

Returning to Chajsy, Belarus: Back to Stalin

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 12 2020

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

In 2017, Belarus introduced a five-day visa-free regime for travelers from 80 countries. The only criteria were that one had to arrive at Minsk International Airport from the west and return by the same route. By 2019, the time limit was extended to 30 days, enough time to carry out a research program. Joyfully, in 2017, I had taken advantage of the new opening and had no issues at Passport Control though I had to put away my Canadian passport with all its rejection stamps – the latest one from 2015 – and present a bright red new EU-UK one, which I had never used before.

There was no time to do much other than visit some old friends, and visit museums and the National Library, though some of the city media were very interested in my return. A reporter from Radio Svaboda interviewed me while walking around the city, asking me what had changed and whether Lukashenka was a dictator. Minsk had changed quite dramatically in my seven-year absence and was clearly becoming the showpiece of the republic. The historical part of the city had been beautifully restored and now resembled a European city with cafes, restaurants, cobbled streets, musicians playing outdoors, and new hotels and boutiques. Obviously, there were far more private enterprises than encountered during previous visits.

My hotel was a new Western one, a Double Tree by Hilton, and with Western standards. It was built alongside and with indoor links to Galleria, a large shopping mall with five floors, including a food court on the top floor and a food store on the ground floor. I visited the new Museum of the Great Patriotic War, which I had never had an opportunity to do when writing *'Our Glorious Past.'* It was impressively laid out, with groups of schoolchildren being escorted around. I had now become interested, however, in the period just prior to the outbreak of the "Great Patriotic War," and specifically the period 1937-1941, which seemed to me the most notable blank spot in the history of Belarus.

I returned the following spring and began to elaborate a new research project that returned to a topic I have mentioned earlier in this chronicle, namely NKVD mass executions at the Kurapaty site to the north of Minsk. In 1994, I had written what might be termed an exploratory article on the topic that appeared in the American *Slavic Review*. Now I thought it should be possible to go further and provide an updated study.

I had been corresponding with a PhD candidate at the Polish Academy of Sciences, Veranika Laputska, and we decided it would be of mutual interest and benefit to combine our efforts. She is from Minsk and had assisted me with *'Our Glorious Past'* and could help me at times when it was difficult to allocate time for research in Belarus. She is also a renowned linguist. In September 2019, I was finally free to carry out a period of sustained fieldwork, visiting Kurapaty and other sites. Even though the KGB Archives have remained closed, the consequences of our findings were so profound that I began to question some of the conclusions I had reached over many years of research, namely that one could not compare Nazism and Stalinism, and thus the concept behind books such as *Bloodlands* were seriously misleading. We also faced some serious problems in dealing with such a topic.

By way of background to these, since the study of Stalinist rule in Belarus (the Belorussian SSR) in the West is not a subject of broad perusal, I would cite three sobering facts. The first is the fate of Belarusian party leaders between

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1920 and 1937. I compiled a list of these and append my notes below for clarification:

Vilgelm Knorish 1890-1939, Latvian, 1920-1923, and May 1927-Dec 1928, purged and shot during Latvian Operation

Aleksandr Nikolaevich Asatkin 1885-1937, Russian, led CPB 1923-1924. Arrested July 5, 1937 when member of CC CPU, shot Sept 2, 1937, rehab 1957

Aleksandr Ivanovich Krinitsky 1894-1937, Russian, May 1924-Dec 1925. Arrested Jul 20, 1937, executed Oct 30, 1937

Nikolai Matveevich Goloded (Mikalai Haladzei), 1894-1937, Belarusian, Head of BSSR govt 1927-1937, English source says 1st Sec, Russian says 2nd Sec. Arrested in Moscow, Jun 14, 1937, sent to Minsk, fell out of 5th floor window of NKVD HQ

Yan Garmarnik, aka Yakov Tzudikovich Gamarnik, 1894-1937, Dec 4, 1928-Jan 3, 1930, Jewish military leader from Zhytomyr. Committed suicide in 1937.

Konstantin Veniaminovich Gey 1896-1939, German/Russian, Jan 1930-Jan 1932, arrested Oct 2, 1938, shot in 1939

Nikolai Fedorovich Gikalo, 1897-1938, Jewish from Odessa. Jan 1932-Mar 1937–purged party by 50%, moved to Kharkiv as 1st sec. Arrested Oct 11, 1937, shot following April. Rehabilitated 1955

Vasily Fomich Sharangovich (Vasil Famich Sharanhovich), 1897-1938, Belarusian, Minsk region, Mar 1937-Jul 1937, arrested Jul 1937 as member of Rightist-Trotskyist anti-Soviet bloc with 20 others. Shot Mar 15, 1938. Rehab 1957 and restored to party 1958.

Iakov Arkadievich Iakovlev, 1896-1938, Jewish from Hrodna, a Russian source says Bialystok, Jul 27-Aug 8, 1937. Arrested in Moscow, Oct 12, 1937, shot Jul 29, 1938, rehab 1958

Aleksei Volkov 1890-1942, Russian, Aug 11, 1937-Jun 18, 1938. Not arrested

Thus, the first nine party leaders of the republic had all died by one means or another by 1937-1938, making this surely the most dangerous position in the Soviet Union. And yet, virtually all studies of Kurapaty were maintaining that peasants, rather than party leaders, were the main victims of the executions. Such statements put the scale of the shootings on a much wider scale.

The second problem was one of investigation of these events in Belarus itself. I found one apparently reliable text, published in 1994, meaning that research for the book had been conducted when the KGB Archives were still open. Subsequently, Kurapaty became part of a political struggle between the Lukashenka regime and the opposition. To some extent this development was preordained by the fact that Zianon Pazniak, leader of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, a far-right political group that was an offshoot of the original BPF founded in the late 1980s, had carried out the original archaeological findings that revealed the mass grave. As noted earlier, he had published his findings in a Belarusian literary newspaper in 1988.

When the authorities tried to cut off the burial site by various means, such as road and business construction, oppositionists defended the area, sometimes for months on end. By 2017-2019, the chief defenders of the site came from organizations such as the Youth Front and the unregistered Christian-Democratic Party, much to the consternation of Pazniak, who had fled into exile in 1996, and now divides his time between US and Poland, though he is most often residing in Warsaw. Official newspapers referred to the defense of Kurapaty and estimates of the number of deaths there according to Pazniak – between 30,000 and 250,000 – as “privatizing” the past.

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In turn, the most prolific writer on Kurapaty in Belarus was Igor Kuznetsov (Ihar Kuzniacou), an Associate Professor at the Belarusian State University. Yet Kuznetsov's figures on executions, "repressions," and arrests varied widely from one article to another, and none of his papers were in refereed journals. Virtually all were in media or social media. He evidently knows neither Polish nor English and thus his circulation may be limited to Russian and Belarusian-language journals, which would restrict his choices of venue. But the results to date of his research are thoroughly confusing, especially on the number of victims, "repressed," and deported. Yet, he is often the main scholarly representative both on and at the Kurapaty site, where he shows visitors around. He is scolded by the authorities, and reviled by the opposition, particularly Pazniak, who thinks Kuznetsov is a KGB agent.

The third issue is something encountered on the 2019 visit – the sheer scale of the executions – something that in fairness Kuznetsov was one of the first to point out before he got lost in a muddle of numbers. Kurapaty contained about 30,000 victims of mass executions, as far as we could determine. But it was far from the only place in Belarus where such deaths were brought about. Every major city from Minsk eastward has a mass execution site, usually a forest or close to a forest and some distance from the major city. Western cities such as Hrodna or Brest were not part of the Belorussian SSR until September 1939, and then only for a 20-month period before the outbreak of war, but in all the others, the NKVD rounded up and shot prisoners, farmers, managers, party leaders and anyone accused of collaboration with Stalin's real and perceived enemies or foreign states – usually Britain, Poland, or Japan. In Minsk there are at least twelve such sites. Most have been discovered over the past five years.

But there lies a problem because there are few archival sources available to verify the identity of many victims – some have been identified because of their ethnic origin, such as Latvians and Lithuanians in Vorsha region. And the discoveries and monitoring of the commemorative sites that have arisen are in the hands of Pazniak's party. As a rule, these people are not scholars, let alone historians. But they are sincere and earnest in their task of uncovering the truth about the fate of the victims. But I am moving ahead of my narrative.

I had first visited Kurapaty in the fall of 1992, and gathered materials in the National Library on which I based my article for *Slavic Review* (1994). I returned in 2017, and noted that the defenders had erected over 100 crosses along the route and roadside to commemorate the victims. Under some pressure, the government acceded to the erection of an official monument, based on a competition, and by September 2019, it had been constructed at the very center of the memorial in the forest: four pillars with a bell in the center, not dissimilar to the largest official war monument at Khatyn, about 50 kilometers from Minsk, but that one is more elaborate and encompasses an entire village, burned down by the Nazis and their accomplices. Coaches to the site leave regularly from Minsk. By contrast, only some trade union officials had turned up for the official opening of the new monument at Kurapaty. The event was ignored by government leaders.

Close to the entrance to the Kurapaty site in September 2019 was a large restaurant, with an entrance gate, and adorned with the name "Let's Go! Let's Eat!" It is owned by an Israeli-Belarusian businessman, Boris Suris and his locally based counterpart, Leonid Zaides, and bitterly resented by the Kurapaty defenders, who have tried to block the entrance and prevent people from entering. Its defenders have maintained that there are similar restaurants operating near mass grave sites, including near the Yama pit in Minsk, where 5,000 Jews were killed. A large billboard on the roadside was advertising "Let's Go! Let's Eat!" and a small number of people were gathering outside. The last thing I needed was to be detained at a protest so I did not approach any closer.

Shortly after my third visit to Kurapaty, bulldozers arrived and smashed down all the crosses by the roadside, and a fence was then erected around the forest. President Lukashenka talked about opening an exhibition center there while the official media complained about attempts to "privatize" a tragedy. Vandals also smashed into four pieces a bench donated by US president Bill Clinton, during his visit to Belarus in 1994. In truth, the bench had been damaged several times before despite its innocuous message "To the Belarusian people from the United States of America." Clearly the memory of Kurapaty is still contested.

Later on the same visit, Ales Lahviniec, a well-known political activist formerly linked with the Milinkievič camp, Veranika, and I drove to a small, remote village, Arshanski, in Vorsha region on the Russian border, seeking the abode of one Jurka Kopcik. We tried several houses along the dirt track that passes for a road in many Belarusian

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villages, and were eventually directed to the poorest house in the vicinity, a brown wooden shack, with a sloping roof and an overgrown but substantial garden that contained a number of beehives. No one answered the door when we knocked, so Ales walked right into the single room that was replete with food utensils, an unkempt sink, unused fireplace, and a table crammed with honey and pickles, and beckoned to us to follow him. Jurka had been sleeping but rose quickly from his bed in the corner and simply added layers of clothing without undressing.

As we drank tea and ate bread and honey, Jurka related his past and his family's victimization in the Stalin period – many of his relatives had been arrested. He spoke only Belarusian. A faded photograph of his great grandmother hung on the wall. We then returned to the car and Jurka donned a deerstalker hat that clearly had been in his possession for many years. He had talked constantly for about an hour, but when we were alone, he suddenly switched to English:

“And where are you from, David?”

I almost fell over with shock.

“Western Canada,” I responded.

“Oh, very good.”

He then reverted back to Belarusian and never spoke another word of English until we departed. He took us over a disused railway line to a forest about ten kilometers from the city of Vorsha, called Kabyliaki. Small signs on trees directed to the “place of mass burials,” gravesites of those executed in 1937-1938, often accused of being Polish spies, and over a considerable area. One sign, black, and with red, blue, and purple flowers around it announced that it commemorated the victims of the Communist regime, 1930-1953. The ground was wet. At the edge of the forest the sign of the Orthodox Church had been erected. All the memorial was the work of locals, and not the authorities, which had provided no support and sometimes had obstructed the efforts to erect it.

Jurka had been talking with Veranika, and she informed me that he had formerly worked as a journalist for the local newspaper, and that she found him highly intelligent. What had happened, I wondered, that prompted him to live such a secluded life, and in such squalor? It made no sense.

Our next stop was the hamlet of Chajsy, near Viciebsk, and right on the Russian border, a relatively short journey. We met our host, Yan Dziarzhautsau, in the center of the city and Ales drove us to another heavily forested area, with similar signs to the ones at Kabyliaki. The difference was the scale. Chajsy was another Kurapaty, perhaps even larger. Evidently Yan, another Belarusian speaker and avid member of the Christian Conservative Party of the Belarusian Front, related that he had been standing at a bus stop nearby in 2014 and overheard someone saying that they were too afraid to go through the forest because of all the corpses buried there. He investigated further and he and others found innumerable graves, some containing corpses. The graves were clear to us as deep holes throughout the forest, many marked with crosses. Yan was in his late 50s, a small, stocky man who wore a blue anorak and cap, and carried a walking stick.

Yan and his colleagues had alerted the local authorities, who came and removed the bodies, but chose not to delve further into the stories behind them. The removal had been sloppy. Bones remained behind and we even detected one on the path through the forest. There were also shoes, items of clothing, and a hairbrush, the owner of which was traced by the unofficial investigators. Yan informed us that people of Latvian ancestry had been living in the area since the days of the Russian Empire, and many of them were caught up in Stalin's Latvian Operation in 1940, after the Soviet annexation of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. In fact, he had managed to interview the last surviving member of the village to have recalled the events before he died. He showed us lists of names and biographical information that they had managed to compile. It was incomplete, of course, but much more information than had been ascertained from Kurapaty. As we passed by a cornfield on the edge of the forest, Yan remarked that the crop was bountiful, as human bodies provided natural supplements.

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During the same visit, we spent long hours in the National Library, and waded through the official newspapers, *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* and *Zviazda* for the years 1937-1938 to ascertain coverage of political events. Some were simply ignored, such as the removal and replacement of party leaders. But there was ample evidence of the purges and ensuing trials. A case would develop slowly against an individual or group of individuals, especially those with suspicious backgrounds, such as foreign birth, or parents who were considered kulaks, or else kulaks themselves. In every region of Belarus, the cases developed and ultimately, the group would be arrested and accused of various crimes, the most frequent of which was spying for Poland – an obsession of Stalin – or of being a member of either rightist or leftist opposition to the Soviet leader.

Then a trial would result, sometimes at a military court, at others a civilian court or simply by troika. At the military courts, local Stakhanovites[1] would be gathered to witness the trial, many of which wrote comments in the newspaper afterward, and the sentence was always “death by shooting.” In other cases, defendants were accused of sabotaging agricultural equipment or poisoning animals. It was a grim, but fascinating picture of a society in the grip of madness, and at several levels, with no sector of society safe. But why was the Purge taking on such extreme forms in this small republic, which was hardly surging with nationally conscious, anti-Soviet elements?

Pazniak, whom we had interviewed in Warsaw before arrival in Minsk, maintains that the Stalin regime conducted a genocide of the Belarusian people. But if one is speaking purely in ethnic terms, the statement seems unlikely to be accurate. The sweeping executions of 1937-1938, as distinct from the later one of 1939-1941, targeted several groups, including kulaks, but its viciousness stemmed, in my view, from his phobia about Poland, Poles, and Pilsudski, and alleged plans to invade the USSR with the support of Germany or the Western Powers. Poles had been removed en masse from the border regions in the early 1930s, but many remained, especially in the western part of Minsk region. The Polish Operation of 1937, after the execution of so-called kulaks, was the decisive action of the period, and embraced far more than ethnic Poles. Nevertheless, the purpose was to end any threat from Poland.

I was shaken by the sheer scale of Chajsy, but also by the complete failure and reluctance of the Belarusian government to offer any form of recognition to the thousands of victims. After all, we were over 80 years on, and no one remained from the period with living memory of the past, just as in the Famine in Ukraine. And the government was moving in precisely the opposite direction, namely, to commemorate the war victory, the Partisans, and the Soviet Army. Thus, in the Park Cheliuskintsau, four metro stops from the city center, the small monument dedicated to victims of Stalin erected by oppositionists is simply overshadowed by the adjacent, impressive monument to the Partisans. Minsk is a city devoted to remembering the wartime victory, and May 9 (Victory Day) and July 3 (Independence Day) are the main state occasions of commemoration, with parades and speeches, the president and his youngest son on the platform in military uniforms.

I have concluded that Stalin the war hero is here to stay, his crimes forgotten or ignored, at least in Belarus and Russia. The families of Stalin’s victims remain silent, as has been demonstrated by Western scholars and analysts such as Orlando Figes (*The Whisperers*, 2007) and Shaun Walker (*The Long Hangover: Putin’s New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, 2018), as they have done for years. And silence breeds ignorance and myth. Such a dilemma likely cannot be resolved in these countries, it is largely dependent on outside researchers. In Russia today it is a criminal offence to engage in historical revisionism about the war; in Belarus, no publisher would print a book that questioned the basic tenets of the war narrative, slightly different from that of Russia with the same underlying themes – and Stalin was the victor. That is not to adhere to the double genocide theory; rather to say that in the places where he conducted the most violent crimes – other than Ukraine – the real Stalin is unknown.

But in Belarus there remain mass graves, unexplored and until recently mostly forgotten. That is perhaps the real legacy of the Soviet Union, which some citizens remember – or claim they remember – with some nostalgia and fondness. There is also the matter of media attention, and focus. The majority of Viciebsk residents, I would surmise, who are about 340,000 in number, probably have no idea that there are mass graves in the forest around them. Yet thousands attend the annual Slavianski Bazaar, an international festival featuring artists from all three neighboring countries: Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, and often attended by the country’s leaders. The past, however, is not forgotten, it is simply interwoven into the official state historical narrative of what should be emphasized and what omitted.

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As for an historian, there is only so much one can do. We are perhaps a dying breed, but I would argue nonetheless that we are needed, if only to draw attention to failed precedents and mistakes, and the horrific consequences of what happens when totalitarian systems are established in Europe, or elsewhere. Above all, in the 2020s, what is sorely needed in prevailing narratives is historical perspective, whether in Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus. History cannot be manipulated for political purposes and it should be written by historians, not political leaders. On the other hand, the Soviet legacy was so pervasive and deep rooted that it has proven difficult to overcome it in some states almost 30 years later. Ukraine is on the path to removing all traces of it in most regions, but the crucial question is with what to replace it. Ukraine's president Zelensky is appealing to all sectors of Ukraine to form a common, civic nation, which may prove impossible, a dream.

The problems faced by these states today seem even more complex than in the late 1980s when Gorbachev opened up society. In retrospect, there was more opportunity then for self-expression and open discussion. Recent political events have only served to impede the study of history at a time when it is being used to define new national identities. Many of the problems left unchecked when the USSR collapsed in 1991 are being resolved today in states mired by corruption and, in the case of Belarus and Russia, authoritarian rule. But I perceived signs that Belarus was changing: growing privatization of businesses, a thriving IT industry, and a clear attempt of the government to adopt policies to bring the country closer to Europe while remaining neutral, in the face of growing Russian pressure for closer integration. None of this is to deny the continuing violations of human rights, manipulated elections, and limited freedom of assembly. But the Stalinist heritage is a bitter one and may take a sustained effort to remove.

Note

[1] Stakhanovites were record breakers in industry, following the example of the Donbas coal miner, Aleksey Stakhanov, who allegedly hewed 112 tons of coal in a single shift in late August 1935. The Stakhanovite movement peaked in 1936-1937.

About the author:

David R. Marples is a Research Analyst in the Contemporary Ukraine Program, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and Distinguished Professor of Russian and East European History at the University of Alberta. His books include *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* (2020), *Ukraine in Conflict* (2017), *'Our Glorious Past': Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (2014), *Russia in the 20th Century: The Quest for Stability* (2011), and *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (2007).