

**Belarus:
Communist genocide of a nation**

Belarus – the name may be relatively new to people in this hemisphere as most of us living here heard about this independent country only just more than a decade ago. However history of Belarus and Belarusians is a rich history of a European nation that has been contributing to the world’s mosaic for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Today though, I will not talk about this contribution or creation of Belarusian statehood or achievements of Belarusian culture. The theme of my narration is much grimmer – I will talk about the communist eclipse on the skyline of the Belarus’ recent past. I will also briefly touch on how this affected my Motherland and to what degree this debilitating impact has its presence in today’s life in Belarus.

It started as early as December 1917 when Bolsheviks strangled the voice of the biggest at that time formal assembly of people’s representatives in Minsk – the First National Congress of Belarusians was violently dispersed. In 1919 Belarus became the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Very soon after that, at the end of 1920s, Stalin’s communist genocidal repressions started.

“The Great Terror in Soviet Belarus in the 1930s had a catastrophic impact on Belarus culture. In three waves of arrests, in 1930, 1933, and 1937 – 1938, hundreds of thousands of people of all walks of life were eliminated. Particularly heavy losses were sustained among the intelligentsia”. The genocidal campaign was conducted under the slogan of a struggle against the “National Democrats”, who were accused of a sinister plot to tear Belarus away from the Soviet Union and sell it to capitalist imperialists. State Security organs began preparing a show trial of the so-called Union for the Liberation of Belarus (ULB), concocted on the model, already in process, of the Union for Liberation of Ukraine. However, the design was frustrated when Yanka Kupala, Belarus’ famous poet slated for the

role of ULB leader, attempted suicide in November 1930. The next in line for the same infamous role could have been the president of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, Usievalad Ihnatouski, but he committed suicide in February 1931 after several interrogations by the GPU. The idea of holding a show trial was dropped, but the arrests continued unabated. The extent of the devastation is evident from the losses suffered by literature. In 1937, after 128 writers had been arrested, only one literary organization remained in the republic: the Writers' Union of Belarus, with 39 members, only 14 of whom wrote in Belarusian. Of the 238 writers arrested during the years of repression only 20 survived. The Institute of Belarusian Culture, established in 1922 and transformed into the Belarusian Academy of Sciences in 1928, lost "nearly ninety percent of its members; the vast majority of them were shot." (Encyklopedyja Historyi Belarusi, vol. 2. 1994. p. 505).

Historian Michael Bic, who researched the effects of Stalinist crimes in Belarus, notes: "In the 1930s, almost the entire national intelligentsia, the majority of whom were educated during the Soviet period became the victims of the Stalinist-Beria repressions". This policy of mass destruction of the national intelligentsia was extended into West Belarus after its incorporation into the Soviet Union in September 1939. More than 200, 000 people were deported from West Belarus in 1940 alone.

Only in recent years has the horrifying magnitude of Communist crimes become clear. To the list of such names as Buchenwald and Auschwitz was added one more in 1988: Kurapaty, a forest near Minsk, where victims were executed on a daily basis from 1937 to 1941. The site was uncovered by Zianon Pazniak and his co-workers. "...The chief investigator has just published an estimate of 250, 000 for the whole site. And this for the capital of a minor Soviet Republic – with five other sites around it still awaiting investigation, and others near the Belarusian provincial capitals." ("Coming to Terms with the Past", *National Review*, New York, March 10, 1989, p.15).

Barys Sachanka, a specialist in the subject of the 1930s repressions, noted that according to his calculations and those made by others, “the number of victims (of Stalin’s repressions – D. E.) equals the number of those who perished during the Great Patriotic War”. (*Zviazda*, Minsk, March 19, 1989). The losses during that 1941 –1945 war in Belarus are estimated of 2.2 million people. (Academy of Sciences of BSSR, *Belaruskaja Savetskaja Encyklopedyja*, vol. 1, Minsk, 1969, p. 217).

Such figures, however, are only one dimension of the tragedy. A concomitant aspect of the Communist genocide in Belarus was Russification. In 1933 a language reform was decreed, bringing Belarusian orthography and vocabulary closer to Russian at the expense of the natural character of the Belarusian language and its many specific features. The Belarusian language was banned from high official places and from higher education. Speaking Belarusian in formal gatherings became a sign of “bourgeois nationalism”.

The history of Belarus was completely re-written. Many of its outstanding personalities - including the fifteenth century humanist Francisak Skaryna and the nineteenth-century leader of an anti-tsarist uprising Kastus Kalinouski, - were denounced as reactionaries and condemned to oblivion.

At the same time, Russian tsars, generals and writers became models to be studied and emulated by Belarusian youth. The history of Belarusian people was reduced to a single desire to be united with the Russians. Cultural activities, instead of concentrating on native themes and heritage, centred on so-called internationalism, with a heavy emphasis on everything Russian. The devastating effects of these genocidal and ethnocidal policies were admitted by even the most conservative Communists in the years of perestroika. As the main organ of the Communist Party of Belarus, *Kommunist Belorussii*, wrote in 1990: “ the struggle with the so-called *natsdems* (National Democrats) and kulaks in 1929 –

1933 shifted to a liquidation of foreign agents in 1937. As a result, the process of the formation of a national intelligentsia was arrested for a long time (“V poiskah Utrachennoho Vremeni,” *Kommunist Belorussii*, No 1, Minsk, 1990, p. 65)

Communists continued their work to create the so-called “new community of people – the Soviet People” for decades to come after the Second World War. Those were the years of disaster for the generations of Belarusians who were taught their national history only from the perspective of the infamous “historical materialism” that silently deprived each one nation in the former Soviet state, bigger or smaller, of their true history and wiped out the names of those who contributed to it.

Without providing you with detailed analysis into the current situation in Belarus, one can only say that today’s Belarusian dictatorship is deeply rooted into the soil that has been long cultivated by the Communists. And as most of you probably know, dictatorships mostly look and act alike: political opponents of a dictator disappearing without a trace, media that are waiting for directions on how to reflect the ‘happy life’, elections without a real choice, jailing those whose opinions are different from the official ones, monopoly on the very concept of interpreting what human rights are really about... and the list can go on. In this respect, conventions of this caliber can definitely assist in raising awareness and educating public as to what proportions of a catastrophe Communist ideas can lead to and what we can do to have the sad pages of our history never repeated again.

Thank you for your attention,

Dr. Rayisa Zuk-Hryshkievich