
History Teaching In Belarus: Between Europe And Russia

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Keywords:

Belarus, Europe History, Historiography, Education, Identity, Russia, Soviet [USSR] and post Soviet period

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Introduction

The present Belarusian historiography can be divided into two major schools: Soviet and nationalist. Currently the Soviet view of history dominates, with the support of the political authorities. The education system aims to transmit the official Soviet interpretation of history and to legitimise links with Russia and its specific authoritarian political system.

The history of history teaching in post-Soviet Belarus is extremely complex. The “most Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)” (Karbalevitch, 1999), Belarus, has fully adopted the interpretation of both the Soviets and today’s political authorities on the fundamental role played during the Soviet period in the construction of the Belarusian history narrative, memory, national identity and political system.

History teaching is a tool for identity building and for legitimising geo-political strategy. Identity building, with reference to history, is built on the frontier between ‘us’ and ‘the other’. For official identity discourse, the Soviet past and the links with Russia are fundamental elements. Historical links with Europe are subordinate and European neighbours of Belarus, Poland and the Baltic



Belorussia and her neighbours

countries, are represented as different and the 'significant other' for Belarusian identity, as a proof of the authoritarian confinement of the country.

The Context of Belarusian history and historiography.

The history of Belarus, situated at the crossroads of countries and cultural blocs (the Eastern or Eurasian bloc represented by Russia and the Western European bloc represented by Poland) is a history of wars and invasions. Until the 20th century, the lands of present-day Belarus belonged to several state formations [polities-jurisdictions] such as the Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire.

In March 1918, the first Belarusian state was created. Belarus declared independence as the Belarusian Popular Republic, succeeded by the Socialist Soviet Republic of Byelorussia in January 1919. Belarus was devastated in the Second World War. The republic was considerably redeveloped in the post-war years. In 1945, Belarus became a founding member of the United Nations. The Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus declared its sovereignty on 27 July 1990, and

during the period of the dissolution of the USSR Belarus declared independence on 25 August 1991.

In order to clarify the conflicts between major history and identity paradigms in Belarus, the general context of current Belarusian historiography should be analysed. The present Belarusian historiography can be divided into two major discourses; a Soviet and a nationalist discourse. In this configuration, the Soviet view of history dominates with the support of the political authorities, which have monopolised the majority of social sources. Nationalist interpretation of the history of Belarus is pushed to the margins of the system, and its social impact is extremely limited.

The pre-eminence of Soviet historiography over other discourses in Belarus is an exception in the post-Soviet bloc. According to numerous research projects devoted to historical discourse and history teaching in the post-Soviet countries, Belarus is the only country, which does not describe relations with Russia and the Soviet period in negative terms. Belarus is the only former republic of the USSR, which experienced a turning point in its historiography in the mid-1990s. The historical narrative of Belarus at the time of Perestroika and independence (1985–1991) Perestroika means literally re-building, radical reconstruction of the political, social, economic system) was formed in opposition to Soviet and Russian imperial discourse, the mid-1990s marked a return to a Soviet-style, Russian-orientated and totalitarian interpretation of history.

TABLE 1. The essential periods of development of the Belarusian people

Period Characteristics	Soviet time (1919–1985)	Perestroika and independence (1986-1994)	Current period (starting from 1994)
Ideology, conceptions of history	Marxism-Leninism, historical materialism	Nationalism	Search for a new state ideology, neo-Soviet trends
Economic context	Planned economy, the only form of property – state property, relative general well-being	Chaos, economic crisis, beginning of privatization, poverty	Return of Soviet methods of economic management, relative economic stability
Social conditions (researchers and teachers)	Social prestige of the academic and teaching professions, stimulating remuneration of these professions	Loss of prestige, very modest remuneration for research	Modest return of prestige, attempts to create favourable conditions for researchers and teachers
Political situation	Totalitarian control of the State on all spheres of public and private life	Political liberalization, pluralism	Return of state control, authoritarianism

To illustrate social changes reflected in education, the following textbooks were selected from each period (Soviet, perestroika, current period).

TABLE 2. A selection of textbooks from the three periods: 1919 to the present

Period	Auteur	Title	City, edition, year, number of pages	Tirage	Ideology
Period I Soviet Time	Laurentsii Abetsadarski	<i>History of the Soviet Socialist Republic. 10th Grade</i> ¹	Minsk, Popular Instruction, 1968, 282 pages	9000	Marxism-Leninism, historical materialism, denial of independent Belarusian history
Period II Perestroika independence	Pavel Loika	<i>History of Belarus. 8th grade</i> ²	Minsk, Popular Instruction, 1993, 209 pages	196000	Search for independence from Russia and for European roots in history
	Ouladzimir Sidartsou, Vital' Famine	<i>History of Belarus. 9th grade</i> ³	Minsk, Popular Instruction, 1993, 158 pages	195000	
Period III (after 1994)	Ouladzimir Sosna, Sviatlana Marozava, Siarguei Panou	History of Belarus. 8th grade	Minsk, Minsk State University, 2005, 167 pages	136040	Return of Soviet methods of teaching, historical links with Russia, glorification of the soviet past
	Pavel Loika	History of Belarus. 7th grade ⁴	Minsk, Minsk State University, 2004, 219 pages	163500	
	Ouladzimir Sidartsou, Siarguei Panou	History of Belarus. 9th grade	Minsk, Minsk State University, 2005, 216 pages	7700	
	Yaouguen Novik	History of Belarus. 11th grade ⁵	Minsk, Popular Instruction, 2000, 205 pages	189200	
	Yakov Trechtchenok	History of Belarus. 11th grade	<i>Moguilev</i> , Moguilev University, 2003.		

Soviet-style, Russian-orientated and totalitarian interpretation of history

In Belarus, a former republic of the U.S.S.R., the construction of a national identity runs parallel to historiographical construction and history teaching. The early history of the Belarusian lands dates back to the late nineteenth century when centrifugal tendencies begin to undermine the Russian Empire, sparking the beginnings of interest in this particular province. The first book on the history of the Belarusian land, *An Overview of the History of Belarus*, by Vaclau Laustouski was published in 1910. The first Belarusian national states: the Popular Republic of Belarus and the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus (SSRB) were created in 1918 and 1919 respectively.

In Soviet historiography, the history of Belarus begins only in 1917 and omits the short-lived Belarusian Popular Republic created in 1918, which existed only for some months. The Belarusian people were able to consolidate and begin its existence as a nation state only through the

1 16th years students 2 14th years students 3 15th years students
4 13th years students 5 17th years students

framework offered by the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), a republic of the USSR created in January 1918. The Belarusian government is a Soviet creation and the Belarusian people is primarily a Soviet people. The history of Belarus is the history of the BSSR.

In Soviet times, the history of Belarus did not exist, either as an autonomous academic discipline or as a school subject. The first and only school textbook on the History of the RSSB was published in 1960 in Russian and went through 11 editions, remaining the only educational support on the subject until Perestroika. The number of books edited was 9000 copies (for a country with 9,000,000 citizens), which is an indication of the minor place accorded to the history of Belarus as a school discipline during the Soviet period. The textbook was for use with the last class of general secondary school (10th grade).

History teaching in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic prescribed the denial of an independent Belarus and an independent Belarusian history. The history of Belarus was merged into Soviet history. Identity politics transmitted through history teaching aimed at the construction of a Soviet identity above all other identities. The following sentences from the only history textbook on Belarus published during the Soviet period are an illustration of the extent to which Belarusian history was viewed as no more than a constituent part of Soviet history, in as much as a fundamental tenet of Soviet historiography was its articulation of the Second World War as the central event in the history of the USSR: 'From the first days of the occupation, workers in Soviet Belarus began the People's War. Brigades of partisans were created everywhere. Their number increased daily. The organizer and leader of the partisan movement was the Communist Party' (Abetsadarski, 1968). The semantic and stylistic construction of the text is revealing. Short sentences and a dogmatic tone meet the objectives of Soviet propaganda: to point out that the information provided by the textbooks is an ultimate and indisputable truth, despite the fact that objective criticisms of these postulates were made by nationalist historians at the time.

History teaching in the BSSR became a propaganda tool underlining the superiority of the Soviet Communist model as against the Western capitalist model. History as an academic discipline was itself used as an important tool in the construction and legitimization of the Soviet totalitarian State, claiming a specific place for it in world politics. The victory in the Second World War was presented as a proof of the superiority of Soviet society over Western society.

Perestroika, independence, search for democracy and European roots in history

Perestroika, 1985–1991 In the post-Soviet bloc, the period known as 'Perestroika' (1985–1991) was a crucial moment for the building of states and their national identities. New political parties appeared to challenge the political monopoly of the Communist party of the USSR, claiming the right of the Soviet republics to an independent history and an independent future. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union the majority of post-Soviet countries have tended to articulate historical consciousness in opposition to Soviet and Russian interpretations of the past, seeking for European roots in their histories.

Soviet history writing changed completely during Perestroika, where history was requisitioned as a legitimizing authority for profound social change, the creation of an independent state in 1990, the establishment of a new socio-political system and the shaping of a new national identity matrix. Under Perestroika numerous publications appeared in the media, relating to the link between education, history teaching and this national renaissance: 'Education – the Only Way to a National Renaissance', 'Give History Back to the People', 'History Education as a Source of a National Identity'. The first school programs on the history of Belarus were inspired by the

nationalist party – National Front programme, as was the new Constitution of the Independent Belarus, which claimed that ‘the Belarusian people has a long history which can be traced back many centuries’. The coat of arms and ‘nationalist, flag dating back to the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, regarded by Belarusian nationalists as the ‘Golden age’ of the Belarusian nation, were introduced after the proclamation of independence in 1991.

Autonomy, Belarusian academic history and the curriculum The gradual gaining of autonomy and the institutionalisation of the history of Belarus as an academic discipline and school subject is also linked to Perestroika. A decision of the Ministry of Education of the 15th of September 1986 stated that ‘during the 1986–1987 school year, the history curriculum must be changed, although the creation of new textbooks is not intended for this year.’ Changes in the history curriculum were reduced to a placing greater attention to the peculiarities of Belarus, within the framework of the history of the U.S.S.R. The history of Belarus was incorporated into the curriculum of the history of the U.S.S.R. and only 27 hours per year were devoted to it. Only at the beginning of the 1990s, when the independence of Belarus was proclaimed, did significant qualitative changes take place in the field of writing and history teaching.

1992 The commissioning, rating and validation of new history textbooks

December 1992, the new Minister of Education of independent Belarus held a meeting with the most famous historians in the country – Mikhas’ Bitch, Ouladzimir Sidartsou, Vital’ Famine, and Pavel Loïka – asking them to write school textbooks to be sent to schools in September 1993.

Manuscripts were submitted for printing in March 1993, while the decision to publish textbooks was taken in December 1992. All the authors wrote books more or less acceptable for the school system within three or four months. The lack of a methodological and didactic base for writing history textbooks in Belarus greatly complicated the work of the authors. The historians invited to write the textbooks were academics and researchers rather than secondary school teachers, and they experienced significant difficulties in adapting their styles to the needs of young readers and the requirements of the education system. The historian H. Sahanovitch described the restructuring of Belarusian historiography and history teaching as ‘a methodological and pedagogical vacuum’ (Sahanovitch, 2001).

The Scientific and Methodological Center at the Ministry of Education was the only body responsible for monitoring the manuscripts in 1993. According to the official procedure, the manual had first to be approved by the university professors, which would ensure the academic quality of the works. School teachers would then try out and present the results of the use of the new books in the classroom. At the same time as the review process, conducted by professors and teachers, a series of meetings, round tables, lectures, and discussions was organized by the National Center for Textbooks, where different views were exchanged, discussed and confronted.

The Perestroika history teaching and textbooks were the first attempt to move away from the dogmatism of the Soviet period. They encouraged reflection on historical events and personalities and did not contain indisputable dogmas. The authors of the first textbooks put a particular accent on the civic function of the textbooks. The books were supposed to educate patriots and awaken critical thinking skills, which was a novelty, pedagogically speaking, compared with Soviet-era thinking.

Democratization of the Society and Condemnation of the Soviet Past

During Perestroika in all the post-Soviet countries contact with Russia and Russians began to be described in terms of disaster. The communist period is thus frequently described in terms

of invasion, occupation and colonization. For the histories of the post-Soviet countries, Russia played the role of 'the other', the 'convenient' enemy, to which it is possible to attribute all errors and all failures. Russians were classified as invaders, and all territorial divisions, whether unions or annexation, are described in very negative terms.

Pluralism as one of the most important requirements of a democratic society was an important element of Perestroika history teaching policy, curricula and teachers' training. Teachers are trained during 5 years at history faculties of Belarusian universities, the training is focused on history and didactics of history teaching. Teachers had a high social status during the Soviet era, they became a poorly paid and less respected social category during the period of economic chaos and perestroika. At the present time, teachers have a "middle" social status – better than during perestroika, but lower than during Soviet time.

Textbook authors and experts stressed the need to present multiple perspectives on historical events in the textbooks: 'The author must give at least two divergent opinions on the facts presented', 'There are many debatable issues in the science of history, however, the author presents some events as ultimate truths' (Sidartsou, 1993). Pluralistic tendencies are strongly reflected in the books of this period. The introduction that opens Ouladzimir Sidartsou and Vital 'Famine's textbook', published in 1993, clearly states the authors' pedagogical point of view (Sidartsou, 1993).

Through their manuals the authors aspire 'to explain the contradictory process of the development of our society, help students to become aware of the history of Belarus as our history and as part of our everyday lives today'. The authors invite young readers to study 'the role of historical figures, to reflect on their actions' and 'to put themselves in the place of historic characters to understand their motivations'. The authors draw attention to the diversity of opinion on the historical facts analyzed in the book: 'Different points of view are represented in the textbook. You can accept them or defend your own opinion; however you should keep a respectful attitude towards those who have a different opinion from yours'; 'We recommend that students take an active part in debates on controversial issues in order to learn how to defend their points of view.' The authors encourage reflection on historical events and personalities, and their book does not contain indisputable dogmas.

The experts who gathered at the beginning of the 1990s, at the National Center for Textbooks, debated on the modalities of revision of the totalitarian Soviet period, which was a major step towards democratisation and openness to democratic values. The condemnation of the Soviet heritage and the search for European roots in Belarusian history was a very important trend in the writing of history textbooks.

During perestroika, the fundamental event of the Soviet history – the Second World War was subject to thorough historical reinterpretation. The myth of the crucial role played by the Communist Party in the victory was debunked, as was the myth of the struggle of the whole people against the Nazis; the whole people did not fight on the side of the Red Army and the partisans. Historians revealed instances of collaborationism and crimes committed by partisans. Soviet-era glorification of the Second World War was significantly toned down. Stories of victims and of whole communities forgotten by Soviet and Belarusian historiography, such as the Jewish community, were told for the first time in the 1990s.

Search for Links with Europe and 'Europeanization' of History Discourse

The particular attention paid to the Great Duchy of Lithuania, to which the Belarusian lands belonged between the XII and XVI centuries, was the result of a search for a valid historical alternative to the idea of the Belarusian nation as a constituent part of the Soviet totalitarian state advanced by Soviet-era historiography and school curricula. To find an authentic alternative to the Soviet version of Belarusian history is not a simple matter.

In textbooks published in 1993, particular emphasis was placed on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and on the wars between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Muscovy as a historic proof of resistance to Russian domination and links with Europe. Even the titles of the chapters underlined the link between Belarusian and European and world history; 'Belarusian Culture in the Context of World Civilization', 'The Great Patriotic War in the Context of the Second World War'.

It should be noted that the rejection of Soviet totalitarianism and the national revival took extreme forms during this period. 'History today still labours under the burden of dogma inherited from previous decades,' remarked one expert, although some scholars recognized that the rewriting of history and the rejection of Soviet dogma created a new nationalist dogma, and that it was essential to consider the transitional state of historical consciousness in dealing with difficult issues (documents of National Center for Textbooks). The school textbooks edited in 1993 contained the headings 'Historical Fact' and 'Historical Document'. (Loïka, 1993) which prove the intention of the authors to support their narrative with historical documents in order to make them objective.

Europeanisation of the Holocaust memory and changes in Belarusian interpretation of the WWII

Perestroika and liberalisation of the post-Soviet space in the 1980s opened new pages of the history dissimulated by the soviet regime: Molotov Ribbentrop pact, reprisals against Red army officers, crimes committed by partisans, the Holocaust. During the Perestroika the fundamental Soviet myth of the Second World War was subject to important reinterpretation. The myth of the leading role played by the Communist Party in the victory was debunked, as was the myth of the struggle of the whole people against the Nazis: the whole people did not fight on the side of the Red Army and the partisans. Historians revealed instances of collaborationism and crimes committed by partisans.

The Holocaust memory is a crucial historical experience and a unifying memory for Europe. Eastern Europeans had to confront the fact that for Western Europe, the central historical experience had become the Holocaust, which, for them, was only part of the history. The newcomers had to tell their own historical experience, unknown for the West, and make it officially part of the European identity. By 1989, the representational modes of the Holocaust-memory had become normative in an emerging transnational social space of memory politics, in which eastern European states entered, after the collapse of state socialist regimes. After 1989, it gradually transformed into a 'Europeanised' regime of memory politics in the Western world (Sierp 2014).

Representation of the Holocaust memory in Western Europe served as a model for Eastern European countries and the canonisation of the Holocaust memory became a criteria of European-ness, to be considered as a member of the European family by joining the Council of Europe and of the European Union. Holocaust has become a meta-historical discourse, a supranational de-contextualized, forming of a transnational normative regime of memory (Rothenberg 1999). To recognize the Holocaust memory, to learn lessons from history, became a moral obligation in

order to prevent the human rights violation, to prevent us from repeating the atrocities of the past. The European Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity based on the Holocaust memory deprived of its historical context and turned into an ethical inoculation against totalitarian crimes.

The post-Soviet space faced the issue of the Holocaust memory after Perestroika and liberalization, when change of political regime historically coincided with the memory boom in Europe. The Holocaust became a subject of public discussion after decades of the Soviet silence on the issue. Belarus, which had a very important Jewish community before the Second World War, discovered that more than 600,000 Jews were murdered by the Nazis. The Trostenets extermination camp near Minsk is one of the biggest concentration camps in Europe (Dean 2000). Belarus discovered institutionalised commemoration of the holocaust in Europe only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and this helped in recognising the Holocaust in Belarus. Perestroika was used to claim 'European-ness'. Like other post-Soviet countries, Belarus opted for the European model of the history of Holocaust.

Re-Sovietization of history teaching

The year 1994 witnessed a major shift in the liberalization of Belarusian society. The political forces which came to power in 1994 forged their victory by promising a people in disarray that they would restore the Soviet legacy, fraternal ties with Russia and the welfare state inherited from the Soviet period. The new government began to use methods inherited from Soviet leaders. A referendum in May 1995 focused on changing state symbols, union with Russia, and the status of the Russian language as the state language. The arms and 'nationalist' flag dating back to the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, regarded by Belarusian nationalists as the 'Golden age' of the Belarusian nation, were introduced after the proclamation of independence in 1991.



Belorussian nationalist flag,
1991–1995

After the 1995 referendum, these nationalist symbols were again replaced by those of the Soviet era. The majority of the electorate voted for union with Russia and two state languages in Belarus; Russian and Belarusian. In 1991 Belarus's Independence Day was established as the 27th of July in commemoration of the Act of Independence voted by the Supreme Soviet (Parliament). In 1996, however, Independence Day was changed to July 3, the day of the liberation of Minsk



The Sovietisation of the Belorussian flag: 1995 to the present

from the Nazis; further evidence of a return to a Soviet model of writing and interpreting modern Belarusian history.

The referendum institutionalized a return to the Soviet era and to Russian-orientated history interpretation. This legalized Sovietization also affected history writing and teaching and official policy on Belarusian national identity. An edict of the President of Belarus, Alexander Loukachenko, of 16 August 1995 stated, 'given the results of the referendum, it is necessary to replace the books published between 1992 and 1995 with new textbooks' (Loukashenko, 1995). Concerned to defend the Soviet legacy, history textbooks seen by the president as having a nationalistic content were condemned to be replaced by books that better met the aspirations of the new political authorities, who took the Soviet heritage as the basis of their political legitimacy.

The intervention of the political authorities in history teaching and textbook writing provoked heated debates in society. Discussions in the press reflected the negative attitude of teachers and the intelligentsia towards the hardening of control on and manipulation of school history teaching. The round table on history textbooks organized by the Belarusian Historical Review was a response to the decision to remove all textbooks published between 1992 and 1995. Authors and teachers strongly criticized state intervention in textbook rewriting. The author Mikhas' Bitch criticized the authoritarian ban on books edited in 1993; 'The history curriculum was openly debated and discussed in 1991 and 1992. Where were the people who are now raising their voices to criticize our textbooks in 1992?' (documents of National Center for Textbooks).

A proof of authoritarian confinement: history teaching under political censorship

State control

In the mid-1990s the creation of the State Commission for the Control of School Literature in the Field of the Humanities and Social Sciences, called into being by a presidential order of 24 August 1995 and answering directly to the Presidential Administration, marked a new stage in Belarusian politics of history teaching and textbooks writing. This structure responded to the aspiration of the Belarusian political authorities to bring the writing of school history under their control. Countless mechanisms introduced in the procedure of textbook publishing stifled any attempt to go against the official government conception of history. The purpose of the Commission is to monitor and directly control textbook writing. Thus, the Commission remains the ultimate judge of textbook manuscripts. Before being monitored by the Commission, however, a manuscript must pass many stages of correction and review.

Government control of textbook authoring and production

At first, a manuscript is read by two experts at the Institute of Education of the Ministry of Education. The experts appointed by the Institute check the didactical and ideological quality of the work. If the manuscript corresponds to the pedagogical requirements of a textbook and is not openly opposed to official ideology, it obtains approval in the first instance. A manuscript can be subjected to number of criticisms and the author is obliged make corrections in response to the experts' objections. The secretariat of the Ministry can send the manuscript for 'improvement' many times until it is accepted by the Commission.

The next step is expert analysis and deliberation within the Section of History textbooks of the Ministry of Education. The Section verifies whether the work corresponds to the official curriculum, the didactical characteristics of the manuscript, and the ideology expounded by the author in his book. The manuscript is submitted to new experts, and if there are points to rework, it is returned to the authors for corrections. The officials of the Ministry of education know which points to 'polish' so that the manuscript can be analyzed first by the Presidium of the Academic Council of the Ministry of Education, and then by the Commission. Points relating to political history, the Soviet period, and the Second World War are considered to be difficult.

After the approval of the Section of the Ministry, the manuscript is submitted to the examination of the Presidium of the Academic Council of the Ministry of Education. Its members are appointed by the Ministry of Education and it is chaired by the Minister of Education. Before deliberation in the Council, the manuscript is submitted to the experts of the Commission, and although it does not form part of official procedure, their opinion carries much weight during deliberations. It is the Academic Council which gives the greatest number of negative verdicts to manuscripts. This makes sense, because the next step is the Commission, which takes a final decision on manuscripts, so they must correspond to official ideology by the time they reach this stage.

The Commission controls politically important school subjects such as world history, geography, and the literature and history of Belarus. These are the most controversial and politicised academic disciplines, so the political authorities control how they are taught with particular vigilance. The file concerning each manuscript considered by the Commission includes nearly ten expert conclusions, the authors' responses to the corrections made on the basis of objections, and the reports of all the meetings of all the bodies that have analyzed the manuscript. The Commission issues the final verdict. If the script gets the approval of the Commission, the Ministry sends the manuscript to the publisher specifying the number of copies to be edited. Such an open authoritarian control over history teaching and textbooks writing goes even further than Soviet methods of control of educational system.

Forward to the Soviet past?

The return to the Soviet interpretation of history resulted in the selection and omission of topics. Some of them are accentuated, others disappeared. Collaboration during the Second World War is a very problematic issue, which 'disappeared' from the present Belarusian historiography and history teaching. During Perestroika, this issue started to be analyzed. It was important to study this phenomenon, the motivation of collaborators who very often were the executioners of Jewish, Roma and other communities, why neighbours became executioners, *Collaboration in the Holocaust : crimes of the local police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941–44*, according to Dean Martin's expression. In Belarus textbooks edited after 2005, the term 'collaboration' is not even mentioned. It is impossible to conduct research on collaborationism in state institutions or to publish a research on collaboration in Belarus.

The present Belarusian administration is also aware of the role of education in weaving social ties and building identity; 'history teaching is also a struggle for the minds and souls not only of individuals but also of nations' (Loukachenko 2000). On the one hand it is imperative to overcome the shortcomings of education within the family in the context of a dramatic decline in the general level of the education of children, to the degree that 'textbooks are probably the only books which many children lay their hands on'. On the other hand, the school system plays an almost exclusive role in the training of young citizens. Textbooks are the preferred and often the sole instrument of the transmission and legitimisation of the particular interpretation of history and narrative of national identity, which a political administration aspires to convey.

Within this context, history teaching and school textbooks on history are extremely effective instruments of identity construction. Messages on identity, on 'us and the other' can be transmitted and perpetuated across generations through history textbooks distributed to citizens in millions of copies. Their texts, illustrations and typography can become common references all over a country, guaranteeing a broad, thorough and continuous impact on the entire population of a territory. The assimilation by several generations of the same message, photographs and historical images transmitted by textbooks can play an important role in legitimising an official narrative on history and identity within a school system (Schissler, 2005).

Identity discourse transmitted by educational systems becomes a starting point, a basis on which individuals can construct their identity, world view, and view of the past and history. They begin to assume their belonging to certain groups and their non-belonging to 'others' to the point that this perception guides their behaviour and becomes a generator and an organizer of practices and opinions. The narrative of the history of a nation as taught in its school system tends to centre round certain key events which become markers used in the construction of links between a nation and its past (Bassin, Mark and Kelly, Catriona, 2012).

In official historiography and school curricula, alternative historical interpretations are not completely erased, but pushed to the margins of the social historical narrative. Among the few alternative institutions which can escape the official historiographical dogmas outside the system there are some institutions in exile, located in Vilnius and there is a 'History Workshop' in Minsk, a German-Belarusian institution. The Workshop, located in the territory where the Minsk ghetto was situated, is trying to reveal the 'white spots' of the war and of Nazi occupation, including the destiny of the Jewish community and collaboration (Kozak, 2012). The protection of a diplomatic institution, the German embassy, guarantees a certain flexibility and freedom of expression.

Soviet historical dogma, and in particular the cornerstone of the Soviet legacy – the glorification of the Second World War – has marginalised other historical interpretations. The pre-eminence of the Soviet interpretation of the War is reflected in partial and biased discourse, full of lacunae and oblivion, on the Second World War in school textbooks. Current definitions of Belarusian past and memory cannot be sustainable and will always be weak and susceptible to political manipulation because they are based on partial and incomplete historical references, in which the heroic interpretation of the Second World War is incompatible with the victims' narrative. The Holocaust memory was evinced not only from official discourse, but event from personal memories. The pre-eminence of the Soviet and Russia-orientated interpretation of history resulted in animosity in analysis of relations with Europe.

With Russia and against Europe

Animosity between Poles and Belarusians was methodically cultivated over the centuries by the political authorities. This policy of hostility, which has been encouraged for centuries by the ruling

elite in Belarus, be they Russian, Soviet or the present day Belarusian authorities. The goal of this policy is the establishment of a multidimensional border between these peoples in terms of mentality, territory, religion, and language, obscuring the fact that Poles like Belarusians are a Slavic people, who are in fact very close to the Belarusians in all these areas. The Belarusian language, for example, is the most 'westernized' of all the Eastern Slavic languages, and thus close both to the Polish and Russian languages (Boulyko, 1999).

This artificial and unfounded cultural boundary between Belarus and Poland makes Poles out to be the 'worst enemies' (Zaiko, 1999) of Belarusians in all official discourse and political propaganda, declaring a 'war against Poles' (Eberhardt, 1997), evidence of which can be found even in public space and in the educational narrative.

If identification is defined as a conscious act of choosing to belong to one particular group rather than to 'another' one (Recher, 2001) knowledge of national history, which contains a considerable number of questions and answers to issues relating to identity, to common features of the nation and difference with others is important.

Political control of the writing of school textbooks is reflected in mistakes, contradictions, and omissions affecting the quality of the books. P. Loïka's textbook was considerably rewritten under political pressure. The editorial surface of the chapters devoted to the Russian-Belarusian war of the XIV–XVI centuries was reduced. The section titles were changed in order to "soften" its nationalist emphasis. The Battle of Orsha that pitted Russian and Belarusian troops against each other in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) has already been mentioned as a major revelation of the historiography of perestroika and an important chapter of 8 pages in textbooks of 1993 (Loïka, 1993). However, in the 2002 edition, the same author has not been able to introduce a reference to this battle, which occupies an important position in Belarusian nationalist lore, in the body of the manual, although he still presents it briefly, as follows, in a chronological table at the end of the book:

"1512–1522: War between G.D.L. and Muscovy.
1514, 8 September: the Battle of Orsha. The victory of the army of G.D.L." (Loika, 2005)

This shift is characteristic of the rewriting of school history: nationalist references have no place in public discourse and are pushed to the margins of the system of political discourse and school education without, however, being completely erased.

The Soviet heritage is imposed by the political authorities as a dominant discourse. In textbooks on the Soviet period, the very term "totalitarian" is deleted and replaced by the euphemism "the Soviet administrative system" as a result of a direct Belarusian Presidential prohibition expressed during a meeting with textbook authors (Loukashenko, 2000). Some authors even completely rehabilitate the Soviet period. For them, "the magnitude of J. Stalin" is indisputable, V. Lenin was a "political genius" and Soviet reprisals were necessary because they "allowed the U.S.S.R. to achieve staggering results" (Trechtchenok, 2005). Another textbook author asserts that "the huge and unrealistic figures of the number of victims of political reprisals published during the last decade by nationalists is nothing but a myth, whose purpose is to discredit the socialist system" (Novik, 2010). Other authors partially bow to political pressure. Thus, analyzing the 1917 revolution in the 1993 edition of their textbook, the authors O. Sidartsou and V. Famine use the term "the events of 1917" (Sidartsou, Famine, 1993) while in subsequent editions, we find the "October Revolution" formulation, which is a sort of compromise between the Soviet tradition, where this event was known as "the great October Socialist Revolution", and the nationalist tradition, for which they are "the events of October 1917 (Sidartsou, Famine, 2007)."

Moreover, while the textbooks edited under perestroika aimed to promote civic education, a pluralistic presentation of historical interpretation and critical thinking skills, current textbooks follow the educational traditions of Soviet totalitarianism. Students are not encouraged to think. The number of assignments and questions accompanying chapters is extremely small compared to the books of Perestroika. Homework is often reduced to a mechanical committing to memory of “dogmatic truths”. In a textbook edited in 2002 at the end of the chapter on the U.S.S.R. in the 1930s, we find the following question: “Why political reprisals became possible in the U.S.S.R.?” (Novik, 2010). In order to be able to answer this question properly, students are in fact forced to make apologies for Soviet reprisals, as the author does in his text. The authoritarian turn that Belarus has taken since the mid-1990s explains the similarities between Soviet and current textbooks. Political logic that orchestrates the production of school literature has the same objective as during the Soviet period: to legitimize a political regime, where textbooks become tools of propaganda aimed at legitimizing an authoritarian regime claiming historical links with Russia and rejecting openness to global tendencies.

Poles as a part of Europe and ‘Significant Other’ in Belarusian history textbooks

The identity message, the identity boundary, the image of ‘us and the other’ presented in contemporary Belarusian school textbooks is based on stereotypes, which stem from a time when ideological confrontation served to justify the division of the European continent into West and East (Lindner, 1999).

Belarusian history textbooks are littered with stereotypes about Europe, which take the Polish-Belarusian border as the dividing line between West and East from a geographical and cultural point of view. In terms of identity construction, these stereotypes fulfil the useful role of defining a ‘significant other’ on which the conception of Belarusian national identity and national sovereignty is based.

The current President of Belarus, who is an historian by training and himself espouses a Russian imperial – Soviet conception of Belarusian history, stated in one declaration aimed at nationalist historians that, ‘many myths and political insinuations have appeared in academic historical debate over the past 15 years. Opposition activists are zealous in the rewriting of history, using only two colours: black for the Soviet era and white for the ‘Polish’ period (the period when Belarusian lands were included in Rzeczpospolita, a Polish-Lithuanian, Belarusian union) (Loukachenko, 2003).

The insurrection of 1863 in Belarus is an example of a key event, which divides Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian historians, and to this day excites the largest number of controversies in Belarusian historiography and school curricula. The Soviet tradition places emphasis on the social nature of the struggle; while Belarusian nationalists make K. Kalinouski, the leader of the insurrection of 1863, into a national hero who led the struggle for national liberation ‘from the deadly clutches of the Russian Empire’ (Trechtchenok, 2005). In Belarusian textbooks Poland is presented as a source of outright evil, and the Polish people are qualified literally as ‘degenerate traitors’ (Trechtchenok, 2005).

Conclusion

Present Belarusian historiography and identity matrix are divided into two competing interpretations of history, two approaches to producing historical narrative: nationalist and Soviet versions. Each of these projects mobilizes and articulates facts and historical events in order to legitimize a political discourse and a narrative of historical identity.

In current Belarusian historiography a clear imbalance exists between the historical narratives in favour of Soviet doctrinal and dogmatic narrative. The history of the twentieth century witnessed the misuse of history in the USSR, and the use of history to justify crimes, exterminations and reprisals. The use of nationalist history in different contexts also showed the dangers of an aggressive nationalism. A single perfect historical narrative, a unique historical consciousness, a single way of interpreting the past cannot exist, but any narrative must be plural, open, without dogma and without monopoly, which is not the case in Belarus today.

The nationalist discourse on historical consciousness and national identity is condemned to obscurity due to lack of opportunity for transmission and legitimisation. The only model for historical consciousness and national identity for Belarusians is the Soviet model defended and promoted by the authorities. The alternative project promoted by nationalist forces is also a negative project, incapable of becoming a reference for national unity. The problem of the lack of a regular and stable point of reference is the absence of a necessary consensus on national identity.

Soviet historical dogma, and in particular the cornerstone of the Soviet legacy – the glorification of the Second World War – has marginalized other historical interpretations. The pre-eminence of the Soviet interpretation of the War is reflected in partial and biased discourse, full of lacunae on the Second World War in identity discourse and school textbooks. Thus ideas of Belarusian national identity are once again based exclusively on the negative and destructive reference of war. Remembrance of the past and historical discourse, where it relates to national identity, should have an open, peaceful, pluralistic and discursive basis and should transcend controversial issues like wars and conflicts. Current definitions of Belarusian identity cannot be sustainable and will always be weak and susceptible to political manipulation because they are based on destructive historical references.

The acceptance of official discourse on historical memory is due to the marginalization of other discourses. The formative influence of the politics of memory is powerful if society remembers the past in a similar but not identical way, generating an idea of historical truth and reinforcing belief in the version of history commemorated.

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