, only to pounce again in another spot. (Usmanava 2014: 109)

This partisan tactic is a "response to the 'situation' created by the regime, in which all protest is regarded as illegitimate violence" (Usmanava 2014: 109). This tactic – for which a new word, the verb *partisanits* (rus. *partisanit'*), has been established – was also deployed in other forms of public protest and flash mob actions. These included inconspicuous distribution of flyers; flash mob choirs performing protest songs in public places such as metro stations and shopping centres[51] (some of which were songs from the international tradition of partisan songs)[52]; unannounced concerts by well-known bands; talks by creative artists in the rear courtyards of buildings; and the placing of banned protest symbols in locations where they were difficult to remove, as well as the documentation of laborious (and often failed) attempts by staff of the state authorities to remove these symbols.[53] The last example in particular shows that these actions were not solely a matter of symbolically attacking the system's vulnerable points, but also of demonstrating the dysfunctionality of a supposedly omnipotent apparatus of power, and ideally dismantling it from within.[54]

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50 Cf. Khartyia '97: "Partisan March Held in Belarus", 10 October 2024: https://charter97.org/en/news/2020/10/18/397402/ [30 September 2023].

51 Cf. people singing the songs *The Almighty God* (*Mahutny Bozha*) and *The Chase* (*Pahonya*) at the Kupalovskaia metro station on the evening of 27 August, *Zerkalo*, Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TN-ZgjvX_Vc [30 September 2023].

52 An overview on the role of songs in the Belarusian protest movement in 2020 is given by the online magazine *Meduza:* "Belorusskiy protest v musyke: pleylist Meduzy", 16 August 2020 (https://meduza.io/slides/belorusskiy-protest-v-muzyke-pleylist-meduzy) [30 September 2023] and by Andrei Khadanovich in: "Smuggling Freedom: Belarusian Protest Songs", 31 December 2020 on online magazine *Cultura.pl*: https://culture.pl/en/article/smuggling-freedom-belarusian-protest-songs, in which he refers to the song *The Partisan* (originally: *La Complainte du Partisan*) by Anna Marly & Leonard Cohen. The project "Street of Freedom" ("Ulitsa Mira") and the singer Svetlana Ben performed the song in a natural open space, floating on a raft across a lake, Cf. Nenoev Kovcheg, Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32re2VAWMVw&t=21s [30 September 2023].

53 Such as colouring a frozen lake in the colours of the opposition or tying three pairs of underpants coloured red-white-red to a line high above a road, etc. Cf. pictures in journal *Nastoiashchee vremia*, 11 January 2021: https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-2020-dno/31038555.html [30 September 2023].

54 A key role in coordinating the protest actions and informing people about the events was played by the Telegram channel Nexta, with over one million people registered on the channel. Cf. *NEXTA live*: https://t.me/nexta_live [30 September 2023].

One striking particularity of the Belarusian protest actions was their recourse to methods taken from alternative Internet artworks with 'partisan tactics': popular Internet art projects from the 2010s such as the websites *Lemons* (*Limony)* and *Belarusian Toad (Belarusskaia zhaba)* and *Free* (*Svoboden*), which are collections of ironic photomontages with Belarusian themes or caricatures of Lukashenko.[55] Most of these sites have since been shut down, but they were carried on in new formats during the 2020 protests, such as on the Twitter account and Telegram channel *Sad Kolenka* (*Grustnyi Kolen'ka*), where a character named after Lukashenko's oldest son comments sarcastically on current political events in a way that is critical of the regime.[56] After August 2020, the "war of internet memes" (Dawidowicz/Kharytonau 2021) grew into a veritable storm of digital protest art, which made it possible to expose the ruling ideology's crude mixture of pathos and absurdity and, as an earlier overarching description by Usmanava put it, "through parasitical participation in public discourse" to "split things from within, devalue the familiar words and images and thus make the ubiquitous official culture look not only absurd but also completely out of place" (Usmanava 2014: 108).

The dimensions of these appropriations of tactics and symbols of the partisan struggle once again shifted radically with the preparation and launch of the large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022. For example, the anonymous regime-critical hacker group calling themselves *Cyberpartisans*, who had made a name for themselves in 2020 with coups such as hacking the databases of the Interior Ministry and other state-run websites[57], now joined forces with the self-proclaimed partisan groups *The Storks are Flying* (*Busly liatsiats'*) and *Resistance* (*Supraziu*), in order to fight in solidarity with the besieged Ukraine against the imperialist adversary, Russia, and its ally, the Belarusian government.[58]

55 All three sites are deactivated for political reasons and currently not accessible.

56 Before the channel was declared "extremist" in August 2023, it had almost 350.000 followers on X-Twitter (https://twitter.com/sadmikalai) and over 20.000 followers on Telegram (@sadmikalai). The online portal *Kyky,* which has been labelled "extremist" by the government since December 2022, regularly publishes a column under the hashtag Grustnyi_Kolenka: https://kyky.org/search_tag?tag=Грустный_Коленька [30 September 2023].

57 One of their best-known coups, apart from uncovering numerous intercepted telephone calls, was the hijacking of the Interior Ministry's computer systems, where they gained access to the wanted lists and unceremoniously placed the names of the Interior Minister and Lukashenko himself at the top of the list as "most wanted". Cf.: *Kyky*, 3 October 2020: https://kyky.org/hero/eto-lish-vershina-aysberga-kiber-partizany-rasskazali-kak-budut-sryvat-maski-s-silovikov [30 September 2023].

58 Members of The Storks are Flying group were sentenced from to 8.5 to 15 years in prison by a Minsk court in December 2022 on charges of participating in terrorist activities, according to, among others, the human rights organisation *Viasna*, September 28, 2022: https://spring96.org/ru/news/109227 [30 September 2023]. Via Telegram they mobilise Belarusians to join a volunteer battalion fighting on the side of the Ukrainians in the war.

Figure 7.6: Screenshot Telegram Chanel Cyberpartisans

The alliance between the *Cyberpartisans* and the group known as *Railway Partisans* drew a great deal of attention: beginning in January 2022, they jointly carried out numerous acts of sabotage against the Belarusian railway network to prevent the transport of Russian military equipment to Ukraine via Belarus (Perova 2022).[59] The continuity of their actions with the Soviet myth is evident – in World War II, partisans similarly sabotaged the railway lines of the German occupiers on the occupied territory. In March 2022 the opposition political and journalist Franak Viačorka posted on Twitter: "Belarus is a land of partisans. Our heroes stop Russian trains, damage Russian equipment, hand out leaflets to prevent Belarus troops from entering Ukraine."[60] In this way, symbolic art actions and philosophical treatises have swiftly given way to the return of real acts of sabotage, and in place of tactics of unarmed retreat and hidden survival, masked (cyber-) attacks and armed forms of solidarity are once again appearing.

59 These acts of sabotage were coordinated and supported by anonymous comrades-in-arms via the Telegram group *Belarusian Haiun* (*Belarusskii Haiun*, @Hajun_BY), which monitors military movements on Belarusian territory.

60 Cf. *PolskieRadio.pl*, 21 March 2022: https://www.polskieradio.pl/400/7764/Artykul/2924291,Belarusische-Saboteure-helfen-den-Ukrainern [30 September 2023].

9. Conclusion

Strictly speaking, in contemporary Belarusian culture there have been two interrelated phases of the popularisation of partisanhood, which are superimposed over one another in their contradictory nature. In line with Roland Barthes' notion of mythologies, these are different phases of the 'naturalisation' of symbolic constructions of identity, which different actors repeatedly adapt to fit specific cultural and political constellations. The first crucial phase of constituting the partisan myth took place during the post-war era, when the characteristics of the figure of the partisan which had existed since the 1920s were attached to the struggle against the German occupiers during World War II and shaped into recurring attributes, images and narratives. Thus emerged the topos of Belarus as a 'partisan republic' which was presented as having made a decisive contribution to the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany through its heroic resistance. This myth was spread in all mediums and in many popular films beginning in the 1960s, and – after a brief phase of upheaval in the 1980s and 1990s – continued to be constitutive of Belarusian state power in the post-Soviet era.[61] In the second phase, which began at the turn of the twenty-first century, oppositional and dissident conceptualisations of 'partisanhood' have been directed against the dominance of that which is heroic, Soviet and official and of the state. In the second phase, 'partisanhood' has served as *the* metaphor for the Belarusian 'mentality' and 'identity' and as the core of a fundamentally revised myth. On the one hand, this is a concept of not showing oneself, of making oneself invisible in the face of the insurmountable superior power of the adversary 'occupying' one's homeland, a stance which was also projected backwards all the way to the early modern era as a timeless quality of all Belarusian identity. However, an update of the myth which was more tailored to the specific situation of Lukashenko's Belarus also emerged at the same time: the figure of the partisan as an actor engaged in subversive artistic practises and artistic protest entered into the self-conception of independent creative artists. Partisanhood was now understood as the art of living (and survival) and as the only way out of a struggle – which had not been freely chosen – against the adversary (the state, ideology, official art). In light of the already extensive apparatus of repression in Belarus and the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine with the participation of the Belarusian state, this understanding has begun to shift both within Belarus and abroad in the past year and half: now self-proclaimed partisans place their own activities within a broader context as acts of solidarity with the decolonial resistance of Ukraine against the imperialism of Russia. It is thus apparent that the formal core of the myth initially installed by the Soviet state in the 1960s, a core which refers to resistance against external occupying powers, has developed enormous vitality and popularity in recent decades and has largely eliminated its 'Soviet' content, if not outright identified Sovietness itself as the real 'occupation'. In these reappropriations of partisanhood, however, the quality which Barthes identifies as so dangerous in mythologies remains evident: rather than differentiating or historicising, the mythology constructs Belarusian identity in a way that repeatedly operates through clear distinctions between what is one's own and what is foreign, between

61 For more detail on the role of the partisan battle in Belarusian memory politics, cf. Rudling 2008; Hansen 2008: 187–196; Sahm 2010; Marples 2012, 2014.

the national and the imperial, and between the colonised and the occupier. At the same time, however, the post-Soviet appropriations of the partisan myth in the alternative and dissident art scene and in oppositional protest culture show that these binary mythic dichotomies are tremendously flexible, and that, as a familiar repertoire of symbols and narratives, they can be subversively adapted and varied to fit a specific political situation and cultural environment.

Translated by *Jane Yager*

Filmography

Brest Fortress (*Brestskaia Krepost'*), dir. Izrail Pikman, USSR 1975.
Come and See (*Idi i smotri*), dir. Ėlem Klimov, USSR 1985.
Deep Flow (*Glubokoe techenie*), dir. Margarita Kasymova/Ivan Pavlov, Belarus 2005.
Father (*Bat'ka*), dir. Boris Stepanov, USSR 1971.
Flame (*Plamia*), dir. Vital' Chatsverykoŭ [Vitalii Chetverikov], USSR 1974.
Franz + Polina, dir. Mikhail Segal, Russia 2006.
Girl Seeks Father (*Devochka ischet ottsa*), dir. Lev Golub, USSR 1959.
I Am a Fortress, I Stood my Ground (*Ia – Krepost', Vedu Boi*), dir. Izrail Pikman, USSR 1972.
In the Fog (*V tumane*), dir. Sergei Loznitsa, Belarus/Germany/Latvia/Netherlands/Russia/USA 2012.
Konstantin Zaslonov, dir. Aleksandr Faintsimmer/Vladimir Korsh-Sablin, USSR 1949.
Mysterium Occupation (*Okkupatsiia. Misterii* [*Akupatsyia Mistèryi*]), dir. Andrei Kudinenko Belarus 2004.
Party-Zan, dir. Andrei Kureichik, Belarus 2016.
Sons Go into Battle (*Synov'ia ukhodiat v boi*), dir. Viktor Turov, USSR 1969.
The Ascent (*Vozchozhdenie*), dir. Larissa Shepit'ko, USSR 1976.
The Black Birch (*Chernaia berëza*), dir. Vital' Chatsverykoŭ [Vitalii Chetverikov], USSR 1977.
The Brest Fortress [also known as *Fortress of War*], (*Brestkaia krepost'*) dir. Aleksandr Kott, Russia/Belarus 2010.
The Children of the Partisan (*Deti partizana*), dir. Nikolai Figurovskii/Lev Golub, USSR 1954.
The Clock Stopped at Midnight (*Chasy ostanovilis v polnoch'*), dir. Nikolai Figurovskii, USSR 1959.
The Matrix, dir. Lana/Lilly Wachowski, USA 1999.
The Ruins Are Shooting (*Ruiny Streliaiut'*), dir. Vital' Chatsverykoŭ [Vitalii Chetverikov], USSR 1970–72.
Through the Cemetery (*Cherez kladbishche*), dir. Viktor Turov, USSR 1964.
Time Has Chosen Us (*Vremia vybralo nas*), dir. Michail Ptashuk, USSR 1976–1979.
War Under the Roofs (*Voina pod kryshami*), dir. Viktor Turov, USSR 1967.
What Is It, the Sea? (*Kakoe ono, more*), dir. Ėduard Bocharov, USSR 1964.

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