

MEMORY WARS IN BELARUS 1937–2020

by **Olga Bubich**

In a place that had never allowed you to write your own history, even remembrance can be a radical act.

from *The Impossible City*
by Hong Kong writer
Karen Cheung

Common memory awakening is the only real way to acquire a common language

writer, translator
Nikolai Epple

One out of four, and 1941 are two numbers everyone who went through the Soviet and post-Soviet schools in Belarus is familiar with. The former stands for the statistics of the Belarusians who died in the Great Patriotic War, the latter marks the year this war began. However, when I first came to Europe as a teenager, I was amazed to discover that no one actually knew either of my people's heroism or our great victory. The war, as I found out then, did not even start in 1941 – nor was it defined as “patriotic”. Rather it was everyone's – “world war” – with patriotism not attributed to nationalities.

As historian Galina Ivanova, whose quote Nikolai Epple cites in his book *Inconvenient Past*, states, the war in the USSR had actually begun long before WWII. Moreover, the point is not even

about crossing other independent states' borders:

In fact, a protracted, undeclared war of the party and state against its own civilian population became a civil one,” she writes, noting that this artificially imposed battle was based on the search for external and internal enemies. Criminals were perceived as allies with the Soviet government, actually “legitimizing persecution for dissent.”

NOW, DECADES LATER, one comes to realize that in the first half of the 20th century, Belarusians were often murdered not by terrible Germans as depicted in propaganda posters, but by their own fellow citizens – on the denunciations of neighbors and in the name of the liquidation plan received from above. If every fourth person died

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defending the USSR, then how many disappeared on a seemingly peaceful night in the 1930s? And was it necessary to be a Belarusian to have your death counted in this terrible formula?

One of the victims of the Great Terror was my great-grandfather Ivan Frantsevich, thrown into a *Cherny voronok* [Black Raven: meaning police car]² by plain-clothes police in 1937 – until recently, the fact of his sudden disappearance had been the only thing my family knew about his fate. While studying memory-related topics a few months ago, I came across his card in the Memorial archive:³ Ivan Frantsevich was shot under Articles 72 and 74 of the BSSR Criminal Code: “Propaganda or agitation containing a call for overthrow.” I learnt that local villagers had nicknamed him, a 54-year-old miller, “an American”. He had just returned from the USA, where he went to work. “An American” – during the Great Terror it was enough for a bullet in the back of his head and silence that the regime made to last for almost a century.

IN ACCORDANCE WITH NKVD order No. 00447 (On repressive operations against ex-kulaks, criminals and other counter-revolutionary elements) in July 30, 1937, repressions were carried out on the basis of approximate figures and, contrary to popular belief, affected not only the nomenklatura, but ordinary people – such as my great-grandfather.⁴ Any well-off



Screenshot of the people's memorial in Kurapaty. Retrieved in Google. Date of the shot made on the memorial site: April 2019.



Screenshot of the area around Kurapaty, the site of collective executions during the Great Terror. The restaurant "Let's Go – Let's Eat" is captioned as "No going, no eating". Retrieved on Google on January 20, 2023.

citizen, a former member of the White Guard Party or a surviving tsarist official could match the definition of "an anti-Soviet element". The other target group to be eliminated were non-ethnic Russians: Soviet Poles, Germans, Romanians, Latvians, Estonians, Greeks, Chinese and others. An additional reason leading to the death sentence could have been the fact that my great-grandfather spoke Polish and had a Polish surname.

In the late 1930s, about 1.6 million people were arrested in 16 months, and 682,000 shot.⁵ A broader historical frame seems hard to visualize, yet in 1930–1958: 20,000,000 prisoners passed through the Gulag – 2,000,000 of them died.⁶

Nowadays, memorial sites on European territory are full of detailed information about the prisoners and perpetrators and contain calls to remember and never repeat the horrors of dehumanization, harassment, torture, and execution methods – invented and functioning on the sites surrounded by towers and encircled by barbed wire with barracks and experimental medical blocks. But who in today's Belarus remembers hundreds of thousands of people killed by their own fellow citizens?

FOREXAMPLE, at the site of mass executions committed by the NKVD on Stalin's orders in 1937–1941 in Kurapaty, near Minsk, there is still no memorial – however, according to experts, up to 250,000 people could have been buried in its mass

graves.⁷ The struggle for the right to commemorate the victims has been going on for decades: The authorities continue demolishing the people's memorials and arresting grassroots activists who try to put up crosses and honor the deceased. Since 2017, Dmitry Dashkevich, one of the memorial's most persistent defenders, has been regularly subjected to repressions.⁸ Amnesty International has twice recognized him as a prisoner of conscience.

The state reacts to the activists' demands with cynicism and ignorance. In the early 1960s, the Soviet authorities deliberately built a highway that ran through Kurapaty, splitting the burial ground into two parts. In the second half of the 2000s, "Bulbash Hall" entertainment complex (later renamed "Let's Go – Let's eat") was built there – as a mockery at the place of mourning.⁹ Denis Ivashin, an investigative journalist working on the identification of the circle of people involved in this financially beneficial decision, was imprisoned in 2022 and sentenced to 13 years in a penal colony. One of the articles of the ac-

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cusations was Article 356 of the Criminal Code: "Treason against the state".¹⁰

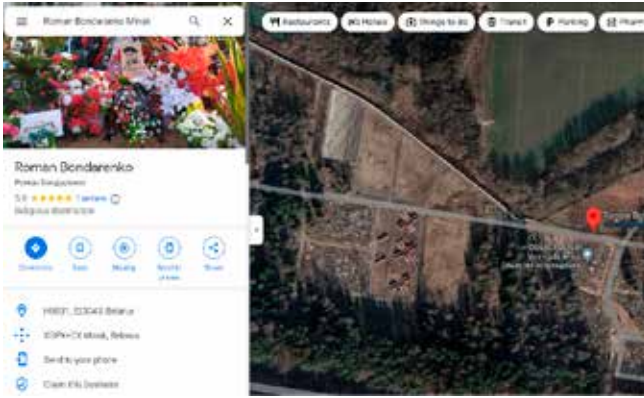
On April 20, 2019, Lukashenko introduced a total ban on any further research on Kurapaty:

Maybe some other president will come one day and start looking for consensus and dig these graves up. As long as I am president, this will not happen[...] And I do not support an idea of swarming and rummaging – all these excavations and archives.¹¹

The state's understanding of memorial culture is also expressed in another statement of the country's self-proclaimed leader:

We will hang flowers on the fence, as on the Winners Avenue's dividing line. We will make a gate so that people can use it for going in and out.¹²

VLADIMIR MATSKEVICH is another iconic political prisoner in Belarus who persistently voiced his concerns about the necessity to respect the memory of the Stalin's victims in an appropriate way. He is a philosopher, methodologist, and the founder of the "Flying University". Matskevich has recently been imprisoned for 5 years in a reinforced regime penal colony for "heading an extremist formation". In an interview in 2019 he said:



Screenshot of the area around Roman Bondarenko's grave – on Google it is marked as “religious destination”. Retrieved on January 20, 2023.



Screenshot from the site dedicated to the “Square of Changes” timeline. The image was made by Pasha Krichko and shows a track transporting the candles, lamps, and flowers of the dismantled people's memorial to Roman Bondarenko. Retrieved on January 20, 2023.

The people's memorial hurts someone's eyes so much. President [A.G. Lukashenko] said that he was annoyed by the crosses he sees from the highway. How much hatred for the manifestation of free will and independence the current government demonstrates by such actions.

In the same interview, Matskevich also calls the situation around Kurapaty “a desecration of graves and looting”.¹³

THE CONFRONTATION around the memorialization of victims in Kurapaty is perhaps the loudest and longest battle in the memory wars on the territory of modern Belarus, but this episode is far from being the only one. Other mass graves of Stalinist repressions' victims were discovered in Orsha and near Vitebsk: In both cases, attempts to document and honor the victims' memory have been made exclusively by grassroots initiatives. What about the state's position? Not only does it fail to contribute to the culture of memory strengthening – people are regularly punished for fighting for the right to remember. Yan Derzhavtsev, an activist and initiator of the Vitebsk national memorial “Khaysy”, was faced with administrative charges for “an unauthorized reburial of the remains, installation of 34 crosses and a few dozen memorial plaques”.¹⁴

For almost 30 years, Lukashenko's regime has been highlighting only indi-

vidual episodes from the country's history – those believed to be convenient for a more persuasive interpretation of Belarus' past as closely connected with that of the “brother” Russia. And this “convenience” lies in the fact that Belarusians should remember as little as possible.

The well-known comedian Yefim Shifrin also speaks with regret and pain about the silence of the official memorial culture. In Yuri Dud's documentary *Kolytma – Birthplace of Our Fear*, dedicated to Stalin's victims in the Gulag, he shares the story of his repressed father, a resident of the Belarusian town of Orsha in the Soviet years. In the prison where “anti-Soviet” elements were once tortured and killed, there is now a Jesuit college. The building has been renovated and given a fresh touch of bright paint – with no memorial plaque installed, Shifrin states.

Loud May Day parades on Victory Day, central avenues decorated with red flags,

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streets named after both Soviet heroes and Soviet executioners, the stereotyped rhetoric of the great historical countdown marked by the “great victory” – all these actions are declarative in nature and do little to help people move out of the scenery of their hard past into the world of the present. There is no search for a language of “gathering around the present, not around the past”.¹⁵ It is easier to remember heroes than victims, and talking about the masses is not so hard as speaking out individual names. The political elite's request to “turn the page” becomes a mantra that sounds every time the regime realizes that it has gone too far. And unspoken, unprocessed, silenced history repeats itself, preserving in today's social fabric the gap, or the division into “us” and “them” imposed by the authorities – for the sake of convenience, of control.

JAN ASSMANN, the German Egyptologist and historian of religion and culture, writes that:

Throughout human history, it was the memory of the dead that served as the main basis for constructing communities' identity. The memory of the dead is a paradigmatic case of memory able to ‘create a community’. By addressing the dead in their memories, the community maintains its identity. Recognizing one's debt to certain names always underlies

the recognition of one's sociopolitical identity.¹⁶

Recurrence, the need to openly address the subject of the silenced victims of state terror, is manifested not only in the desire of grassroots initiatives to retrieve and remember the names of the innocent ancestors, but also in the tragedies of today. In the chronology of the 2020 protests, I constantly recall an episode that seems to bear a great importance for understanding the role of Belarusians' memorial culture in the current development of the nation. It was a reaction to the death of Roman Bondarenko, a young activist kidnapped and killed by plainclothes police in his own backyard in 2020 – a spontaneous people's memorial, which was formed near the transformer booth as a sign of support. Photographs taken by another resident of “the Square of Changes”, Yauhen Attsetski, and a detailed documented timeline of the story of the locals' resistance and mutual support can now be found on a website specially dedicated to the memorial of Bondarenko.¹⁷ The materials collected in this online archive still amaze with the mass participation of caring Belarusians: on November 12, 2020, a booth with the image of “DJs of Change” (another important symbol of confrontation) was surrounded by a field of flowers and lamps brought by the townspeople. The death of Roman Bondarenko, who was abducted near his home, shocked Belarusians, comments the team behind the site. Wishing to pay tribute to the memory of the deceased, thousands of people from all over the city began to bring lamps, flowers, and photographs to the “Square of Change”. Passing cars honked, people chanted “We won't forget, we won't forgive!”, “Tribunal!” and “Fascists!”. Traffic jams formed at the entrance to the backyard, now turned into the memorial.

THUS, THE VOW to “never forget – never forgive” becomes more than an anti-fascist WWII slogan. On November 15, 2020, at the memorial service, and later at Roman Bondarenko's funeral, these words postulated memory as a duty, and

the demand for justice as a moral imperative of the nation.

Despite the fact that the memorial was destroyed on the orders of the authorities a few days later, Attsetski's archive articulates and (in the context of the story of the “Square of Changes”) also solves a task important for the formation of national identity. In the 21st century, documentation can take a form of not only physical objects – crosses, monuments, or memorial objects installed at the places of executions or burials. A freer and more flexible digital space (therefore less exposed to censorship) can also help to remember. Memory wars in Belarus are therefore continuing in different spaces and forms – appealing to empathy and universal values, and uniting around common suffering and grief can become one of the ways to overcome division and move towards the restoration of justice and democracy. And in my turn, I would like people who choose to support the regime today to check the lists of victims of Stalinist terror on “Memorial” website.¹⁸ Knowing that the fate of Roman Bondarenko was shared in the 1930s, perhaps by their blood relative – a great-grandfather, a grandfather or a great-grandmother – how can one refuse to remember, refuse to long for a life other than one built on fear, violence and silence?

VIOLENT DEATH is something that cannot be attributed to “those of my kin” or “those of the alien ones”. The right to life and the right to remember are inalienable human rights that belong to a person of

“THE RIGHT TO LIFE AND THE RIGHT TO REMEMBER ARE INALIENABLE HUMAN RIGHTS THAT BELONG TO A PERSON OF ANY NATIONALITY, RELIGION, AND HISTORICAL PERIOD.”

any nationality, religion, and historical period. Why, then, does the promise “never again”, immortalized in the memorial complex on the site of the first concentration camp in Dachau, remain unfulfilled, forcing the Belarusians again and again, almost a century later, to face nightly abductions, searches, lawlessness, hastily passed sentences and the hunt for dissidents? Maybe one of the answers to this question is connected with the imposed indifferent attitude to the sacred places of memory and mourning as formal “gates one can go in and out”? Lamps and flowers, of course, can be thrown into the back of a truck as trash, people's memorials can be easily dismantled, but no regime is able to erase the memory.

The French philosopher, philologist and historian of religion Ernest Renan writes:

Suffering in common unites more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, grief is of more value than triumphs, for it imposes duties, it requires a common effort. A nation is therefore a vast solidarity, constituted by the sentiment of the sacrifices one has made and of those one is yet prepared to make. It presupposes a past; it is, however, summarized in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life.¹⁹

National politics, Epple concludes, can be rethought not on the basis of common victories and common pride, but on common defeats and common pain: “The main value the new order of things rests on is human life – not the greatness of the state, and human rights should serve as a new universal language.”²⁰ x

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