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Will the World Save Us? The Cultural Roots of Political Opposition in Belarus

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The late 1960s to early 1970s – years of upheaval and protests across the globe – were notorious for the reversal of political liberalization in the USSR, the suppression of the Prague Spring, and the attacks on dissenters in the Eastern Bloc. In the Polish People's Republic, the student protests of 1968 resulted in a wave of repression and emigration. In Russia, or more precisely, in Moscow and Leningrad, trials took place against dissenting intelligentsia and Soviet Jews fighting for their right to emigrate: the Daniel and Siniavskii affair, the Trial of the Four, the Hijacking affair,[i] the vilification campaigns against physicist Andrei Sakharov and writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and, finally, the expulsion of the latter from the USSR in 1974. In Soviet Ukraine, nationally conscious intelligentsia faced work dismissal, arrests and even physical danger.

Around the same time, in 1973-1974, in Minsk, the party and state security organs started an offensive against a group of "Belarusian nationalists". This loose, informal association of intellectuals united to protest against the cultural and national politics of the Soviet Union, which, as they believed, caused the annihilation of the Belarusian language and the destruction of historical heritage. Many members of the group were employees of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, so it was later dubbed the "Academic circle".[ii] Communist Party leadership reacted immediately to the efforts of the intelligentsia to consolidate, seeing them as a direct threat to the stability of a flourishing, modernized and dissent-free socialist Belarus.

At that very moment, one of the group's associates, art historian Zianon Pazniak (under alias Henrykh Rakutovich), made an appeal – or rather a cry for help and publicity – in his *samizdat* text "Situation in Belorus *[sic]*. The Year 1974."

"We, who write these lines, do not have any connections to Belarusian émigré or the abroad. The elimination of our intelligentsia by the KGB happens in total silence."[iii]

Another group member, historian and archaeologist Mikhas Charniauski, later complained about the wall of reticence that surrounded them and their works. It seemed, as Charniauski put it, that they had just "disappeared from this world in an instant".[iv] During the years of the Great Terror, Belarusian intellectuals suffered most severely; back then, the label of "nationalist" equaled a lengthy term in the Gulag, torture, and, often, execution. In the 1970s, the events were still fresh in memory, and Leonid Brezhnev's attempts at re-Stalinization prompted fear, so Pazniak's distress signal that he sent to the world was not merely rhetorical but was grounded in the history and actuality of Soviet Belarus.

Just one year earlier, in 1973, when the Moscow authorities ran a vilification campaign against the physicist, dissident, and future Nobel Prize laureate Andrej Sakharov, the latter famously remarked: "The world will save me. The whole world is watching me."[v]

Transnational recognition was and has been the necessary condition for the emergence and durability of dissent.[vi]

Belarusian intellectuals, among them Charniauski, Pazniak, Mikola Prashkovich, Ales Kaurus, Valiantsian Rabkevich, and even their better-known counterparts such as celebrated novelist and poet Uladzimir Karatkevich, with their concern for and their advocacy on behalf of the right of self-determination for national cultures, seemed to be uninteresting to both the Russian democratic intelligentsia and the Western public. Their quest for cultural emancipation remained unheard or was misunderstood as lacking political background or intellectual sophistication.

In the late 1960s to 1970s, with the former leader of partisan movement Petar Masherau at the head of the Belarusian Communist Party, Soviet Belarus, as one Western observer commented, "was regarded as a republic where national sentiment was weak, and Russification had made its greatest inroads."[vii] In the second half of the 1980s, at the outbreak of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* initiative, analysts from Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe were surprised to come across the unexpected "resurgence of Belarusian national assertiveness". The

largest demonstration in the history of Soviet Belarus, co-organized by the young literary scholar Ales Bialiatski, gathered in Minsk on 30 October 1988. Some 10,000 people, primarily students and intelligentsia, came to the streets to commemorate the victims of Stalin's repressions; Western media covered the rally, primarily its brutal breaking up, with great enthusiasm. Also, the attempts of the intelligentsia to establish the Belarusian People's Front (BPF) were eagerly received in the West. A broad people's movement in support of change in the Soviet Union, the BPF was modelled after similar organizations in Estonia and Lithuania and faced a fierce response from the republican administration.

Where did this "resurgence of national assertiveness", the rise of cultural and political activity, come from if, allegedly, it was not present before? It formed and developed both outside and within the Soviet system of education and cultural production, gradually transgressing the border of the latter. Cultural dissenters in Belarus, perhaps, lacked the understanding that the message they were sending to the world would not be received and comprehended.

Still, they had a clear vision that it was primarily in the field of culture that they would win or lose the battle for the political existence of the Belarusian nation.

The activity of the "Academic circle" discussed above was only one among many such attempts. Still earlier, in 1968, the students of the Philological Faculty at the Belarusian State University, and among them, the future star of contemporary Belarusian poetry Ales Razanau, initiated a petition to support Belarusian as a language of instruction at the University. In 1978, the Moscow-based Belarusian linguist Aliaksei Kauka penned "A Letter to a Russian Friend", powerfully rejecting the widespread conviction in the Soviet Union that such a technologically advanced society as the Soviet Union would soon abandon such small and local languages as Belarusian. In the early 1980s, the PhD student of philosophy and future poet Aleh Bembel studied the moral and aesthetic value of a mother tongue using the example of Belarusian. His dissertation was not accepted at the Academy of Sciences, and upon its publication abroad in 1985, the author faced dismissal and a vilification campaign. The next year, a group of 28 prominent intellectuals wrote a letter to

Soviet leader Gorbachev demanding a reformation of the system of education and culture. The letter included a whole program of complex measures and suggestions for reformation. In six months, in the summer of 1987, this was followed by another appeal signed by 134 people, including workers and technical intelligentsia. The petitioners harshly criticized the language and cultural politics of the Belarusian Communist Party, treating cultural revival as the most direct way to political change. None of these concerns, which clearly also contained political demands, were received as such or were seen beyond the domain of culture.

Furthermore, we can speak of at least 23 periodicals and 10 non-periodical titles that appeared within the period between 1968 to 1988 in the territory of the BSSR. Additionally, there are a least nine *tamizdat* (written in Soviet Belarus and published abroad) titles. These *samizdat* journals and titles embrace a vast number of topics, from ecology to anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, from the destruction of historical heritage under the guise of the anti-religious campaign to uncontrolled alcohol consumption. Yet also, in *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, the main concern was the status of the Belarusian language and the Belarusian culture, which should have substantiated the quest for Belarusian autonomy.

The new generation of activists – among them were Ales Bialiatski, Vintsuk Viachorka, Siarhei Dubavets, Viktar and Jauhen Ivashkevich, Siarzhuk Vitushka, and Siarhei Sokalau-Voiush – entered the scene in the early 1980s. These young people formulated their goals and demanded political change in a much bolder manner. “We were ambitious and were not afraid of thinking for the whole Belarus”, recollected Bialiatski in his reminiscences of the time.[viii] Yet, also for this generation, culture and politics were closely linked, and the quest for democratic change had grown from the idea of cultural emancipation. Suppressed in the Soviet Union, independent Belarusian-language literature and art and alternative historical scholarship should have laid the foundation for a broad societal transformation. All unofficial and half-official youth organizations, such as *Maistrounia* (workshop), *Talaka* (joint work), and *Tuteiushyia* (locals), which appeared before and over the course of Gorbachev’s perestroika, brought cultural concerns to the forefront of their (still very much clandestine) political activity.

Focusing on the primacy of the political resistance – as an open revolt or as demands for a change of power, insisting on the opposition of cultural and political hegemony – we are risking overlooking various forms of discontent, which are no less relevant and efficient, and which sometimes require no less courage and creativity. Thus, it is precisely cultural opposition that was only possible in late socialist Belarus, a heavily militarized Soviet republic. Belarus remained under increased surveillance due to its borderland status during the whole late Soviet period; it had no Western embassies, and it was rarely visited by foreign correspondents and tourists. As much as today, political demands could only result in imprisonment and societal isolation, so intellectuals sought to engage in different forms of cultural resistance, such as informal groups, protest letters, and the rehabilitation, in literature and art, of themes proscribed officially. Yet simultaneously, both the older and the newer generation of cultural oppositionists in Soviet Belarus were utterly convinced that cultural transformation should adjoin and perhaps even forerun political transformation. This approach laid the foundation for the broad societal consolidation of the late 1980s and early 1990s and had an effect well into the revolution of 2020.

In this essay, I attempted to show that it is not only the demands of the cultural opposition but also the fact that they were overlooked and under-evaluated that separated them from the political sphere and deprived them of the political component that was expected and desired from the Western viewpoint on dissent in Eastern Europe. Perhaps it is worth switching perspectives, thinking of the work for the sake of cultural emancipation as something which was actually not less important (or efficient) than open political revolt. It may be worth thinking of dissent in the late socialist societies from the point of view of this “betweenness”, of the continuous positioning in regard to the state system, and of the continuous choice intellectuals faced under Socialism. The experience of intellectual groups on the “periphery” of the Soviet Union and their reliance on cultural protest could certainly add to our understanding of resistance, which was previously founded in the experience of a small group of (Russian) dissidents.

ENDNOTES

[i] The Daniel and Siniavskii Affair, the Trial of the Four, and the Hijacking affair were the politically motivated trials that took place in the Soviet Union in the late 1960s to early 1970s. The first two were targeted against the dissenting intelligentsia, and the last one against the activists from the Jewish movement for emigration in the USSR. For more, see, Ludmila Alexeyeva, Soviet Dissent. Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights (Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, 1985), 274–282 and Juliane Fürst, "Born under the Same Star: Refuseniks, Dissidents and Late Socialist Society", in Yaacov Roi, ed. The Jewish Movement in the Soviet Union (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), 137–163.

[ii] Mikhas Charniaŭski, "Akademichny asiarodak" in Aleh Dziarnovich, Nonkanfarmizm u Belarusi (Minsk: Athenaeum, 2004), 196–204.

[iii] Genrikh Rakutovich [Zianon Pazniak], Polozhenie v Belorusi.1974 god [n.p. Mogilev, 1974], 1. Here and passim translations are mine – T. A.

[iv] Shapran, Siarhei. "Mikhas' Charniaŭski: "Nibyta my znikli z belaha svety." Novy Chas. Accessed December 18, 2022. http://novychas.info/asoba/michasj_carniauski_nibyta_my_z/.

[v] Robert Horvath, The Legacy of Soviet Dissent. Dissidents, Democratization and Radical Nationalism in Russia (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 51.

[vi] Kasper Szulecki, Dissidents in Communist Central Europe. Human Rights and the Emergence of New Transnational Actors (Cham 2019: Palgrave Macmillan), 9 and passim.

[vii] Bohdan Nahaylo, "Political Demonstration in Minsk Attests to Belorussian National Assertiveness," RFE/RL, November 26, 1987. OSA 300-85-12: 72/31.

[viii] "About the journal 'Burachok' and the colonel Danilin. The recollections of Ales Bialiatski, written in prison" in: Narodnaia volia, №161–162 (2011): 4 [Originally in Belarusian].