Chapter 9:

Dealing with Cultural Traumas

Popular Representations of the Past in Contemporary Belarusian Prose

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1. Belarus: 26 Years of the State Regulation of Everything

Work on this essay began in the period following the mass protests over the illegitimacy of the 2020 elections in Belarus, continued during the subsequent repressions and ended at the point when Russia's war in Ukraine had been going on for several months. All these events changed the context of the ideas and works discussed, further emphasising the importance of the trends noted in this essay: the significance of historical narratives for the present, the public role of the Belarusian language within this process as well as the tendency of repressing and censoring certain representations of the past from oppositional writers and intellectuals. In this, the Belarusian state policy seemed to be very similar to the Russian one, except that in the Russian Federation the state more actively engaged, also financially, in history politics. Before the war unleashed by Russia in February 2022, these trends might have looked like a nostalgic attempt to motivate the citizens of Belarus and Russia to be proud of their countries despite the lack of democracy, economic and technological development, a way of trying to cover up these deficits with an eye to the 'great past' and to revive the spirit of Soviet patriotism. After 24 February 2022, it became clear that these seemingly nostalgic representations and the pathetic celebrations of the 1945 Victory were also preparation on a psychological level for new wars.

What might have seemed like a selective approach to history during the 26 years of Lukashenko's [Lukashenka's] regime, privileging certain interpretations and laying emphasis on the state ideology, today becomes the only allowed reality, claiming to be absolutely true. And the ways in which historical events are memorialised and represented in feature films, documentaries, and city festivals can no longer claim to have the cute flair of kitsch, amusing in its fabulousness and addressed to a deliberately naïve viewer. Depicting historical events through entertainment has been a way for the dominant (i.e.,

state) discourse to disguise the coercion and lack of alternatives to the official version of history.

In contrast to the Russian case, in Belarusian society the commercial component of this entertainment format was virtually absent; turning history into a nostalgic product was mainly a matter for state cultural actors. Movies, TV-documentaries, military parades and mass shows, as well as museums and memorial complexes (the most striking example being the Stalin Line, a museumised complex of defensive structures not far from Minsk) have become the main media for broadcasting an ideologised version of history.

But the Belarusian literary community has not mirrored this development by producing a similar kind of popular historical fiction prose, portraying historical events in a way that expresses the writers' vision and interests a wide range of readers. This, at first glance, is even more astonishing as in the literatures of neighbouring countries, such as Russia, Ukraine and Poland, we can observe in recent decades a boom in alternative histories, historical fantasy, radical rewritings of traditional Soviet historical narratives, and reappropriations of national narratives with very different ideological orientations and media implementations. Such a widely varied and pluralistically diversified, playful approach to one's own history is clearly absent from Belarusian literature and culture.

This absence is partly due to the fact that Russian mass cultural products enjoyed much greater popularity and were better financed for many years, whereas many local, Belarusian products were poorly financed and hardly stood a chance of enjoying a broader reception. The overwhelming Russian-speaking majority of Belarusian readers preferred popular books, films and other media products from Russia, whose mass media market – at least until recently – was also more pluralistic and freer than in Belarus. But a more profound cause for this absence could be that the literature of independent Belarus (from 1991 to the present) developed in a sociopolitical context that was itself traumatic for both society and authors. The first years after the collapse of the USSR gave rise to hope for the possibility of cultural, political and creative self-expression for all social forces and actors, but this period was replaced by a revanche of state control over all spheres of life and the dying out of a wide public field.

The daily life of literary production consists of restrictions on freedom of speech, the marginalisation of the Belarusian language (the state only occasionally uses it in the public sphere for decorative purposes), and an extremely narrow range of what is considered acceptable. A vivid example of a critical reaction to this cultural policy is the existence of two unions of writers in Belarus: the pro-governmental one, which enjoys preferential treatment from the state, and the independent one, which, along with the Belarusian PEN Centre, is essentially engaged in defending the interests of writers under constant pressure. These circumstances restricted commercially profitable projects, while traumatic and problematic social issues gained increasing importance and critical writers were rather focused on the moral overcoming of their own 'invisibility', isolation and even marginalisation. Therefore, entertainment, as already noted, was for many years at the opposite pole from those critical and tragic ways of speaking, the pole chosen by most Belarusian authors.

Another factor that complicates the situation is the bilingualism of Belarusian society, in which only a small minority of the country's residents can actively use, understand

and read the Belarusian language. In the national survey "Culture of reading and literary preferences of Belarusians" from 2014, the respondents answered the question "In what language do you prefer to read books" as follows: 93.7 per cent prefer to read in Russian, 5 per cent – in Belarusian, and less than 0.5 per cent – in other languages (Mikheeva 2014a). These figures do not reflect the share of those who know Belarusian (it is much higher), but preferences and reading habits. This situation is also connected with the informal division of the literary community into Russian-speaking (with a potentially large audience) and Belarusian-speaking (oriented towards the Belarusian-speaking minority). Until recently, there was even a discussion within the literary community whether Russian-speaking authors living in Belarus should be included in Belarusian literature at all, as their works enter into a common literary market with Russia. The discussion ended with the introduction of a rule that does not give Russian-speaking works the right to be nominated for the country's main literary prize – the Jerzy Giedroyc Literary Award.[1] The Jerzy Giedroyc Literary Award is given every year for the best book of prose (including non-fiction and collections of essays) written in the Belarusian language. The award was co-founded by the Embassy of Poland in Belarus, the Polish Institute in Minsk, the Belarusian PEN Centre, and the Union of Belarusian Writers and is dedicated to the Polish essayist and politician Jerzy Giedroyc (1906–2000). In general, it can also be noted that Russian-speaking authors more often choose to work with popular literary genres. Natal'ia Batrakova's love novels or Olga Gromyko's humorous fantasy are good examples of this tendency.

Historical narratives became the prerogative of Belarusian-speaking authors, who are more focused on the values of national revival and therefore choose to depict periods when Belarus was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (this period is considered the heyday of the Belarusian lands), the Polish Rzeczpospolita, or a short period of national-cultural renaissance in the early 20th century. The most popular author of fiction and documentary historical books in Belarusian for several decades has been Uladzimir Arloŭ, who received the Jerzy Giedroyc Prize in 2018 for the book *Dances Above The City.* (*Tantsy nad goradam*, 2018), and the most popular historical book of recent times is his illustrated children's encyclopaedia *Motherland: A pictural history from Rahnedy to Kastsiushki* (*Aichyna: Maliaŭnichaya historyia. Ad Rahnedy da Kastsiushki*, 2017). The book's release was a notable public event, with queues of people wanting to buy it, lining up to get an autograph from the author as well. In online bookshops it is still on the list of top non-fiction books. The media wrote about the book as an essential that every Belarusian should read and every Belarusian family should have at home. Although *Motherland: A pictural history* does not present any new facts, it presents a sequential overview of events from the first mention of the Belarusian lands in chronicles to the 1794 uprising of Tadeusz Kościuszko [Tadevush Kastsiushka], who tried to resist the encroachments of the Russian Empire on the Rzeczpospolita and stop its partitions. In all likelihood, adults will also use the book

1 The Jerzy Giedroyc Literary Award is the main prize for independent writers. This award was the most visible and important among the existing non-state ones. These prizes have only been actively monitored by the independent media, which have now been completely shut down in Belarus. In contrast, state awards followed the Soviet version of award distribution, honouring propagandist writers supported by ministerial offices.

as a handy source of knowledge about Belarusian history, and Pavel Tatarnikaŭ's vivid illustrations are in many cases stylised reconstructions of real historical images (landscapes, portraits, maps), making them especially valuable for readers.

Not only non-fiction books, however, but also fictional works in Belarusian have been published in the last decade more often, targeting a broader audience. This popular genre prose (detective, historical detective, travel novel, adventure novel) followed the tradition of the great Belarusian writer of the Soviet period Uladzimir Karatkevich. For example, Liudmila Rubleŭskaia's cycle of novels *The Adventures of Prancish Vyrvich* (*Avantury Prantsisha Vyrvicha*, 2012–2020) can be compared to both the novels by Karatkevich and to the quasi-historical detectives of the extremely popular Russian writer Boris Akunin. And Uladzislaŭ Akhromenka's novels *The Theory of Conspiracy* (*Tėoryia zmovy*, 2011) and *Muses and Pigs* (*Muzy i svinni*, 2014) combine a historical detective component with postmodern play and irony.

Also worth mentioning are books by other well-known Belarusian authors of recent years like Alhierd Bakharevich, Artur Klinaŭ, Viktor Martinovich, and Ihar Babkoŭ. None of them works in the genre of historical fiction, but for all of them working with history is an important part of today's life or even of the imagined future. For example, Alhierd Bakharevich sneers at a lot of historical stereotypes about Belarus (for example, the common love contemporary Belarusians have for the medieval castles in Belarus, almost all of which are now ruins, as well as for the national revival in the early 20th century) and incorporates these ironic reflections also indirectly into his novels.

Another example is Ihar Babkoŭ, who created a whole pseudo-historical novel about a figure from Belarusian culture called *Adam Klakotski and His Shadows* (*Adam Klakotski i iahonyia tseni*, 2001) who never actually existed, thus committing a kind of historical hoax. But many readers took it seriously as a 'discovery' of a previously unknown historical character, even students and teachers of the Philosophy Faculty of the Belarusian State University (BSU) and the Belarusian Collegium, who were among its first readers. However, several intellectuals and writers admitted that Klakotski could be a real, but unknown figure. Thus Babkoŭ, who is known for researching little-known and forgotten thinkers from the Belarusian lands throughout history, demonstrated, intentionally or not, how little Belarusians, even those interested in cultural history, actually know about it and could have intrigued his readers to engage more with the past.

The novel itself is a collection of fragments representing the memories, reflections, dreams and diary entries of several characters living in Belarus during different historical epochs. These fragments are linked through the main character, Adam Klakotski, who at the beginning of the book is presented as a real-life enlightener and encyclopaedist, allegedly born on the territory of Belarus in 1793, the year of the second partition of the Rzeczpospolita. Klakotski's life seems to resonate with the lives and ideas of characters from other eras, as if setting major questions, dramas, discussions and themes of reflection for generations to come. The part devoted to Klakotski is stylised as a biography and is replete with many vivid details, as if putting his character in the context of the 1830s, which were rich in historical events in Europe. Importantly, Adam Klakotski is shown as a bearer of the European tradition, for whom Paris, Warsaw and Minsk are equally accessible and important centres of culture. The other characters seem to echo him in their reflections and experiences.

Furthermore, Artur Klinaŭ's novel *Empties* (*Shklatara,* 2013, the term in Belarusian denotes empty bottles and jars) literally includes as a 'novel within a novel' the text of a quasi-historical screenplay written by the protagonist. These historical inserts reference the 19th century, when the Belarusian territories became part of the Russian Empire, and among the Belarusians there were many of the so called 'narodniks', politically active people from the intelligentsia who organised the rural population in opposition to tsarist power, the most prominent of whom was the Belarusian Ihnat Gryniavitski [Ihnatii Grinevitskii; Ignacy Hryniewiecki], who threw a bomb at Tsar Aleksandr II in 1881. These events are intertwined in the 'novel within a novel' with folk legends and a free interpretation of the 19th century Belarusian author Ian Barshchėŭski's work *Nobleman Zaval'nia, or Belarus in Fantastic Stories* (*Shliachtsits Zavalnia, abo Belarus u fantastychnych apaviadanniach*, 1844). This plot clearly resonates with events of the present, when Belarus is still experiencing a political crisis and the intelligentsia is searching for its role in this situation.

In his other writing, Viktor Martinovich also works with historical references, for example, in his most acutely political novel *Paranoia* (2009). Here the fictional present is compared with the era of Belarusian Kastus Kalinoŭski's uprising against Russian tsarist power, which took place in 1863, and the fictional Belarusian president is named after General Muravyov, who then suppressed this uprising and conducted the execution of its leaders. The fantasy novel *Mova* (2014), on the contrary, in a way transports the activities of Belarusian national revivalists of the late 19th – early 20th century to the near future, when Belarus has become part of the global Russian-Chinese state. Here, learning and writing in the Belarusian language is a form of opposing the state-imposed Russian and Chinese languages. Despite all their differences, both novels *Sphagnum* (*Sfagnum*, 2013) and *Night* (*Noch*, 2018) present the Belarusian people as a society without historical memory. In *Sphagnum*, the worldview of the characters is based on fragments of Soviet ideologemes about the Great Patriotic War, folk legends and village prejudices. In the novel *Night*, historical memory seems to be completely destroyed, so that the characters lose all ability to think critically and unconditionally believe the false news broadcast to them on the radio by a mad crank.

What all these works have in common is a critical and often ironic attitude toward historical narratives. Instead of creating romantic historical works designed to enchant the reader with the atmosphere of a certain era, these authors highlight critical reflection on history and its complex, debatable aspects, many of which have been culturally traumatic for Belarusians.

2. Regressive Sociality as a Traumatic Core of Belarusian Literature

A critical and ironic approach to one's own history is not, however, the main feature of contemporary Belarusian literature. In 2017, in cooperation with the Belarusian Journal, I conducted an expert survey (Mikheeva 2017) on the 500th anniversary of book printing in Belarusian lands, starting with Francisk (Frantsishak) Skaryna's (1470–1551) work in the first half of the 16th century. I asked fifty experts to name the most important Belarusian books of those 500 years. The experts named a total of 175 books – from Skaryna's

Bible to prose published in the 2010s. This list of 175 books helped me formulate the hypothesis that the contemporary code of Belarusian literature consists of a kind of traumatic core connected not only with the problem of identity (who, what are we, Belarusians?), but also with the always conflicting and painful experience of the social reality in which Belarusians exist.

To elaborate on this hypothesis, in this essay I have chosen novels from the expert list that were written in the 2010s and received a wide public response, gained awards and became bestsellers. They all in many ways echo the most influential classics of 19th and 20th century Belarusian literature like Yanka Kupala's [Ianka Kupala] tragicomedy *The Locals* (*Tutėishyia*, 1922), Vasyl' Bykaŭ's short novel *The Ordeal* (*Sotnikaŭ*, 1970), Barshchėŭski's *Nobleman Zaval'nia* (1846), mentioned above, Maksim Harėtski's *Two Souls* (*Dzve dushy*, 1919) and several postwar novels by Uladzimir Karatkevich. In these works, the topic of an unsatisfactory, traumatic sociality, of a deficit of solidarity, a ruptured cultural landscape, discordant due to a lack of social conventions on all meaningful occasions, is added to the issue of problematic local identities. The only situations when solidarity among people becomes evident are in 'negative' deficit or traumatic circumstances, a sort of 'negative solidarity' when people rally around something that, though vitally necessary, is currently missing, stolen or destroyed.

When analysing these literary works, I would like to use a concept introduced in 2005 by the most influential Belarusian political philosopher Vladimir Fours – the concept of "regressive sociality" (Fours 2012). In Fours's analysis of the Belarusian social field, regression is "a specific reaction to one's own inconsistency in a changed situation of action or in a situation of serious uncertainty" (ibid.: 111), a decrease in the aims and expectations of citizens, apoliticality, the shifting of responsibility to a charismatic leader, the uncomplaining acceptance of social roles approved by the state, and finally the acceptance of the status quo as the only possible and natural one. It is the state that the majority of Belarusians were in before the 2020 protests and the state to which the Belarusian authorities hope to return.

This "regressive sociality" in my view can also be described as a feeling of being engulfed in the present (without a vision of the future and without a consensus about the past), in the private (without access to public spaces), without solidarity and collectivity. It is condition that is enforced by a sovereign state, which opens no possibility to participate politically in the government or ministries and allows no freedom of speech or a public sphere where open discussions and independent culture could be created. Of course, there is no space in such a state to cope with the historical traumas of Belarusian society listed above. However, it is worth remembering, as the Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka states, that the concept of cultural trauma should not be understood as a single event, but as a process that includes many components: the initial situation, the event itself, the description of the event with the help of available cultural resources, the appearance of certain social symptoms, and a subsequent adaptation, and, in positive cases, processing and curing of cultural trauma (Sztompka 2001: 6). In other words, one cataclysm may not become a trauma, while another, on the contrary, may significantly shake the social foundations and the usual model of the self-understanding of society.

Another factor is time, as we know from studies about the temporal range of communicative memory, which does not extend further back than a few generations. For ex-

ample, events prior to the 20th century are mostly perceived by contemporaries as unproblematic, causing no heavy and negative emotions nor being associated with a sense of irreparable historical damage. So, the naïve, heroic film *Anastasiya Slutskaya* (*Anastasia Slutskaia*, 2003), directed by Yuri Yelchov (Iurii Yelkhov) and produced by the film studio Belarusfilm, tells the story of a princess who lived in the late 15th – early 16th century, and who, after the death of her husband, ruled the principality of Slutsk on her own and repelled the attacks of Tatar invaders. The film is one of the most entertaining productions of Belarusfilm and includes elements of a love narrative. Also, Liudmila Rubleŭskaia's most popular novels take place in the 18th century, completely detached from any negative emotions. But the further we move toward the 20th century, the less ironic and more problematic the filmic and literary representations are, depicting past events rather as uncorrected misfortunes, having fatal consequences until today.

Based on the aforementioned analysis of the list of the 175 books named as the most significant literary works, we can specify the following *traumatic* events in a chronological order:

1. World War I, which has been displaced from official discourse by the memory of the *"heroic" Great Patriotic War*.
2. After the war, the incorporation of Western Belarus into Poland and its subsequent annexation to the BSSR (the western part of Belarusian lands went to Poland as part of the Peace of Riga in 1918, while the eastern part went to the USSR, then at the beginning of World War II Western Belarus was again annexed to the USSR). As a result of these events, society was divided and for decades existed in two different states with a radically dissimilar economic structure, political system, and state language.
3. Collectivisation in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and beginning of the 1930s, which turned the owners of private farmsteads into a free labour force for collective farms and dekulakisation.
4. Stalinist repressions of the 1930s when the Belarusian national intelligentsia was purposely destroyed in the so-called Night of Executed Poets in October 1937, with more than one hundred cultural figures and politicians being killed during one night without trial), but also during the NKVD shootings of citizens in Kurapaty from 1937 to 1941.
5. World War II, accompanied by the extermination of the Jewish population and civilians, as well as the partisan movement.
6. Participation of Belarusians along with other Soviet citizens in the Afghan war from 1979 to 1989.
7. Explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in April 1986.
8. The collapse of the USSR and the socio-economic crisis that affected the last years of the USSR and the first years after its collapse in the 1980s and 1990s.
9. Repression of national intelligentsia and politicians under Lukashenko, peaking with demonstrations of disagreement with the results of elections and referendums.
10. The Niamiha tragedy in May 1999, an accident in which 53 people died in a crush while fleeing a downpour in an underpass.

11. The April 2011 explosion in the Minsk metro, in which 15 people died and 400 were injured, as well as its investigation, the results of which were not accepted by public opinion.

During the past 26 years, in the absence of public debate and in the context of state pressure on independent media, it is precisely these catastrophic, traumatic events that have acted as triggers for an increase of informal communication between a variety of subjects and groups, that united society situationally, forcing it to search for internal resources for collective processing. What is important here is that state ideology essentially blocked any open conversation about these events, either by ignoring, glossing over, or directly disputing the existence of a certain occurrence (for example, the shootings at Kurapaty are not officially recognised). It is precisely because of this lack of a truly universal ethical reflection on the Soviet past that the cultural traumas of the 20th century are still so crucial for civil society and literature.

Interestingly, the traumatic events of the more recent past are thus often unofficially discussed as a kind of mirror image of older historical traumas: Thus, the pressure on Belarusian-speaking and opposition-minded citizens and authors was linked to the Stalinist repression of the national intelligentsia, the activities of contemporary Belarusian security forces evoked the actions of their Soviet predecessors and the Niamiha tragedy and 2011 terrorist attack in the Minsk metro were associated with the silencing and inadequate elimination of the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster.

In spite of this engagement with traumatic events in the past, mainly in non-state and unofficial media and formats, there is one state-approved trauma in the Belarusian public sphere, which is intensively used for the official ideological metanarrative, namely that of the Great Patriotic War from 1941 to 1945. In December 2021, the Belarusian parliament even passed a bill "On the Genocide of the Belarusian People" (during World War II), which essentially aims to legally enshrine something like the Holocaust as applied to citizens of the BSSR.

The state monopolises the discourse about this period, masking everything painful and unspoken about the war with the mythology of the feat of the Belarusian people, which has no dark chapters or controversial figures. Even the old Soviet Museum of the Great Patriotic War was closed, rebuilt, and reopened in a new location in 2014. The concept of the new museum smoothed over the suffering and horrors of the war and celebrated the heroic deeds of ordinary Belarusian people as part of the Soviet Union in an even more sublime way, emphasised by innovations in the museum's exhibition and architecture. The museum is filled with compositions in which human-sized figures of partisans or invaders play out various scenes of military life or battles. Museum visitors can entertain themselves by taking selfies with plastic partisans or models of Soviet military equipment. (Mikheeva 2014b).

Figure 9.1: Glass dome in the Minsk Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War. *© Lidia Martinovich*

Figure 9.2: Representation from soldats in the battle. Scene in the Minsk Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War. *© Lidia Martinovich*

3. Traumatic Experience through the Eyes of Belarusian Writers

This tension between an official glorification of the Great Patriotic War while negating all other traumatic experiences and a multilayered unofficial engagement with the negative experiences of the 20th century can also be found in Belarusian literature. We can identify two sense-forming centres of attention, which in general characterise the thinking of significant Belarusian prose writers today. First, comprehending the traumas of the late Soviet and post-Soviet transformations is still relevant. Until 2020, this relevance was based on the policy of 'preserving the best of the USSR' conducted in Belarus. In 2021, this relevance is fuelled by the realisation in society that not only the 'best' was preserved. Such phenomena as the absolute power of the police, security and supervisory agencies, the planned economy, the bureaucratisation and ideologisation of all spheres of society, and militaristic rhetoric were all carried over from the USSR. All the more relevant are the books that have been published in recent years rethinking the Soviet past and the period of post-Soviet transformation by the Nobel Prize laureate Svetlana Alexievich (Sviatlana Aleksievich), for instance *Secondhand Time* (*Vremya sekond khėnd*, 2013), as well as the laureate of the Jerzy Giedroyc Literary Award Ihar Babkoŭ's *A Minute* (*Khvilinka. Try historyi*, 2013). Second, many Belarusian prose writers think not only about the experience of 'the Soviet' and overcoming 'the Soviet' as central to society, but also raise the question of the uniqueness of life in Belarus, which emerged from an incredible superposition of various factors. Barys Piatrovich's novel *The Square. One Lovestory* (*Ploshcha. Historyia adnaho kachan'nia*, 2011) for instance was inspired by the events of the 2006 protests and reflects on the specific pressure on dissenters. At the same time, this uniqueness is comprehended and experienced as a cultural trauma. For example, novels by Viktor Martinovich *Sphagnum* and *Night*, novels by Klinaŭ *A Helmet* (*Shalom*, 2011) and *Empties*, the short stories by Eva Vezhnavets from the collection *The Way of the Minor Bastard* (*Shliakh drobnai svolachy*, 2008) and many other texts problematise the totality of circumstances in which their characters, placed in contemporary Belarus, have to exist.[2] These novels describe various social dis-synchronisations, anomalies and lacunae, which can be found in various spheres of social life. All these failures and gaps are seen by the authors as directly connected with the local specificity and historical epoch, that is Belarus during Lukashenko's reign, which one could designate as a perspective that marks the whole state of 'Belarus as a trauma.'

The formula 'Belarus as a trauma' in my view (and, I believe, for many intellectuals in our country as well) is not only a reflection on the dissatisfaction with current developments or the breakdown of many social institutions, but signals also the transition of previously suppressed political and cultural conflicts into an articulated form. For me, the main meaning of this form is in the real, daily experience of fear of state violence behind each of the social problems listed above. By designating the current situation with

2 At the same time, works appeared that rediscovered the old trauma of the marginalisation of the Belarusian language, an old, unhealed trauma from the imperial 19th century like Martinovich's *Mova* or Alhierd Bakharevich's *Alindarka's Children* (*Dzetsi Alindarki*, 2014) while Sasha Filipenko offered his interpretation of cultural trauma associated with the mass crush near Niamiha metro station in the novel *Ex-Son* (*Byvshyi syn*, 2014).

'Belarus as a trauma' many authors I am talking about in this text relate the memory of the Soviet and post-Soviet years to episodes of state violence in contemporary Belarus, trying to comprehend their present situation through the prism of history and images of the future, and based on this drawing conclusions and offering explanations of the apparent traumatic situation. To illustrate more precisely what I mean by this, in the following I will examine some of the abovementioned novels in more detail.

4. The Double Trauma of the Transition from Soviet to Post-Soviet Society

My first example is the novel *A Minute* (*Khvilinka*, 2013) written by Ihar Babkoŭ, one of the most iconic authors of recent years. It deals in a way with a double trauma affecting Belarusian society. Undoubtedly the greatest trauma of the recent past was the collapse of the Soviet Union with all its well-known consequences: the crisis of social institutions, the economic breakdown, the sudden impoverishment of the population, the dissolution of the army, the new borders and military conflicts of former 'brotherly peoples', the vanishing of a monolithic ideological metanarrative, and so on. In parallel to this, behind this present traumatic situation it became more and more obvious, that the Soviet Union itself was a conglomerate of social traumas, which gradually were publicly acknowledged: Stalinist repression, the Soviet devaluation of human life (the lives of its own citizens in war and in everyday life), the undermining of trust in the state after the Chernobyl tragedy, and so on.

It is this double Soviet and post-Soviet trauma that is depicted in Babkoŭ's novel *A Minute*. Its plot begins just before perestroika and the Chernobyl tragedy in the 1980s and extends to the early stage of state independence of Belarus. In the novel, the trauma of the post-Soviet period takes on a metaphysical and generalised political meaning. It is composed of several intricately intertwined stories involving the narrator himself, the poet Franciszak, the political activist Bahdan, the singer Eva Daminika, and the bartender Leo at their favourite coffee shop, Khvilinka. Through the intertwining of the lives of these characters, Babkoŭ depicts the decline of the Soviet era and the social transformations of the 1990s. The Soviet is described in the categories of boredom and indifferent detachment. The novel offers us large-scale generalisations, filled with the experience of deadness, the frozenness of social life, lasting seemingly forever. Babkoŭ's protagonist experiences the feeling of isolation, disconnection, and non-inclusion in sociality as a satori. Thus, the negative social effects of alienation and atomisation of the individual are transformed into a productive and refreshing state of mind associated with the establishment of a salutary distance in relation to an alien and already deadened Soviet society. Observing the flow of city life from the window of a coffee shop one day, the narrator apprehends his own separateness as a liberation from any illusions about social life. He feels mild disgust, nausea towards Soviet Belorussia. The source of these feelings is described not as a sense of injustice at the social order, but as an intellectual and aesthetic protest against the inviolability of social automatisms. In this perspective, the main problem of the late Soviet is the inertness, the lack of alternative to the total ideological spectacle, in which citizens participate simultaneously as obedient actors and mesmerised spectators.

This perception of Soviet life is also present in a rather carnivalesque way in a fragment which depicts a scene when the three main characters, Franciszak, Bahdan and Eva Daminica, become acquainted and accidentally find themselves in the "Leninist room" of the student dormitory, partying, drinking wine, listening to records, thereby risking, perhaps, not only their well-being, but also their freedom. The characters throw the works of the classics of Marxism and Brezhnev's book *The Minor Land* out of the window, and later leave the room locked from the inside in an imaginary hot air balloon. Thus, the 'Soviet' in Babkoŭ's novel is described in the categories of a dead, mechanistic spectacle, the traumatic consequences of which are represented latently but discernibly. The reprisal of alien, unnecessary, dead books, embodying the code of the decrepit system, becomes a game, an act of freedom and carefreeness, the opposite in its modus operandi to any obsolete rituals produced by the system itself.

The author as narrator contrasts this 'pain' caused by Soviet society to him and the other characters with the microcosm of the coffee house Khvilinka, which gives its name to the entire novel, where the protagonist feels that it is "not so painful to live" (Babkoŭ 2013: 8). At this alternative, almost underground place the protagonist can finally be alone with himself or meet friends. In the case of Babkoŭ, this is a gesture of demonstrative artistic escape. The author is telling us: I know all about the traumas of my homeland, but I intend to confront this collective experience with my own individual world as a piece of art and a project of self-salvation.

However, it is no coincidence that this centre of the new microcosm is a small, modest coffee shop, overlooking the main avenue of the capital. This café represents the antithesis of Soviet kitchens, in which people criticised the government in the 1960–70s. Because in contrast to the private kitchen, a coffee house is a public place not hidden from the system, but it appears as if it slips out of the system's field of vision by being in full view. It is both part of the city and life and an island of privacy, solitude and mutual respect. At the same time, a cup of coffee is a symbol of pure, aesthetic pleasure of taste, unrelated to the profane nutritional content of food or the intoxicating effects of alcohol. Coffee is a drink with a flavour of Europeanness and ties in with the tradition of intellectual conversation in urban cafes of the fin de siècle. Its very existence symbolises a failure of the Soviet system, providing additional resources for a 'less painful' existence within it.

Hence the descriptions of the 1990s in the novel stress the urge to transform reality, the hope of establishing a path for Belarus of its own, although not without stating the other side of the coin, also referring to theft and the redistribution of everything 'that is bad', which ran parallel to the struggle for democratic freedoms. But this hope for a new less painful life of the early 1990s fails and Babkoŭ's heroes are confronted with a relatively smooth turn into the well-known 'stability' of Lukashenko's reign. According to the narrator, the responsibility for this turnaround lies not only with the corrupt, the men in power or the hapless 'revolutionaries', but also with the majority of those who have chosen the path of loyal consumption, rejecting the opportunities of a radical change. The novel describes this development as a vicious circle: The main characters start with critical contemplations and thereby detach from the 'society with a deficit of sociality' of the late Soviet Union, then actively participate in social change, before they return to the initial position of mere contemplators, but already with the experience of an unfulfilled, unrealised social project of a new Belarus. Both author and his heroes are puzzled by the

present: the crisis-ridden 1990s led them to the still crisis-ridden 2000s. There seems to be no way out of the double trauma of late and post-Soviet experience.

5. *Empties* and *Sphagnum:* Belarus as a Trauma

Another perspective on the traumatic entanglements of Belarusian past and present is opened up in the novels *Empties* by Artur Klinaŭ and *Sphagnum* by Viktor Martinovich, which were both published in 2013 and became bestsellers.[3] Both novels share quite similar images of Belarus, depicting a social crisis which can be characterised in Vladimir Fours words as a 'regressive sociality'. Martinovich and Klinaŭ tell us about heroes from different social strata (Klinaŭ's heroes are Minsk intellectuals and artists, Martinovich's are provincial gangsters), which allows us to see this regressivity from different perspectives.

The action of the novel *Empties* develops around a contemporary art gallery that used to be housed in a building that once was a drop-off point for recyclable empty glassware. The prototypes of its characters are real people, artists, designers, philosophers, publishers, writers. The narrator is Artur Klinaŭ himself, an artist, writer, and screenwriter. The novel has two plot layers – the story of falling in love with a girl and parting with her, as well as the story of the script written for Partizanfilm-Studio (Belarusfilm), which is a pseudo-historical narrative on the *narodnik* Ihnat Gryniavitski, a Belarusian revolutionary, a member of the underground revolutionary-terrorist organisation Narodnaya Volya (People's Will). In 1881, he threw a bomb at the Russian Emperor Aleksandr II who died from his injuries.

Like Artur Klinaŭ's previous, more phantasmagoric novel *A Helmet* and *Empties* can be read, on a plot level, as a novel about a rejected artist. Empty glass bottles and jars here are a metaphor for the marginalisation and desolation of Minsk's intellectuals and artists. The gallery is not at all an optimistic public place. On the contrary, this public space is deeply broken, and its participants (as the novel's metaphorical title emphasises) are almost garbage, spent material that struggles for the right to be useful again and again. People of art in the novel are aware that they are on the margins, but retain enough courage and irony to continue to live their bohemian existence and work even under the conditions of neglect and humiliation by society and the state.

While the hero of Klinaŭ's previous novel *A Helmet* consciously chose a radical artistic position of self-exclusion, in *Empties* an outlet for the protagonist becomes a painful love affair. His struggle for the script, in other words, his attempt to defend his authorial self in public space, is paralleled by constant battles for his personal happiness, and in the end the hero's downfall awaits him both in his private and public life. The pathological environment, deaf and insensitive to the intellectual and artistic processes that exist in spite of everything somewhere on its margins, repeatedly nullifies all of the hero's efforts. The leitmotif of *Empties* is needlessness and loneliness.

3 The Belarusian independent literary scene is, for reasons mentioned above, very modest. When we talk about a "bestseller", we have to consider a print run of no more than 2000–5000 copies.

Traumatic collective experiences are present in Klinaŭ's novel on several levels. On the one hand, the terrorist attack of April 11, 2011, is central to the plot of the novel, a certain inexplicable excess of violence, the subjects of which are not fully defined due to the distrust of the official version of events. And so, it is not clear where this violence came from, what its meaning or message was, and what conclusions can be drawn from the event. But what it exposes is a terribly rigid, clumsy, bureaucratic system in the face of deadly and blind outbreaks of undirected, illogical violence. Tellingly, the tragic events at Niamiha are interpreted in Sasha Filipenko's novel *Ex-Son* (*Byvshii syn*, 2014) in a very similar vein – as a burst of random, uncontrolled, 'nobody's' violence. In both novels, the tragedy has become something of a transition point between Lukashenko's early rule and the subsequent tightening of his regime and the constant pressure on civil society, which is what Filipenko's novel especially is about.

Another common trait of both novels is that the perpetrators of the terror act are almost impossible to identify, whereas the huge number of victims affects society as a whole, with it being incapable of rationally comprehending what actually happened, whereby the tragedy gains an almost mystical nature. This links the Minsk terror attack to earlier traumatic tragedies like the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant where also no culprits were identified. Thus, the novel offers a model of a 'sinister subjectlessness' of traumatic events, which leads to a total mistrust towards the state authorities, who do not take responsibility and conceal the scale of the consequences not only from the public, but also from the forced liquidators of the disaster.

In summary, the traumatic echo of *Empties* is triggered by a disaster, namely the terrorist attack on April 11, 2011, which recalls the terrorist attack on the Tsar of Ihnat Gryniavitski in the screenplay written by the main character. This resonance between past and present spills over into social reality of the protagonists, who are confronted with distrust, their own futility and, in particular, personal catastrophes.

Viktor Martinovich offers a different perspective on Belarusian society and its historical memory and traumas in his work *Sphagnum*, a novel initially praised by the publisher as an entertaining read comparable to the films of Guy Ritchie and Quentin Tarantino. The novel tells the story of three men from the Belarusian countryside, who stole a bag of money from the scene of a mysterious murder and are on the run. The detective story develops into an exploration of small towns and villages, their everyday lives and social imagination. It depicts a Belarus whose life does not intersect in any way with the universe we find in Klinaŭ's *Empties*. At the same time, the countryside is obviously as isolated from a kind of 'Belarusian society in a vacuum' as, for example, Minsk's intellectual community. Moreover, glocalisation in the description of the Belarusian province reaches a new level. The 'regressive sociality' here consists not only in Belarus' self-isolation from the world, but also in the self-isolation of separate regions (the autonomy of Palesse, small similar worlds of the Hrodna, Brest, Vitebsk, Homel' regions, each of which has its own agenda, its own political guidelines and ways of doing business, and so on) and small towns and nearby villages, where residents seek to secure themselves by accepting imposed social contracts and social roles. The narrative strategy of *Sphagnum* is the creation of a kind of thread, stringing together the world of the dying and eventless modern Belarusian villages and provinces. The dramatic events of the detective plot expose all the elements of this frozen world that acts according to rusty social automa-

tisms.The depicted social reality of the Belarusian wilderness is a motley palimpsest of various discordant layers of experience: some villagers exist in secluded archaicism, subordinating their lives to the everyday magic and rhythms of forest and agricultural life; others live by the rules of local bureaucracy; some are classical philistines, who have made a social contract with the state apparatus – loyalty in exchange for the status of a 'normal citizen.' This 'social contract' had often already been made during Soviet times and was then mechanically prolonged in the era of independent Belarus. In the novel, the Soviet debris (in the form of remnants of a bygone civilisation, traces of urban planning and centralised management – in the form of signs on stores, transport stops, local history museums, etc.) looks like one of the layers of a complex palimpsest of types of experience which one needs to have in order to be 'the true local' in the Belarusian village. It is governed by fear of authority, by a social atomisation as modus of everyday interactions and by archaic beliefs and values.

The titular swamp moss – *sphagnum* – in this sense is a metaphor for everything that replaces the social coherence of the Belarusian village: the partisans put it in their wounds as a disinfectant, and the inhabitants also use it during the construction of houses to fill in the cracks between the logs. Swamp moss exists in nature in abundance, it is an inexhaustible resource for those who want to survive on the margins of 'big society', in the land of forests and swamps. Moss in this way also becomes a symbol of compensation for the lack of real social connections between people.

Another 'unnecessary' social group is depicted in the novel with the three young protagonists who simply have no place to put themselves within society, being neither part of the village people nor of the philistines. Their search for a bag of money resembles some magical or adventurous treasure hunt linked with the hope that its discovery could change their hopeless lives at once. Just as Klinaŭ's hero compensates his lack of publicness with an unhappy love story, so Martinovich's gangsters receive compensation for all the shortcomings of regressive sociality in the form of magical trips through the marshes of the Belarusian province, where, as they hope, an alternate mystical world could be found.

In his novel *Night* Viktor Martinovich continued to develop this logic of thought. Here, the fragmentation of the social imaginary in which the Belarusians live is illustrated on the plot level as the actual disintegration of the whole society. After an energy apocalypse, the world is split into multiple subjects where everyone is living according to his or her own values, ethical principles and concepts. In a world without electricity, nation-states and societies disappear, people return to living in communities, each spontaneously invented from scratch, regressing to pre-modern forms of sociality. The novel describes this fragmentation of societies around the world into local groups sharing sometimes maximally contrarian views in detail. It presents followers of conspiracy theories who stormed the Capitol, religious traditionalists, living in communities and denying the need for any vaccines, but also radical feminists, or adherents of veganism and zero-waste, and paramilitary communities. At the same time, it shows precisely the disintegration of post-Soviet society – choosing not only global trends, but also recognisable Belarusian examples. The novel presents this development as a direct outcome of the post-Soviet situation: due to the inability to build real solidarity and effective social institutions after the collapse of the USSR, Belarusian society is falling apart into war-

ring communities not bound by law and order, each with its own rules and vision of the future. Thus, the disappearing electricity – the central symbol of Soviet modernity – is not only an embodiment of technical and economic regression, but also a symbol of social regression, a regression of humanity and the expiration of the guarantee of law. It is an apocalyptic picture which resembles many developments happening in Belarus right now.

6. Conclusion

Comparing Babkoŭ's, Martinovich's and Klinaŭ's work with history in their best-selling novels, it is striking that all of them in a way mark a shift from writing that is concentrated directly on the traumas of the past (in the manner of Svetlana Alexievich, who gives 'ordinary people' a voice, the right to speak, and laments the personal dimension of social catastrophes) to the paradigm of conceptualising contemporary Belarus as a pervasively traumatic social reality due to its misunderstood or forgotten history. The authors represent this shift in fictional form, using the techniques of genre prose (mysticism, fantasy plots, detective stories), as well as the endless resources of postmodernist play and irony.

As I have already mentioned, it is largely thanks to the authors' desire to create fiction books for a broad readership that Belarusian literature in the 2010s and 2020s has become the most noticeable public platform of critical thinking about the social and political agenda of Belarusian society, more influential than, for example, political science or sociology, which experience permanent pressure. The entertaining and accessible nature of these novels made it possible to involve readers, regardless of their profession, education or status, in the reflection about history and collective memory.

These popular novels developed new literary ways of perceiving the history of Belarus as a series of cultural traumas, shifting the focus from the literary recollection of immediate traumatic experiences and their consequences (as is the case with Alexievich's prose) to a vividly entertaining narrative of active heroes building creative, diverse relationships with their history and its echoes in the present. These literary works were able to look at the image of the 'suffering Belarusian' with a certain distance, simultaneously with empathy, but also ironically. They also offered images of characters who challenge the traumatic reality and create their own alternative worldviews and even imaginary worlds in which trauma becomes surmountable, less frightening, sometimes even ridiculous. Instead of a documentary examination of past suffering heroes as passive witnesses, these works offer a multiplicity of views and characters who are acting, resisting, fantasising, and creative. In this way, literature potentially empowers and might motivate the reader to act themselves, in associating their own situation with the one of the literary protagonists.

Filmography

Anastasiya Slutskaya (Anastasia Slutskaia), dir. Yuri Yelchov, Belarus 2003.

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Figure 9.1: The final halls of the Museum of Great Patriotic War express the continuity of the Belarusian authorities with the victory in the war and glorify the common bright future of the fraternal peoples of the former Soviet Union. © Lidia Martinovich.

Figure 9.2: The final halls of the Museum of Great Patriotic War express the continuity of the Belarusian authorities with the victory in the war and glorify the common bright future of the fraternal peoples of the former Soviet Union. © Lidia Martinovich.

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