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‘OUR GLORIOUS PAST’

Lukashenka‘s Belarus and the Great Patriotic War

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Cover picture: Entrance to the Khatyn Memorial Complex with the statue of Iosif Kaminsky, the only surviving resident, carrying the body of his dead child.
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For Katsuaki and Kae Fujiwara

PREFACE

The Great Patriotic War has been elevated to the pivotal event in both historical and present-day Belarus. Its omnipresence is evident. Every major town and village has its memorials and monuments. The giant obelisk in Victory Square dominates the center of the capital city. Approaching Minsk from the airport one encounters the Kurgan Slavy (Mound of Glory), and in the city there are a host of other structures that link the city to an event that ended almost seventy years ago. In the course of conducting research in and about Belarus over the past twenty years—I traveled there for the first time to attend a conference in Minsk in April 1992—the memory of the war was not something I could penetrate immediately. However, the question intrigued me enough that I decided I would pursue it further once my existing projects had been completed. Since that time, the war has grown larger in public memory and has become an integral part of state building. Simultaneously the official rhetoric has kept pace, eliminating other important episodes of the past or relegating them to relatively minor affairs. The war as a global event places Belarus on the map of Europe as a small but highly significant entity: the republic that to a certain degree saved the world from Fascist enslavement.

The development and progress of propaganda about the war has taken several different directions, most of which will be perused in the pages to follow. School textbooks issued in the Lukashenka era have refocused attention on the heroism of the war years. Replacing those works that appeared in the early 1990s, which had begun to question the Soviet perspectives, they have offered slightly diverse versions but in general concur on the significant points and on which events to highlight. State-run newspapers are instructed to feature commemorative events, portray the experiences of war veterans, and essentially to create memory about the war that can be instilled into the mindset of the general public, particularly schoolchildren. Increasingly this outlook signifies a reduction in gray areas and an all-out attack on efforts to investigate in more depth some of the more controversial events. Yet to state that a purely Soviet version of the war is still being circulated would be inaccurate. In fact, there are some oblique and overt criticisms of some attributes and actions of the Soviet regime, especially in regional newspapers. Rather, this is an exclusively Belarusian-manufactured version that serves to consolidate the official image of the state as a key player in events over which seemingly it had little control. It is thus subtle and at the same time disturbing, at least in the eyes of historians. The attention to the war in central and regional newspapers is quite extraordinary, particularly on commemorative occasions such as 22 June (the date of the German invasion of the USSR), 3 July (the national holiday since 1995, and the date Minsk was freed in 1944), and above all 9 May, the official Victory Day, at which time the president traditionally makes a speech to veterans and the public and on which the entire country must focus on the war for several days preceding the date and on the day itself. These newspaper items constitute narratives that denote the framework of the official version of the war.

In addition, the government has turned attention to historic sites, museums, and monuments. The recognition of Belarus as a key player in the war came relatively late during the Soviet period. Only in May 1965, was the defense of Brest recognized with the designation of "Brest Hero Fortress" by the Soviet authorities. And it was not until 1974 that Minsk became a Hero City, the thirtieth anniversary of its liberation from German rule. The reasons for this belated acknowledgement will be discussed below. The Lukashenka regime not only restored and renewed several historic sites, but it also created new ones, expending considerable funds on what it considered were essential memorials. In 2005, the Liniya Stalina (Stalin Line) historic site opened near the town of Zaslaŭje, some twenty kilometers outside Minsk, founded by the League of Afghan Veterans, but with the clear support of the government. At the time of writing, the huge Great Patriotic War Museum in Minsk has been entirely reconstructed at another site. The former building was in a dilapidated state and apparently inappropriate for what will surely be lavish celebrations for the 70th anniversary of the Victory in May 2015. Once again, from the description of the new museum, no expense is being spared, despite the country going through a period of severe recession as a result of the world economic crisis. At a time when Soviet monuments are looking dilapidated in the former Communist regimes of Eastern Europe—the Soviet Memorial close to the airport in Warsaw being a prime example—in Belarus they are replenished or built anew. Those local or regional authorities that failed to restore or maintain existing monuments could expect official admonishment and public criticism.

My goals in this study are several. First, it is to demonstrate the increasing prevalence of the war as an instrument of modern-day state and identity building, and how this is being achieved. How has the Lukashenka regime used official commemorations and public narratives to render the war the pivotal event in the construction of a the Belarusian state, a post-Soviet Belarus that has not cast off fully either the former image or Soviet-style propaganda? Second, the intention is to discuss the media's images and descriptions of the war as part of the memory of Belarusians, i.e. the extent to which the regime has propagated its views in the official state media. Third, and linked to the above is the more obvious task: to denote and analyze the distortions of events—and even fabrications—that have occurred and continue to be reiterated in a number of areas, but particularly on issues such as the defensive operations of 1941, the role of the partisans, the creation of Belarusian heroes, and the euphoric "Victory," achieved after battles on Belarusian territory before the Soviet surge to Berlin. Fourth, there is the rather more difficult question of the viability of state policy in this regard and the effectiveness of its propaganda. What will happen in Belarus when the last veterans have died? How does such propaganda affect relations with foreign states, especially Russia, where the war years have also been considered sacrosanct in official memory and in which inevitably it is Russia and the Red Army that play the pivotal role? And how does Belarus deal with its anti-Soviet component, those who freely collaborated with the Germans and attempted to establish the Belarusian National Council in the latter part of the war and those who are termed "historical revisionists" today?

In any study of popular narratives of an event, the question arises of the "residue" of detail that emerges. This was indeed a quandary. If one is focusing on popular narratives then the quest for historical truth is usually the first casualty. One cannot provide both equally. But at the same time the stories and myths that are encountered cannot always be dismissed outright as state propaganda. They often contain fascinating capsules of real events. In most cases there is no reason to doubt that the narrator—most often a war veteran—believes what he is saying. Some of the memories are very vivid. So I have taken the liberty at times of including some of the stories in greater detail than might seem warranted. They add to the myths but also they help to provide a fuller picture of the terrible war years in this republic and why such narratives can be influential.

A second question surfaced immediately: how does one deal with a republic that the invading forces did not recognize as an entity and in fact divided up between several states in arbitrary fashion? There was no single area called Belarus during the war. Here my inclination was to follow the narratives, which never call into question the continued existence of the republic from its prewar to postwar structure, with the implicit deduction that it never disappeared and that the residents there acted patriotically and fought for Belarus as a republic as well as for the survival of the Soviet Union. In other words one is looking at the war years, as does the

Lukashenka regime, from the perspective of the modern state, as well as one that existed fleetingly in its present form in the period September 1939 to June 1941. It is illusory, but then so is much else about these portrayals.

In any study on memory that makes use of narratives, there arises the issue of selection. Which sources should be perused and why? My goal was not to ascertain the most accurate version of events—given the current availability of the needed archives in both Minsk and Moscow that might have been impossible—but the prevailing one, the one that receives official acclaim and sanction and is highlighted at public events, i.e. what message have citizens of Belarus been hearing? My sense was that this could be best encapsulated in the main presidential newspaper, *SB-Belarus Segodnya* (originally *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*), which has the widest circulation in the country, as well as the newspaper of the Ministry of Defense, *Belorusskaya Voennaya Gazeta*. Both these newspapers have devoted extraordinary attention to the war. For example, in 2009 *SB Belarus Segodnya* introduced a new series entitled "The most memorable day of the war" that lasted for several weeks.

For a regional view, the focus was mainly on *Vecherniy Brest*, which was particularly useful as being the organ of the region first invaded by the Germans as well as the location of the legendary Brest Hero Fortress. It is also much freer from state supervision of content. I used a wide variety of other newspapers, albeit not always in the same depth. In terms of the period covered, the focus was on the most recent period, from 2008 to 2010, though some articles from 2011 onward were also added. The book cites the main opposition newspaper, *Narodnaya Volya*, as an example of historical revisionism in running a series of articles about a small village during wartime in the spring of 2010, based on a book by a former serviceman in the Armed Forces, Illia Kopyl. In general, however concentration was on official rather than dissenting voices because it was necessary to show at length the story that is being disseminated among most residents of Belarus.

The dates 2008-2010 were deliberately chosen for another reason. The year 2008 was taken as a standard or typical year in the third term of Lukashenka. But 2009 and 2010 were special years. The year 2009 had been earmarked for high-level commemoration of the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus from the German occupation, and especially the freeing of the capital city, Minsk, on 3 July 1944, now the second major day in the annual calendar. And 9 May 2010 denoted the 65th anniversary of the Victory, which the authorities opted to celebrate as the most important single date in the history of the independent state of Belarus. Perhaps the reasoning was that many veterans would not live to see the 70th anniversary in 2015, and certainly not the 75th in 2020. Thus 9 May 2010 might have been the last time that the Lukashenka regime could celebrate the Victory with a parade of its original participants. In 2010, also, the presidential election campaign had begun (the elections were held on 19 December), hence the official focus on the war highlighted a subject that the regime believed most of the electorate would regard favorably and portray the president in the best possible light. Thus the focus seemed merited, though it also begged the question: what happens in the future? How can a celebration on such a scale be superseded, and with what would the regime replace the usual march of war heroes through the streets of central Minsk?

In preparing this book, I visited almost all the major historic sites, and some on several occasions: the Brest Hero Fortress and Memorial Complex, the Stalin Line, the Chatyń (Khatyn) Memorial, the State Museum of the Great Patriotic War (in its older location in Kastryčnickaja Square—it was being relocated at the time of writing), the Mound of Glory, and many monuments and memorials in Viciebsk, Mahilioŭ, Hrodna, Polack, and smaller towns. I also spent considerable time in the National Library of Belarus, the main repository for newspapers, about half of which were not available on line other than the current year. Over several years I accumulated a variety of school textbooks and examination questions at various grade levels, as well as general histories of Belarus or the Great Patriotic War specifically. I went to a large number of conferences and consulted with Belarusian intellectuals and activists, many of which had their own views on the war years and interpretations thereof. These meetings and interactions compel me to make a couple of qualifications about the nature of this study.

First, though the focus is on the deployment of the war as propaganda geared toward the goals of a notably harsh authoritarian government, any scholar studying the impact of these events in Belarus must at times be overawed by the sheer scale of the suffering and sacrifice. Belarus was occupied for longer than almost any other part of the Soviet Union. Its casualties proportionally were probably the highest of all nations (or quasi-nations) taking part in the war, though considerably less than stated officially, as will be shown below. There is no intention herein to belittle the sacrifices made or the scale of human losses. However, what distinguishes the creation of memory by the Belarusian authorities is the way an authentic foundation theme is distorted, generally because the narrative necessitates the primacy of Belarus in the story, but also because of the need to accentuate the glorious triumph and, to a lesser extent, the suffering inflicted on the republic. Notably absent in almost every case is a clear analysis of the impact of the preceding period: the Stalin Purges in the republic and the systematic eradication of national life and culture, as well as the fates that befell the defenders and population of Belarus after the war. That comment leads to the second proviso.

These narratives, with some notable exceptions such as school textbooks and coffee table books, are overwhelmingly in the Russian language, which is the chosen form of address by the state authorities. Most of the so-called revisionist narratives are in Belarusian, creating the impression that the native tongue is the language of subversion, questioning the official narrative and heroic traditions. Moreover, in the chapter on creation of heroes, it is notable that many are non-Belarusians: other ethnic minorities operating in Belarus during the war or living there today; and some of the events described took place outside the present borders of the republic. Thus it became increasingly difficult to discern ethnic Belarusians from other “heroes” and raised the problem of place and human names, names of significant battles, and other questions. Russian has been one of the state languages of the Republic of Belarus since the summer of 1995, albeit through the device of an ambiguous national referendum, and it remains the language spoken by the majority of the population in Belarus.

Conversely, an increasing number of young people are insistent upon using their native language, and in some cases resisting fiercely the imposition of Russian as a mother tongue. Many belong to that amorphous group known as “the opposition.” But for a foreign researcher working on the topic of the war, where what is happening in Leningrad, Stalingrad, or Smolensk might be as significant as what is happening in Orša or Minsk, the focus on the “international” nature of the war seems reasonable. It is also a deliberate part of official policy to highlight the importance of the former Soviet Union. That is why also, there have been no serious inroads into the process of de-Stalinization in Belarus; in fact the reverse is the case. The Stalin era, and especially the tragic 1930s, is officially forgotten in terms of the atrocities that permeated the decade, hard though it may be to comprehend how a new nation can be constructed after the elimination of its national elite, language, and culture. The Lukashenka regime has decided and prefers to build a new state (rather than nation), based on a foreign language and firm adherence to the Soviet past, but with a a history that focuses on the role of Belarusians alongside and in harmony with other nations, and particularly Russians.

The Introduction provides the main highlights of the history of independent Belarus and how and when it started to focus on the war years in great depth. I decided not to attempt to provide a comprehensive history of Belarusian lands from earliest times to the present. There are several such works in Belarusian and Russian, as well as in English, which are readily available to the general reader.[1] Nor did I deem it necessary to offer a detailed summary of events prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, the most significant of which for Belarus was the uniting of western and eastern regions (17 September 1939) as a result of the Nazi-Soviet partition of Poland. On the other hand, since this book has the words "Lukashenka's Belarus" in the title it seemed imperative to analyze the path to power of the country's only president to date, and the means by which he has remained in office (Introduction). His name is closely identified with post-1994 Belarus and I have argued herein that the process of nation building is a very personal one, revolving around a small ruling elite with the president at the apex, and a singular interpretation of the past that focuses on the war years as the defining period for the modern state. One of the reasons for writing this book was precisely to explain why the Soviet period has been elevated above others, and why the war has become the most important rationale for state building and the maintenance in power of the current leadership, under the firm control of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who is not only the first elected president of Belarus, but also the most powerful leader to have emerged in the history of the republic.

Chapter One outlines the official interpretation of the start of the war, starting with its depiction in school textbooks (which I have cited in all the chapters that refer to specific periods of the war), and including the reunification of Belarusian lands in September 1939. Chapter Two looks at the German occupation, a topic that is somewhat neglected by official narratives, but is present in school textbooks. It includes the sensitive topics of Collaboration and the Holocaust. Chapter Three concerns the partisans, particularly their formation and campaigns, according to the official version of events. Chapter Four looks at the creation of Veteran Heroes and how they have been deified in official media. Chapter Five examines the time of liberation of Belarus in the summer of 1944, narratives on the Victory, and the march of the Red Army through Poland to Berlin. Chapter Six peruses and analyzes the use of commemorative objects: historical sites, monuments, and memorials, including the best known ones of Chatyń, the Brest Hero Fortress, and the Stalin Line.

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[1] See, for example, Abetsedarskaya (1997); Chirginov (2000); Ignatenko (1972-1975); Kosman (1979); Kovkel (2000); Kuznetsov (2000), Lubachko (1972); Picheta (2003); Rudkin (1997); Sahanovich (2001); Shtykhov (1977); Shymukovich (2009); and Vakar (1956).

Chapter Seven is devoted to "exhibiting the war" through non-material means: museum exhibits, conferences, displays, and commemorations. The latter part of the chapter devotes particular attention to the two key anniversaries: the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus in 1944 (3 July is the key date but there are several others); and the 65th anniversary of the Victory in May 1945. Chapter Eight is concerned with what government sources term "historical revisionism," which essentially denotes any attempts to change or reinterpret the official version of the war. Such people are designated traitors or disloyal elements that are trying to denigrate the sacrifice of those who died fighting Fascism. Overall one is struck by the coordination of these events and the clarity of the narratives, which present a straightforward and feasible version of the war though not one that corresponds with reality.

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David R. Marples
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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION OF NAMES

I have used Belarusian names for places and for personalities cited in the text that are either Belarusian-born, or else spent the greater part of their lives in the Republic of Belarus and are therefore considered to be locals. In the individual case of the city of Minsk, I have used the Russian form of the name since it is most familiar to international readers. I have used Russian names in the text for authors from Belarus, writing in Russian, since they are listed in that language in the Bibliography and it would be confusing to have two sets of names. Otherwise I have abided by the regulations of the “Decree of the State Committee for Property of the Republic of Belarus on changes and amendments to the Instructions for Transliteration of Geographical Names of the Republic of Belarus with words of the Latin Alphabet,” dated 18 June 2007. Thus the city on the border between Belarus and Russia is cited as Orša, rather than Vorsha. According to this system, accents are not applied to the names of personalities.

As far as Russian names are concerned, I decided to follow the diacritics-free system introduced in the Russian Federation for passports in 1997, even though it was discontinued in 2010—thus for example for the word for war, I have retained “voyna” rather than the current “voina.” One reason for my choices was that the 2007 Belarusian rules and 1997 Russian ones simplified earlier rules and have much in common, including the removal of the soft sign. In cases of direct quotations I have left the transliteration as it was in the original. I have also used the terms Region and District rather than the Soviet designations Oblast or Rayon. Lastly, I have included pagination in the Bibliography for those articles unavailable online.

INTRODUCTION: LUKASHENKA'S BELARUS

This book examines the depiction of the war years in contemporary Belarus, a state formed from the former Soviet Union in 1991, but with a lengthy history as part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Poland, and the Russian Empire, and a brief period of independence in 1918, after the Russian Revolutions of the previous year. Its focus is the presidency of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, in place since the summer of 1994, and at the time of writing approaching its second decade. In many respects, the Republic of Belarus was little different from other republics that emerged from the USSR's collapse. It had to start from the outset to define itself, establish state symbols, language, cultural and historical traditions, and self-image.

In the Soviet period, despite a brief time in the 1920s, when the newly formed republic—the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was its original name, but it had no clearly defined borders—enjoyed a brief cultural renaissance, its national identity remained unclear. In some ways, however, its position was quite privileged. As the third Slavic republic, after Russia and Ukraine, its party leader usually had a seat in the Soviet Politburo in the Kremlin. It had gained a reputation as an industrial center, famous for its tractors and machine tools, and some saw it as a model for the socialist system. All three Slavic republics shared a common memory of the Second World War and in the case of Belarus and Russia there was a general consensus that the wartime victory, as well as the suffering incurred, justified and legitimized Soviet rule, which paved the way for the independent states that followed in 1991.

There is little to suggest any overt disaffection between Moscow and the BSSR in terms of the portrayal of the partisan struggle, though it became accentuated under the former partisan leader Masherau (1965-1980), who reportedly had little time for the sort of corrupt practices and cronyism manifest in the Kremlin, earning him for this and other reasons the opprobrium of leader of the CC CPSU, Leonid Brezhnev by the late 1970s.

Earlier, when K.T. Mazurau was the party leader of the BSSR (1956-65), even more tension had existed, since the Khrushchev leadership removed many of the more hardline Stalinist officials from office. P.K. Panamarenka, the Belarusian party and partisan leader, for example, lost his positions in the leadership and was dispatched as Soviet ambassador to India, Nepal, and the Netherlands. But with Brezhnev in office from 1964, the Belarusian emphasis on this facet of the war, irritations with Masherau aside, suited the Soviet leadership, since it coincided with a period in which it was focusing heavily on the war and its renewal as the most important event of the Soviet past. Monument building and the creation of memorials were part of a new campaign to glorify the war. For a time it seemed that this resurrection of past glories might see the full resurrection of Stalin, though that did not happen. The de-Stalinization program that had characterized the Khrushchev period, however, ended abruptly.

Old suspicions that had lingered from the late Stalin years about Belarusian loyalty during the period of occupation were finally removed in 1974 when Minsk attained the status of Hero City, and the recognition of the courage with which Belarus had faced its ordeals seemed to be recognized. It was even possible now to discuss the role of the underground, the resistance of which was added to that of the partisans in the category of a valiant struggle. Implicitly there were some contradictions, though they were not expressed openly. In 1965, Panamarenka, one of the leaders of the central administration of the partisans, published his account of the war years. Omitted from his text was any mention of the mass arrests of suspected collaborators in the Minsk underground that he ordered during the war and in the early postwar period, during which thousands were dispatched to concentration camps, often for simply having survived under the occupation regime—in Stalin's eyes, obvious evidence of collaboration. In this respect, under the leadership of Masherau, the BSSR acquired a more important status as one of the key areas of the German-Soviet war and free from the guilt that had riddled its past.

Masherau in particular was a popular leader, almost priest-like in his Communist piety and unusually for this period part of a republican leadership team that appeared to be completely free from corruption. By the late 1970s when the gerontocracy in Moscow indulged in awarding each other medals and awards, the Belarusian leader seemed to live in a different world. Under his leadership, Belarus became the "Republic," and republican movie studios endlessly showed films about the partisan struggle. According to one scholar, it was also Masherau who concocted the original myth that one in four inhabitants of Belarus died during the war, in a speech of 8 May 1965 (the issue will be discussed in more depth below).[1] Masherau died in a car crash in October 1980, bringing a period of national mourning to the republic.

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[1] Kotljarchuk (2013), 10.

But even the devoutly Communist republic was not immune to the impact of the Perestroika period and the de-Stalinization campaign initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union that reached a peak in 1988-89. It rehabilitated many purge victims, and inspired the emergence of an opposition group, the Belarusian Popular Front, which faced an uphill battle, but managed to orient the republic in a different direction: one that examined the impact of the Stalin Purges in Belarus and the role of the NKVD, focused on the plight of the Belarusian language and culture, and demanded more attention to the ramifications of the 1986 nuclear accident at Chernobyl on Belarusian territory. The most emotional event was the rediscovery by Pazniak and others of the mass burial site at Kurapaty in the suburbs of Minsk, where the NKVD had executed tens of thousands of people in the period between 1937 and 1941.[2] The Popular Front (BPF) elected twenty-seven deputies to the parliament (Supreme Soviet of the 15th Session) in 1990—seven other opposition MPs also gained seats in that assembly, but the Communists maintained a strong majority. The BPF held its founding congress in Vilnius to avoid the wrath of the party leaders, but nonetheless its impact was considerable. In 1991, the name of the republic was changed from the BSSR to the Republic of Belarus.

Still, in 1990-91 it was very unclear which direction Belarus would take. In April 1991, there may have been as many as 100,000 people demonstrating against the Soviet authorities in the center of Minsk, when workers went on strike to protest rising prices. A year earlier, Belarusian had been declared the state language of the republic. Stanislau Shushkevich, an enlightened and humanitarian physicist, took on the key role of Chairman of the Parliament as Belarus embraced independence. The Belarusian Popular Front appeared, like the Ukrainian Rukh, to be the main force for change. There was a possibility that the new republic would emerge as a nation under construction with its own language and new directions. Insofar as this new nation had a history and national symbols, they were the white-red-white national flag and the symbol of the Pahonia, knight on horseback against a red background. The Pahonia earlier was the state emblem of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The short-lived Belarusian National Republic of 1918 used the same symbol. But the collaborationist Belarusian Central Council under Nazi rule also used it during the war, before its resurrection, first by the Popular Front and then by the independent Republic of Belarus in 1991. The flag and symbol linked the new republic to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and symbolized a pro-European and anti-Soviet orientation.

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[2] I studied this issue during my first visits to Belarus. See Marples (1994), 513-23.

The Lukashenka regime and its supporters who remained very much pro-Soviet loathed the flag and state symbols and removed them at the first opportunity in a referendum of May 1995, having associated them in official media with collaboration and the German occupation. Lukashenka was able to achieve such a step by raising the fears of the population against a number of hostile forces: Westernization, the imposition of a market economy and shock therapy that had impoverished many people in Russia, a yearning for past stability, and the formation of a "social contract" with the population that included regular wages and pensions, subsidies for factories, and state-controlled industries. In place of the General Secretary of the CC CPSU there was now the President. Even the KGB remained in place.

The years 1991 to early 1994 were a difficult time. The economy unraveled, mainly because it had been so closely centered on links with Russia and other Soviet republics. Shushkevich struggled to make an impact because he had no backing in the parliament. One of his fiercest rivals by 1994 was the leader of the Popular Front, Pazniak. There was a petition for new elections to the parliament. Kebich insisted on pushing through a military and security union with Russia. Finally in 1994, Belarus introduced its own Constitution, which stipulated that there would be presidential elections shortly afterward to elect a president who would be responsible to the parliament in a system of joint power. In this election for the first time many residents of Belarus became acquainted with the name of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, though he already had headed a committee to combat corruption in the parliament that led to the removal of Shushkevich in January 1994—the charges appeared contrived. He was an outsider. Kebich was the prohibitive favorite, but chose to target Pazniak.

The 1994 elections, and their second round, which brought an overwhelming victory for Lukashenka, were the most democratic ever held in Belarus. The electorate opted for the newcomer. People feared instability and the unknown. After the turmoil of the late Soviet years and the economic downturn that followed the disintegration of the USSR, the Belarusian electorate chose Lukashenka in the summer of 1994 partly on his record as head of the anti-corruption commission in the parliament, but also because he seemed to evoke nostalgia for the "heroic days" of the Soviet past and had promised to restore close ties with the closest neighbor Russia. Perhaps the underlying wish in the republic was for another

Masherau. Essentially the electorate had chosen the most Soviet of all the candidates, though this trait may not have been so evident at the time. The new president was also youthful, turning forty just after the election, and he portrayed himself from the outset as a lover of sport and physically fit.

Following the elections of July 1994, Lukashenka managed to stay in office through a series of machinations: amending the Constitution to curtail the authority of parliament; introducing three national referendums in order to enhance his powers and remain in office over his allotted time—in 1995 he succeeded in replacing the national flag with one close to the Soviet version, and in 1996 he replaced the official national day of 27 July with one commemorating the Soviet liberation of Minsk on 3 July 1944—harassing and persecuting his enemies; manipulating votes and electoral procedures; and not least controlling the state media so that the official version of the history of Belarus in the Great Patriotic War was in line with his own and which perceives the current president not only as the "defender of the faith" against hostile revisionists, but also as the natural inheritor of the mantle of the brave warriors of the past in "the Partisan Republic."[3] Under Lukashenka, Belarus has developed what it terms "patriotic education" about the war in the hope that future generations will continue to commemorate it once the last group of veterans has passed away. Although such a campaign represents a form of state propaganda, it contains some substance and moreover it encapsulated what most residents of Belarus had come to believe by the mid-1990s, namely that the war affected the republic more than any other theater of war in 1941-45, in terms of losses, damage to and destruction of towns, villages, industries, and collective farms, and suffering to families. There is no reason to disbelieve that such sentiments were also felt by the country's first and, to date, only president, who was born shortly afterward in 1954. But the use of the war as a form of state and identity building has taken matters to a new level.

It is possible that initially Lukashenka wished to reestablish the USSR, or at least a union state with Russia since its historical pathway in the modern period was largely the same and ethnically there were no discernible differences between the two peoples. That is essentially how he came to power: the electorate was afloat and lost, deeply regretting the empire's collapse and the loss of ties with neighbors, relatives, and friends across the border and Lukashenka promised to bring the two states together again. In 1994, many felt that the opposition Belarusian Popular Front was pushing national development too far, and that the 1990 declaration of Belarusian as the only state language—if ever brought to full fruition—would make life very difficult for the majority that spoke primarily Russian, and included a significant number of monolingual Russophones. But the Union State, always a vague and unclear institution as the two sides wrangled over the draft treaty, became a paper entity with the resignation of Russian president Boris Yeltsin at the end of 1999, and the rise to power of Vladimir Putin in Russia. Putin was the antithesis of his predecessor: sour-faced, rational, sober, and completely ruthless in pursuing his goals. To Putin, it was illogical to share power with his counterpart in Minsk, which was no more than a regional center and Belarus a western outpost of the former empire, important only for geostrategic reasons as a border republic or for the transit of Russian oil and gas to the West. It could be part of the new Russia but it could not have equal rights of decision-making. There could never be a Union State in which the Vice-President, Lukashenka, would eventually succeed Putin and rule a country that bordered Poland in the west and the Pacific Ocean in the east. That strategy, if it existed, was no longer plausible after 2002.

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[3] Two recent works highlighting the years of Lukashenka are Wilson (2011) and Bennett (2011).

Lukashenka decided to focus instead on the past. Along with his relatively small circle of acolytes, he came up with a new idea, namely to promote the concept of the Republic of Belarus as an independent state and, implicitly, future nation. It could not, however, be the sort of state envisaged by the exiled Pazniak (who left Belarus in 1996), which is to say, one based on national language and culture, Western-oriented, and moving away from Soviet historical traditions. Rather the Belarus would be built on what existed already, namely the remnants of its late Soviet edifice, re-pieced together into a form comprehensible to residents of the republic. The troublesome parts of the past would be omitted, as would the notion of a new entity based on some of the principles of the medieval and early modern past and historical links with Lithuania and Poland. Rather the emphasis would be on the USSR, which was convenient in the sense that the Russian Federation, the natural ally, could be depicted as betraying its natural principles in refusing to work together with Belarus in a fraternal manner. Russia had already taken some lamentable steps, such as raising the prices of exported gas and oil to Belarus to world levels rather than the subsidized prices of the past. But both were loyal to the Soviet traditions, and what would be built in the future would be based closely on the Soviet model, with one leader and a clearly defined historical root: the Great Patriotic War.

Most sources concur that the decisive turning point, when Lukashenka resolved to make the war the defining issue of his presidency as well as that of the state being built, was 2003. In this year, the authorities decreed that all high schools and universities must teach the history of the Great Patriotic War as one of their obligatory subjects.[4] Ironically in taking such a step, one of the goals of which was to distance Belarus from Russia and forge an individual path, the president was in fact emulating what Russian president Putin had done just three years earlier, which in the words of Elizabeth Wood was "creating an image that aligns him personally with the fate of the country." She takes the argument further, and her comments about Putin could be applied equally to Lukashenka without qualification:

> …by making World War II the central historical event of the twentieth century, Putin and his handlers have chosen an event of mythic proportions that underlines the unity and coherence of the nation, gives it legitimacy and status as a world power. It functions precisely as a myth is supposed to function, creating a moment that is simultaneously timeless and rooted in time, that involves suffering and redemption, trauma and recovery from the trauma, creation of community, and a narrative way to understand Russia's ongoing challenges.[5]

Aside from the allusion to "status as a world power," the comments can be applied easily to Belarus and its focus on the war, and the key word is "legitimacy." Like many dictatorships or quasi-dictatorships, the Lukashenka regime wishes to legitimize itself through identification with an event that has affected the lives of almost all current residents through their ancestors. It is part of living memory. Unlike Putin, his counterpart in Moscow, Lukashenka does not have close relatives who died during the German occupation. So instead he has adopted the role of a father figure or "batka," which one scholar depicts as a "paternalistic patriarch."[6]

In May 2005, on the sixtieth anniversary of the victory over Germany, the president caused considerable surprise in his capital city of Minsk by deciding, without any prior discussion or agreement with the City Council, to rename several streets, most importantly those of the two main ones,

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[4] Bohdan (2010).

[5] Wood (2011), 174.

[6] Andrew Wilson, in an interview about his book *Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe* (Wilson, 2011). See http://yalebooks.wordpress.com/2011/10/31/author-article-by-andrew-wilson-why-i-wrote-about-belarus-the-last-european-dictatorship/ (Accessed 7 April 2013).

Skaryna Avenue and Masherau Avenue (Praspekt Masherava). They were renamed respectively as Independence Avenue and Avenue of the Victors,[7] the latter obviously in deference to the Great Patriotic War. The original names of the streets were hardly insignificant: Frantsysk Skaryna was one of the first publishers to use the Cyrillic script in the early 16th century (including for a translation of the Bible) and regarded as the founder of the modern Belarusian language. His statue stands outside the modern National Library in the east of the city. Masherau, as noted, was the popular former party leader and partisan hero. Lukashenka awarded both original names to more minor streets. Perhaps the change from Skaryna Avenue was comprehensible given his focus on the war, but why would he have demoted the name of Masherau? The answer perhaps was that he wished to undermine the cult status of Masherau, since the late party secretary was a difficult figure to surpass in terms of national standing. Moreover Masherau's daughter at that time was a political activist who had expressed intentions of running against Lukashenka in the presidential elections of 2006 (she subsequently withdrew from the contest). But the name changes also reflected the president's obsession with the war and its identification with the modern state of Belarus.

Writing in this same year, a time when the commemoration of the war was taken to a higher level on the 60th anniversary of the "Victory" (always capitalized), the late political scientist Vitali Silitski published an article called "The Partisan Reality Show," which captured the essence of the frenetic program to build, in his words, a "Soviet Belarusian nation." Having restored the old state symbols and changed the day marking independence, Lukashenka added, in Silitski's view a "big-fingered pinch of Stalinism," illustrated by the 3 July celebrations with street fairs and massive military parade, and the president himself in the uniform of a generalissimo, albeit without a military rank designated. At the same time the movie company Partisan Films was revived and given a mandate to produce more war movies. In the school curriculum, the authorities introduced a compulsory course entitled "The Role of the Belarusian People in the Great Patriotic War." Existing textbooks, which had replaced the old Soviet era ones, were scrapped and banned from both schools and higher educational institutes. Veterans returned to prominence and played a key part in deciding the content of the new textbooks. Lukashenka also used his own think tank, "the Institute of Social and Political Studies of the Presidential Administration," which perceived devotion to the war as a form of political struggle to unmask opponents and the "lies" told by Western scholars about the years of conflict. Above all, as Silitski aptly put it, the rule of Lukashenka became "the sole guardian of the tradition of the Great Victory anywhere in the post-Soviet space."[8]

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[7] http://www.sb.by/post/43468/ (Accessed 1 August 2012).

According to this same author, there were two issues not subject to any debate. The first was the "righteousness" of Stalin's regime, meaning that none of Stalin's crimes could be addressed or even admitted. In this regard, the Nazi-Soviet Pact could not be criticized as a catalyst of the Second World War. The second issue was the "causes and impact" of the partisan war, even though many Belarusians were well aware that the guerrillas hiding in the forests were "no angels." There were a number of new works on partisans in the early period of independence after 1991, with new assessments of topics like partisan attacks on villages to provoke German retribution and harsh measures taken by NKVD units against villagers. Silitski notes there were some serious challenges to the official version of the war from 1985. One was the movie *Idi i smotri* (Come and See), scripted by Ales Adamovich, which depicted the horror of the Chatyń (Khatyn) massacre, but was denounced by veterans and Communists for its pacifism and humanism, and showing an atrocity without the attendant Soviet patriotism and class warfare. Both Adamovich and his compatriot Vasil Bykau, who wrote many books on the war, offended the Lukashenka regime because they never condoned Stalinism, and both ended up living in exile in their later years.[9] The head of Lukashenka's Presidential Administration placed a ban on the publications of Bykau. In 2004, a low-budget film called *Okkupatsiya Misterii* (Occupation Mysterium, director: Andrej Kudinenka) showed the war from the people's perspective, beset by the Germans on one side and the partisans on the other, minimizing the differences between those who had to make tough choices: some ending up in the partisans, others in the auxiliary police. Most people, it suggested, simply wanted to live a normal life, but the unprecedented circumstances forced them to take sides.[10]

Such interpretations are unacceptable in Lukashenka's Belarus, where the war is so prominent in media and society that it remains a current news item. As events become politicized, so also those who seek to offer new and original interpretations are targeted as subversives who are trying to rewrite—i.e. falsify—history. For the most part, they can also be linked to the opposition, a vague term that signals anyone who opposes

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[8] Silitski (2005), 1-4.

[9] On Bykau, see Gimpelevich (2005).

[10] Silitski (2005), 5-7. See also Lewis (2011).