Partisan Resistance in Belarus during World War II

The tragedy that Belarusian people have undergone during World War II is so deep that even today this topic is embedded in everyday surrounding and culture of Belarusians. After 60 years of peaceful life, Chernobyl, dismantling of the USSR, 14 years of sovereignty still WWII remains a major emotional rift in Belarusian soul. For 60 years after WWII BelarusFilm - the main Belarusian movie studio - was making movies centered on WWII Belarusian tragedy, to such an extent that some have jokingly renamed it into PartisanFilm. Even this year the two major Belarusian movies that came out - both State sponsored and independent movie, forbidden in Belarus - are dealing with WWII and Belarusian partisans. The literary heritage of the beloved Belarusian writer - Vasil' Bykau, referred by many as consciousness of Belarusian nation - was centered entirely on WWII. The march of ever diminishing number of the WWII veterans in Minsk every May 9 is a cherished national event televised not only in Belarus, but in many neighboring states. The WWII topic is too difficult emotionally and for years I was avoiding to write about it in the Virtual Guide to Belarus. Even now I shall probably restrict it to dry statistics as I write these lines on a sunny Californian Saturday of July 24, 2004 with a lump in my throat.

1930-ies in Belarus and generally in USSR weren't the happiest years. Stalinist doctrine grew, millions of people were prosecuted by NKVD. Fear and suspicion were nesting in every house. "Black crows" - the NKVD black cars were coming to the houses of your neighbor to pick him up in the midst of night, only to never see him again. The forced organization of collective farms - kolkhozes - from individual peasant families sparked many conflicts and resulted in many victims. 1937 was written into the history of USSR as perhaps the bloodiest year ever. Millions of executions were performed in a permanent hunt of traitors and "inner enemies". Several years before Khatyn executions by Hitler Germany horrible Katyn' and Kurapaty executions by Stalin's USSR took place. In 1939 Germany and USSR have struck Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in which they divided Eastern European lands lying between them - Western Belarus, Western Ukraine and Baltic states were occupied by USSR. The repressions against Poles and anti-communists on the occupied areas were a background in which Belarus has arrived into 1941.

It is not surprising that when Germans attacked USSR (Belarus) on June 22, 1941 the response of local population was more than ambivalent.

Generalkommissar Wilhelm Kube (left) receives power as a head of newly formed Minsk German administration, August 31, 1941. When Kube was killed by Minsk underground resistance in 1943 Germans have killed 1,000 hostages - citizens of Minsk - in retaliation.

Some people tried to retreat further into USSR, whereas others met Germans with flowers in their best clothes with hope of liberation from Stalin repressions. It is at that time a wide collaboration movement emerged in Belarus. Estimated 120,000 Belarusians have collaborated (willingly or unwillingly) with Nazi.

German officers and Ukrainian Collaborationist police in Sarig, near Kiev, Ukraine - 1942

After a decade of experiencing prosecution of everything Belarusian as "bourgeois" Belarusian nationals hoped to exploit the occupation as an opportunity to re-built Belarusian nation. A "Second All-Belarusian Congress" in 1944 has even proclaimed sovereign Belarusian State in July 1944, against German will. One must recollect here that the first Belarusian state in the new history - Belarusian Democratic Republic (BDR) - was created in the years of German occupation of Belarus during WWI in 1918 by the "First All-Belarusian Congress". Radaslau Astrouski, who led Belarusian national movement during WWII was actually member of the government of BDR in 1918. Many of these nationalists have turned anti-Semitic because of their belief in Jewish origins of Bolshevism. But even the most hardcore nationalists were affected by horrible massacres of Belarusian Jewry, tortures and cruelty with captured Red Army POWs and mass executions of general population.

[FAKE] Execution of women and children near Mizoch, October 14, 1942. Jewish work column - Mahilyow, 1941.

Himmler has pronounced a plan according to which 3/4 of Belarusian population was designated to "eradication" and 1/4 of racially cleaner population (blue eyes, light hair) would be allowed to serve Germans as slaves. Mass executions of entire villages were a common Nazi practice. While initially Germans allowed peasants to take cattle from kolkhoz, later all this cattle was loaded on trains and shipped to Germany. Many Belarusian youth were shipped to Germany as slaves.

Young Belarusians shipped to Germany as forced laborers, 1942.

By Summer 1942 the sentiments in Belarusian population were strongly anti-Nazi. It is at this time a serious partisan and underground resistance fight brakes out on the occupied territory in Belarus. Already in the Summer of 1941 approximately 12,000 of Belarusian partisans have conducted military operations against German occupants. At that time the partisan forces were comprised mostly of Red Army soldiers that escaped surrounding or from German captivity. By January 1, 1943 there were 448 Belarusian partisan detachments and 64 diversion groups. They counted approximately 58,000 partisan fighters. At the same time Ukraine with 4 times larger population than Belarus had 68 partisan detachments with 9,000 people in them. Smaliensk region of Russia just East of Belarus had counted 120 partisan detachments and 9 diversion groups - 10,000 people total.

Belarusian partisan in a forest dugout with his family, 1944

While majority of the partisan and underground movement was driven by a heroic effort of Belarusian people to liberate their homeland from Nazi, there were also negative things associated with some partisan detachments. The rumors about crimes of partisans have always existed in Belarus. Common villagers were often as scared of Soviet partisans as they were of Nazi. In an effort to protect the villages from both some village leaders have become double agents of both Nazi and Partisans. Clearly majority of partisans were not able to fight and feed themselves simultaneously, and so many times they forced Belarusian villagers to give up their food supplies and cattle. This would in term put villagers in mortal danger from Germans, since they could be identified as collaborators to partisans.

Victims of Anti-Partisan Punishment Operation - Minsk region, 1943. 17y.o. Belarusian Jewish (Masha Bruskina 17y.o. Jewish partisan on the left) partisans public hanging by Nazi. **[Admin: Did you DNA test them to affirm they were Jews? Or was that little detail added for good measure?]**

   The standard of SS practice was to execute entire population of the village near which partisan attack has occurred in retaliation. More than 600 villages like [Khatyn](#) were burned by Nazi with their entire population. Not all partisan detachments had pristine morals - tyranny of commanders, heavy drinking, anarchy, looting of food and clothing, even rape - were reported. These actions were known to happen in partisan detachments of Lunin, Charkasau, group of Muhin. The head of Central Headquarters of Partisan Movement - Brigade Commissar Konkin called partisan detachments of Miciuhin and Zaharau "bandit formations". The recent independent feature film [Mysterium Occupation](#), which is forbidden today in Belarus as "distorting historical truth", is delivering exactly this taboo information about partisan movement in Belarus. In many senses society governed by Communist totalitarian regime of Stalin in 1930-ies was already militarized and had established discipline of fear. And so, the development of the network of 1,200

Communist Party cells within partisan detachments around 1943 has considerably improved discipline and cleaned the situation.

1943 was a year of unprecedented Belarusian partisan battle against Nazi. Over the period of 1418 days of German occupation of Belarus 1,255 partisan detachments were formed and lead military actions in Belarus with 374,000 fighters. Additionally approximately 400,000 of locals supported partisan movement. In the cities 70,000 people were involved in the underground resistance. During the three years of war on occupied territory of Belarus (June 1941 - July 1944) Belarusian partisans and underground resistance fighters have killed or incapacitated more than 500,000 of Nazis. 11,128 of German trains following to Russian East Front, as well as 34 armored battle trains were blown up or derailed by Belarusian partisans. 29 railway stations, 948 Military Headquarters, 18,700 cars and trucks, 819 railway and 4,710 auto bridges were destroyed by Belarusian partisans. The partisan movement was so overwhelming that in 1943-44 there were large regions in occupied Belarus, where Soviet rule was established deep inside the German occupation territory. The fully functioning partisan kolkhozes were farming and growing cattle to support partisans.

Pages of the Moscow propaganda newspaper published for Belarusian partisans "Squish the Fascist Beast". Interestingly in an effort to appeal to Belarusian patriotism it is all published in Belarusian - the very language that was prosecuted by Soviets just before WWII and is prosecuted by Lukashenka regime in today's Belarus.

The most known partisan detachments acting in Belarus were led by U.E. Labanok, R.N. Machul'ski, K.S. Zaslonau, V.I. Kazlou, V.Z. Korzh, K.T. Mazurau, M.V.Zimianin,

P.M. Masherau. Many of these commanders have become party and government leaders of Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic after WWII.

Over 500,000 Belarusians were drafted in the Red Army during 1941 retreat. Overall 1.3 million Belarusians fought in Red Army against Nazi, including 194,000 partisan detachment members, who enlisted after liberation of Belarus in 1944.
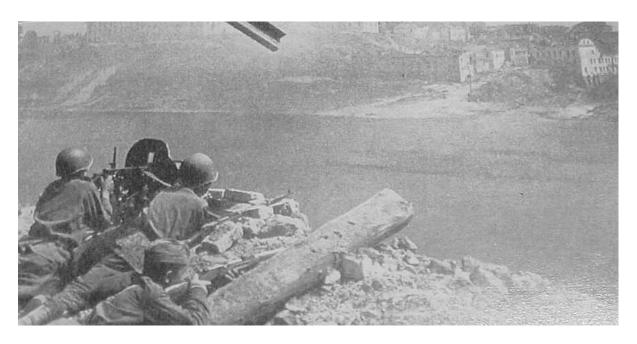

Red Army infantry attack supported by T-34 tank. Red Army woman-sniper in Belarus, July 1944

Belarusians have received over 300,000 combat Orders and Medals for the courage in the battles of WWII. 396 Belarusians received the USSR highest military reward - the golden star of the Hero of the Soviet Union. Four Belarusians - P.Ya. Halavachou, I.I.

Husakouski, S.F. Shutau and I.I.Yakubouski - were honored the title of the Hero of Soviet Union twice. 63 Belarusians became Cavaliers of Order of Glory of all three stages. Belarusian partisans and underground resistance members received 140,000 combat orders and medals during the WWII. 88 of them have become Heroes of the Soviet Union for heroic deeds.

Red Army soldiers liberating Belarusian City, 1944 **[Admin: Liberating, or getting ready for a Soviet occupation? My apologies, but Belorussians got what they deserved: the Soviet "worker's paradise," complete with a failed nuclear reactor at Chernobyl.]**

The USSR did not join Geneva convention in 1929. This convention was signed even by Germany in 1934. It is hard to guess what strange ideas governed Stalin - a dictator of the USSR at that time - in not signing the convention. The official pretext was that Geneva Convention does not go far enough in protecting POWs. But most likely Stalin did not expected anyone to become a prisoner. He treated all Soviet POWs as traitors. Because of this Red Army POWs were not supervised by International Red Cross or any international organizations and were treated by Nazis many times worse than Western allies. Millions of Soviet POWs and Belarusian forced laborers transported to Germany have paid for this Stalin's attitude with their suffering, tortures and often lives. Even worse, on their return to the USSR they were met with suspicion, NKVD interrogations, treated as traitors and deserters. Many of them served long times (25 years was the usual term) in Stalin's Gulags in Siberia.

German POWs marched by Red Army through Belarusian city. Four women partisans in liberated Minsk, 1944.

Different statistics are given for the number of WWII victims in Belarus. The situation is distorted by the secret Stalin's mass executions that occurred in Belarus few years before the war. It is now a common belief that every forth citizen of Belarus has perished in the World War II, reaching every third in some regions (Vitebsk region). Per capita Belarusians lost more lives during WWII than any other nation. The Nazi occupation forces were responsible for 2.2 Million Belarusians dead, while 380,000 young Belarusians were sent to Germany for forced labor - "Ostarbeiters". Some recent reports raise the number of Belarusians who perished in War to "3 million 650 thousand people, unlike the former 2.2 million. That is to say not every fourth inhabitant but almost 40% of the pre-war Belarusian population perished (considering the present-day borders of Belarus). "

The material losses of Belarus reached 75 Billion Rubles, which equals to 35 annual state budgets of Belarus of 1940. More than 209 cities and towns (out of 270 total), 9,000 villages were destroyed. 10,000 industrial enterprises were either destroyed or evacuated

to Germany. The capital of Belarus was ruined by bombings to such extent that for a while it was considered more reasonable to build it in a different place. But emotions took over reason and Minsk was re-built in it's old place, just as entire Belarus was. In about 5 years after war Belarus was rebuilt and Belarusian industry exceeded pre-war levels through an extraordinary effort of the youth delegated by other Soviet Republics of the USSR. Many of those delegates settled in Belarus and were quite disturbed by the rising nationalism in Belarus of the early 1990-ies. But amidst the hurricane of ethnic conflicts that swept Eastern Europe and former USSR republics in 1990-ies Belarus was the only former soviet republic that has never lost one human life to ethnic differences.

Over the centuries of our bloody history Belarusians have learned that Peace is a #1 priority of Life...

References used in this page:

- "Bolshevik System of Power in Belarus" ("Bal'shavickaia sistema ulady na Belarusi") by M. Kasciuk, Minsk - 2000, Publishing house "Ekaperspektyva". ISBN 985-6102-30-8
  - This is the main source used in this page. It gives perhaps most balanced picture on the WWII events and partisan struggle in Belarus.
- "Belarus. From Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe" by David R. Marples, New York - 1996, Publishing house "St. Martin's Press". ISBN 0-312-16181-6
- "Collaboration in the Holocaust. Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941-1944" by Martin Dean, New York - 2000, Publishing house "St. Martin's Press" ISBN 0-312-22056-1
- "Belorussia 1944. The Soviet General Staff Study" ed. David M. Glantz, Harold S. Orenstein, London-Portland, Or - 2001, Publishing house "Frank Cass" . ISBN 0-7146-5102-8

Related Links:

- La Resistenza Partigiana in Belarus (In Italian)
  This page covers partisan resistance in Belarus during WWII and has an interesting photogallery of histarical photos of WWII. The page is run by an Italian Chernobyl charity - Progetto Humus.
- History of Belarus @ World IQ
  Since the early days of the occupation, a powerful and increasingly well-coordinated partisan movement emerged. Hiding in the woods and swamps, the partisans inflicted heavy damage to German supply lines and communications, disrupting railway tracks, bridges, telegraph wires, attacking supply depots, fuel dumps and transports and ambushing German occupation soldiers. In the greatest partisan sabotage action of the entire Second World War, the so-called Osipovichi diversion of 30 July 1943, for instance four German trains with

supplies and Tiger tanks were destroyed. To fight Soviet partisan activity, the Germans had to withdraw considerable forces back behind their front line.

- "Partisan War" - an article by "Moscow Times" about recent Belarusian independent movie - "Mysterium Occupation":
  Occupied by various powers throughout its history, Belarus has plenty of painful memories connected with the World War II period, during which a quarter of its population died, and its aftermath, when thousands more were sent to Soviet labor camps on charges of collaboration. Indeed, much of the country's national mythology is tied to those experiences

- How many Belarusians perished during the war? an article at Open.by
  The ESC's report stresses that 810,091 military prisoners were killed and tortured to death on the Belarusian territory. We do not have to forget that the most part of them were not Belarusians or natives of the republic. For some reasons, for 54 years this number had been representing the considerable part of Belarus' demographic losses. It results, according to incomplete data, that demographic losses of Belarus during the war amounted to 3 million 650 thousand people, unlike the former 2.2 million. That is to say not every fourth inhabitant but almost 40% of the pre-war Belarusian population perished (considering the present-day borders of Belarus). Of course, this problem requires further investigation and it is too early to put the final point in this case.

- A Partisan's Story By Boris Kozinitz, Dokshitz-Tel-Aviv
  When we neared the monastery which was only 200 meters from the ghetto gate, we talked to Sagalchik about freeing the ghetto. According to the plan we were supposed to take from the ghetto only men vital to us: A doctor with his equipment; medicines; the dentist Simchelevitch and others, but with Sagalchik we talked about freeing the whole ghetto.

- WWII Pictures of Simon Wiesenthal Center.
  Bear in mind, when they say Russians they most likely refer to Belarusians.

- Republic-Partisan - an article in Russian in "Sovetskaia Rossia" about Partisan Movement in Belarus.
  This is already more modern interpretation of partisan war in Belarus, slightly departed from Soviet black&white doctrine

- Eurozine: Between brotherly Russia and peaceful Europe by Andrej Dynko
  The Belarusians consider peace to be the highest value. The notorious phrase, "Anything rather than war," is the basis of their political behavior. In the period between the 1950s and 1980s, Belarusian culture created a rich pacifist tradition. A humanistic message was contained in fine art masterpieces such as Mikhas Savitski's Partisan Madonna. Even mass culture could not avoid the anti-war theme. A lot of pacifistic songs appeared. "We want the peaceful sky not to know the fire of war... We wish friendship and sincere brotherly love to peoples," - these are lines from the unofficial anthem "Radzima Maya Darahaya" (My Dear Motherland), the tune of which serves as the station designator of Belarusian Radio. Literature, whose role was extremely important in society at that time, was the determining factor in creating the pacifistic sentiments. Essays by Ales Adamovich, novels by Vasil Bykaw and Ivan Shamyakin gained prominence for their deromanticization of warfare. Pacifism and tolerance were questioned by

none of the more or less significant authors of that time. The presence of this theme in works of art was even intrusive. The authorities tolerated that pacifism. In Soviet Belarusian culture, it was one of the manifestations of conformism, a substitute for open dissent, upon which nobody among the front-rank figures of Belarusian culture ventured. That pacifism was so popular and consistent that it became one of the cultural and political canons and turned into a consciousness-determining phenomenon. Pacifism harmonized with the historic memory of people and came from previous cultural traditions. Incidentally, the influence of high culture, in particular literature, on the formation of the Belarusians' consciousness in the Soviet era is frequently underestimated, above all because change has now occurred in the methods of mass communication. For it is no longer the written word but sight and sound that dominate the communications industry. Anyway, pacifism and the propagation of tolerance in the Belarusian culture of the Soviet era are worth of certain consideration. The replacement of the first lines of the state anthem, "We, Belarusians, with brotherly Russia," for "We, Belarusians, are peaceful people," which was initiated by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, on the surface looked like the result of search for a solution that would insult nobody. But this choice in fact reveals the intuition and opportunism generally characteristic of Lukashenka's political style.

URL: http://www.belarusguide.com/history1/WWII_partisan_resistance_in_Belarus.htm

Kurapaty near Mensk (Minsk) is one of the many places where mass executions of Belarusian civilians were carried out during the Stalin regime (1937 - 1941) by the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs - at the time this was the name of what is today the KGB). Until the late 80s the Soviet government carefully concealed this information from the people.

In 1988, thanks to the efforts of Z. Pazniak and J. Smyhaliou, the articles *"Kurapaty - the Road of Death"* and *"The Pines are murmuring above the grave"* were first published in the Belarusian newspaper *"Litaratura i Mastactva"* (Literature and Art) - both articles are reproduced in the following. These articles were the first to reveal the truth about how the **totalitarian Bolshevist system liquidated more than 200.000 innocent victims** in Kurapaty alone, without any investigation or trial. The articles include numerous reports by witnesses of the tragedy, they report about the archaeological excavations carried out by the authors themselves at the place where the victims were buried, and they draw conclusions about the significance of this tragedy.

Admin: It was likely more than 200K and the Nazi death figure significantly less, especially given that *thousands* of Belorussians were sent to Germany for labor. The Soviets were known for counting NKVD and other purge victims as war casualties...you know, to save face and fool the dumbed-down horde of Anglo-ridden garbage that swarmed throughout the Liberal-Democracies.

Further down on these pages you will find more about Kurapaty:

[Zianon Pazniak](#) - about the author of these articles

[Kurapaty - the Road of Death](#)

[Why do we commemorate Kurapaty?](#) or "Repression in Belarus' yesterday and today"

URL: http://www.belarusguide.com/as/law_pol/disas.html