

The “Partisan Republic”: Colonial Myths and Memory Wars in Belarus

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A short story by Belarusian prose writer Vasil Bykau, entitled *Ruzhovy Tuman* (“The Rosy Fog,” 1997), opens as follows. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a deaf-and-dumb old man approaches a Lenin monument on a national day of remembrance in a Belarusian village. Another veteran notes how little he has changed since World War II: “Look, it’s Barsuk! ... Still alive, would you believe ... And, it seems, he’s still the same” (Bykau 1997: 126). The narrator comments on the strangeness of Barsuk being “the same,” and asks: “is life or nature the cause of this?” He then tentatively answers his own question: “Or perhaps, it’s the rosy fog of deceit, which circumstances won’t allow to dissipate” (ibid.: 127). It soon becomes clear that Barsuk’s uncanny lack of change is the result of the silencing of memory in Belarus during the

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intervening period between the war and the post-Soviet present day. In other words, the protagonist's ritual commemoration of Soviet power (embodied by Lenin) is inextricably linked to a (false) memory of the partisan war. Barsuk arrives from Western Belarus early in the war, having lost all of his family, and is consigned to a pauper's life because he is unable to fight due to his disability. He ends up surviving the war thanks to a pair of partisans, who provide him with ration cards which enable him to obtain supplies from the German occupation forces, supplies which he then shares with the partisans. Once the war is over, Barsuk continues to think fondly of the partisans, nurturing an idealized vision of the partisan movement, and in particular the men who ensured his material provision and thus his survival. Never does he discover the foundational lie behind his fortune: that the ration cards were counterfeit documents produced by the partisans themselves, and that the partisans were using him, risking his life and fully prepared to let him die in the (quite likely) event that the plan were to fail.

Under post-war socialism, Barsuk was never exposed to any version of history which could contradict his rosy view of the partisan movement, so could never learn the truth: unable to hear or speak, he could only rely on written accounts, rather than participate in or overhear informal, unrecorded conversations between veterans.¹ Meanwhile, the other villagers knew all along that Barsuk's belief was false: "after the war, the story of Barsuk became known to many. In fact, only Barsuk didn't know" (ibid.: 129). However, whilst the story implies that ordinary Belarusians knew that the partisan myth was a mystification, it also suggests that people only *openly* revealed their indifference to official war memory after 1991. The attitude of the veterans who encounter Barsuk at the story's beginning is bemused and condescending, and they treat him as an object of curiosity and a relic of the past. Yet, the veterans appear themselves self-satisfied and lacking in individuality: "*they were all* without their caps and hats ... with severe, doleful expressions on their elderly faces" (ibid.: 126, emphasis added); they also continue to gather at the victory monument themselves, thereby revealing their own adherence to expired myths. The story concludes with a comment from the narrator that: "Maybe we should just let him live in his rosy fog, live out his days bringing flowers to the base of the monument" (ibid.: 126). Thus, the narrator appears to side with public opinion, portraying Barsuk

as an oddity who poses no harm and an object of innocuous laughter. At the same time, however, the story implicates *all* of the villagers in tacit collaboration; they outwardly played along with the discourse of the partisan myth until political circumstances changed, and even then, their behavior remained within the Soviet mold. The rosy fog may be thickest around Barsuk, but it affects everyone. For those who have lived in it their whole lives, clarity of vision is only relative, and it is never possible to know whether one has left it entirely.

In an essay written around the same time, Bykau gives another name to the Soviet ideology of remembrance: “anti-memory.” He argues that “people’s memories about [the war] are not only getting shorter, but are being replaced by anti-memory [*antypamiats*], actively capitulating to propagandistic stereotypes” (ibid.: 34). In other words, lived experience had been all but displaced, and official myth had taken hold as the dominant form of knowledge. Bykau’s use of this term echoes that of the Holocaust scholar Geoffrey Hartman, who defines *anti-memory* as “something that displays the colours of memory, like the commemoration at Bitburg cemetery [by Ronald Reagan in 1985], but drifts towards the closure of forgetful ritualization” (Hartman 1996: 10). Hartman denotes a cultural representation of the past which closes the book on history and thereby becomes an appropriation of it: as his chosen example suggests, concerns of political expediency may overshadow vital work of memory and mourning. In both cases, anti-memory represents betrayal of the dead and deception of the living. Anti-memory for Bykau is a discourse of untruth, propagated by an authoritarian state as a means of exerting control over a subjugated population. Hartman, on the other hand, explicates a means of deferring trauma: when an event such as the Holocaust is commemorated tokenistically, through empty gestures rather than an honest exploration of the terrible past, the wound is only patched over, never healed.

This chapter combines the two ideas to argue that the Soviet myth of the “Partisan Republic,” as Belarus came to be known, displaced trauma, attempting to delimit the contours of memory but only deferring the painful process of coming to terms with the past. In addition, it examines the creation of a monolithic image of Soviet Belarusianness based on the memory of the war, that is the construct of the Partisan Republic, as a form of colonial discourse—a means of imposing hegemonic identity

norms on a dominated population. Accordingly, both the Soviet-era resistance to this myth by authors including Bykau and the unmaking of the edifice in the post-Soviet era are analyzed in terms of post-colonial theory.

Post-colonial perspectives on Belarus tend to fall into two categories. On the one hand, contemporary scholars and intellectuals in Belarus such as Uladzimir Abushenka, Valiantsin Akudovich and Viachaslau Rakitski have propounded diverse reimaginings of Belarusian history and identity (Abushenka 2003; Akudovich 2007; Rakitski 2010). What these models have in common is their exploration of Belarus as a borderland, a peripheral territory alienated from itself due to the multiple legacies of colonial subjugation—with Poland, Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union identified as historical oppressors (although the relationship with Poland is treated more ambiguously than that with Russia). With varying degrees of sophistication, these theorists imply a moral and/or intellectual imperative to reconstruct a lost “Belarusianness”: they essentialize national identity, whether as a “creole” phenomenon (Abushenka), a mode of “absence” (Akudovich), or by suggesting that colonialism has destroyed an “authentic” Belarusianness which existed in a mythical past (Rakitski).

The second trend is represented by scholars working in Western academia, such as Elena Gapova, Alexander Pershai and Serguei Oushakine. Often directly polemicizing with the above category of Belarusian intellectuals, they take apart the latter’s colonial reading of Belarusian history. Critically analyzing the narratives produced by Belarusian intellectuals, they posit that the post-colonial condition is a discursive construct generated by politically motivated strategies of narrating the nation: Belarusian post-colonialism is the sum total of the post-colonial myths being articulated by scholars and activists in post-Soviet Belarus (Gapova 2004; Pershai 2012: 121–141; Oushakine 2013). Whilst this understanding of post-coloniality is unquestionably more nuanced than the primordialist ideas being produced by Belarus-based intellectuals, it discredits the latter’s pronouncements as “perpetual laments of self-victimization” (Oushakine 2013: 287) and discounts the possibility of a Soviet colonial situation *a priori*. As a result, these scholars tend to effectively nullify the temporal connotations of the very term “post-colonialism.”

A close examination of Belarusian culture in both the late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods reveals a third kind of Belarusian (post-)coloniality, which both avoids the engenderment of nationalist dogma and reflects

on historical states of subalternity. This Belarusian post-colonialism exists in literary, cinematic and artistic media and is challenging and innovative; its interpretation requires that theoretical models and categories from “traditional” post-colonial paradigms be adapted (see Lewis 2013). An important distinction is that the construction of memory was central to Soviet colonial discourse, an idea captured in Serhy Yekelchuk’s (2004) term “empire of memory.” According to theorists of Western colonialism such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, colonization destroys the memory of the colonized: Fanon wrote that “[c]olonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon 1967: 169); Memmi similarly argued that “[the colonized] draws less and less from his past. The colonizer never even recognized that he had one” (Memmi 1990: 146). In Soviet times, however, the Belarusian past was not only destroyed, but also constructed anew: a particular version of the republic’s past became a tool for prolonging Soviet domination over the territory and the people. The cult of victory in the Great Patriotic War made powerful claims on Belarusian identity, positing the nation’s “heroism” as proof of their loyalty to the Soviet project. The imposition of selective memory was an instrument of Sovietization.

In the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin, Bernhard Giesen’s (2004) two paradigms of memory, triumph and trauma, were opposed to each other politically.² The discourse of the Soviet state was unwaveringly triumphalist, while works by key authors who had experienced the war firsthand, including Vasil Bykau, were replete with trauma. Frequently, characters in late-Soviet-era Belarusian novels and short stories are tormented by their wartime memories; alternatively, they do not remember events at all, but are forced to relive them through flashbacks occurring at critical junctures—they are traumatized by the horrors of war, which return to haunt them.³ Exploring the silences and disjunctures of the national memoryscape—and thereby exposing the hollowness of the official slogan “No-one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten”—a number of now-classic authors, filmmakers and artists made the war the central theme of Belarusian culture but refused the mantle of the Partisan Republic. An alternative, non-canonical Belarusianness can be gleaned from their works, sometimes concealed between the lines (as shall be seen in the case of Bykau), and sometimes declared openly (to be demonstrated here in the example of Uladzimir Karatkevich). Their

revisionist historical narratives bear features of anti-colonial writing and lay bare the traumas of war, a dual process that enables Belarusian identity to begin to come to terms with the secondary trauma of colonial subjugation. What emerges in the wake of this process is a post-colonial hybridity, as the last section of the chapter will attempt to show.

THE COLLECTIVE HERO AND THE DENIAL OF INJURY: THE MAKING OF THE PARTISAN REPUBLIC

The Partisan Republic was a cultural construct upheld by the institutions of the Soviet state. Memory was manufactured and manipulated by means of centralized control over both the “hardware” and “software” of cultural memory, that is respectively, the physical manifestations of memory, e.g. monuments and buildings, and the body of texts that describe, discuss and delimit the relevance of the past (Etkind 2009).

Two complementary but distinct strategies are available for the top-down control of memory, one productive and the other reductive. The first is myth making, an essentially creative endeavor involving the production and standardization of one or more dominant narratives; this process also requires that competing versions be erased, a fact to which we shall return in more detail. A myth is not necessarily false. Belarus was indeed the most important theater of partisan warfare, its thick forests and marshy terrain providing the ideal conditions for stealth combat (Snyder 2010: 234). According to official Soviet statistics, by January 1944, 65% of the entire underground resistance was based there, or 121,903 individuals in 723 partisan units (Musial 2004: 21). Rather, myth is a result of the monologization of language: “[a]n absolute fusion of word with concrete ideological meaning is, without a doubt, one of the most fundamental constitutive features of myth” (Bakhtin 1994: 369). Thus, the representation of the past became a “mechanism of the state-political system,” and “books by historians did not contain any mysteries and were as similar to each other as twin brothers, only rarely differing in the set of concrete facts they discussed, and in some of the finer points” (Afanas’ev 1996: 21, 35). The sheer volume of essentially similar material about the war made the cult of victory a cultural monolith⁴: in the post-war decades, the national academy was filled with newly qualified historians, from barely three dozen in 1936 to over a thousand by the beginning of the 1980s; during the 1960s, no fewer than

60% of academics employed at the Institute of History of the republic's Academy of Sciences worked in the department of the history of the war (Lindner 1999: 377–379).

Whilst the cult of the Great Patriotic War was central to claims of Soviet legitimacy throughout the Union (Tumarkin 1994; Weiner 2001), in the Belarusian SSR it practically became the *raison d'être* of the republic. The official representation of the war held that “the Belarusian people, sparing neither its strength nor life itself, unanimously raised itself for the deathly battle against Fascism, proved itself to be a fighting nation, defending its socialist Fatherland, freedom and independence as one with all the peoples of the USSR” (Romanovskii 1975: 12). The central trope of *unity* among all Belarusians, who were loyal communists by definition, was most powerfully conveyed through the lionization of the “Belarusian partisans” who acted as a metonymic marker for Belarusian wartime activity as a whole. The partisans fought heroically under the guidance of the Communist Party, enabling victory, and the “[Belarusian] population always saw in the partisans their own armed forces, their defenders, who did everything in their power to rescue them” (Romanovskii 1975: 43). The partisans embodied the people and vice versa. According to this circular logic, all Belarusians defended the USSR because of their innate love of Soviet power, and the wartime “heroism” of the Belarusian people was the epitome of their timeless Soviet devotion. The partisans' heroics were the proof in the pudding of Soviet Belarusian identity.

A somewhat far-fetched example can illustrate the rhetorical mechanism by which national heroism was asserted as the essential feature of the war in Belarus. Although the partisans were a quintessentially *collective* hero, a number of individuals such as Konstantin Zaslonov, Ded (“Grandfather”/“Old Man”) Talash and Marat Kazei were identified as exemplary models, and one of them was given superhuman attributes in a serious work of history. Ded Talash was a Soviet partisan from a previous era, the Polish-Russian war of 1919–1921, who had been immortalized in a novella of the high Stalinist period (Iakub Kolas's *Dryhva*/“The Quagmire,” 1934). In 1941, according to an edition of the *History of the Belarusian SSR*, he “again joined the partisans. The glorious deeds of the 100-year-old Ded Talash bear witness to the fact that the entire Belarusian nation joined the partisan struggle” (Gorbunov et al. 1961: 454). Such statements may sound plainly fanciful if evaluated in terms of their truth claims, but they bear witness to the tenacity of the identity

claims being made on Belarus. In effect, the narrative mechanism is a twofold metonymy: the incredible deeds of the stand-out individual speak for the transcendental triumph of the partisan collective, and the glory of Soviet-led partisan movement—often called the “Belarusian partisans”—define the essence of the Belarusian nation: the partisan republic.

Meanwhile, as cities were rebuilt and steadily expanded, dozens of streets were named after war heroes and giant victory monuments adorned central squares; as a result, Minsk became nothing short of “a giant war memorial” (Lastouski et al. 2010: 266). A Belarusian Museum of the Great Patriotic War was founded in Moscow while the war was still in progress, and transferred to the center of Minsk as soon as the Belarusian territory had been regained (Huzhalouski 2004: 38–39); a grand redesigning in the 1960s scaled up the institution and relocated it so it became the city’s architectural centerpiece, in Central Square where it still stands (since 1984 named October Square).⁵ The 1960s saw the opening of several new “supershrines” (Tumarkin 1994: 143) of the Soviet Belarusian war cult, including the Brest Fortress Memorial Complex and the Mound of Glory on the outskirts of Minsk. A string of films that glorified anti-Nazi resistance, such as *Konstantin Zaslouov* (dir. V. Korsh-Sablin and A. Faintsymmer, 1949) and the six-part epic *Ruiny streliaiut* (“The Ruins are Shooting,” dir. V. Chatverykau, 1970–1972) earned the republic’s film studio the unofficial name of “Partizanfilm.”

Alongside myth making, the second strategy for manipulating memory is what Rory Finnin calls “discursive cleansing,” a destructive process more powerful than mere censorship, defined as “disciplining speech through coordinated epistemic and physical violence that is both retrospective and prospective in its application” (Etkind et al. 2012: 16). Public discourse about the war was purged of undesirable histories, and moreover, physical bodies were removed from society and thereby silenced, such as many thousands of wartime returnees who were sent to the camps in punishment for their wartime transgressions, real or imagined (Weiner 1999, 2001).

Among the historical realities that were erased were facts which stained the heroic image, such as partisan detraction to the auxiliary police (whether by coercion, opportunism, or ideological preference), former policemen becoming partisans, or unsavory aspects of partisan life including the coercion of civilians into providing food and supplies. Local collaboration with the occupation forces was the great taboo

of Soviet historiography of the war: the only monograph on this topic (Ramanouski 1964) employed the militant rhetoric of memory war and fundamentally de-historicized its subject, rendering it a tirade against Belarusian nationalism and anti-Soviet Western “imperialism.” Discursive cleansing thereby contributed to the “partisanization” of the war by fully transferring the site of agency to the collective: it was the *political* body which both suffered and retaliated, and finally claimed victory. This entailed the purging of any signs of the traumatic effects of war as experienced by individuals. As a rule, individual deaths feature in war narratives as sacrifices in pursuit of the greater cause. Claiming the Soviet collective as the only actor in the hostilities, official memory generalized ethnicity, blotting out the specific suffering of Belarus’ considerable Jewish population, as well as Jewish involvement in partisan units (Rudling 2013).

At the most basic level, however, it was *bodily injury* in general, and its sensory correlate *pain*, which were purged from the official memoscape. A clear illustration of this is the treatment of Vasil Bykau’s novella *Mertvym ne balits’* (“The Dead Feel No Pain,” 1965): the author endured a battery of scathing reviews from conservative critics. A lengthy review in the newspaper *Sovetskaiia Belorussia*, for example, was entitled “Against the Truth of Life” (*Vopreki pravde zhizni*), and inveighed against the work’s “distortion of historical truth and veracity” and “incorrect, distorted representation of the sources of the mass heroism of the Soviet people” (Shapran 2009: 408–409).

The story’s narrative alternates, like many of Bykau’s works, between the present day and the protagonist’s experience of war. It opens with the former officer Vasilevich arriving in Minsk to attend the 20th anniversary celebrations of the victory over Nazism. Significantly, he is physically disabled because of wounds suffered during the war. A chance encounter with a stranger causes him to remember vividly his wartime sufferings, many of which were exacerbated by the abuse of power by a SMERSH officer in the unit—whom the present-day stranger resembles. Vasilevich’s newfound acquaintance turns out to be more than a lookalike of his erstwhile tormentor, however. He is also an ideological double, who served on Stalinist military tribunals and sentenced many soldiers to the camps. The arguments which ensue between the two present-day characters reflect the epistemological conflict which characterized Belarusian society in the Thaw era. Vasilevich suffers physically and emotionally, and is alienated from the triumphant celebrations which are taking place in the city. He feels threatened by the fireworks which

accompany the victory parade, and remains on the fringes of the event. In a passage censored from the published version, he riles against the Minsk war memorial, calling it an “oversized, not very original monument, built in the spirit of the pompous canons of the cult [i.e. Stalin] period... It has absolutely nothing to do with Belarus” (Shapran 2009: 376). The story’s title theme of pain features throughout, and an anguished refrain closes the narrative: “If only it weren’t for the pain” (Bykau 1980–1982: 347). Vasilevich, whose name is derived from the author’s own, is a vehicle for Bykau’s own objections to the victory cult—he returns pain to the memory of the war. His interlocutor in the story is clearly the embodiment of official triumphalism. Bykau must have grasped the cruel irony of his reviewers echoing the opinions of his character in their attack on his work. Indeed, he later reflected on the episode that: “nowhere did [those reviewers] write anything about SMERSH, the NKVD, or the KGB. As if the story had nothing to do with those ‘organs.’ I read and couldn’t understand: is this deliberate, or have they misunderstood my work?” (Shapran 2009: 428). Avoiding the subject matter of the novella, Bykau’s critics demonstrated that the partisan myth was not subject to criteria of historical verisimilitude and verifiability—despite the assertions they made. Rather, it was a matter of identity and faith. The Soviet version of memory, with no connection to Belarus in Bykau’s opinion, was above all a sign of the nation’s Soviet fidelity, both past and present.

ALTERNATIVE HISTORY AND ALTERNATIVE MEMORY

Despite the troubles he endured with *Mertvym ne balits’*, Vasil Bykau persisted in his literary struggle against the victory cult. His dedication to treating a multiplicity of war-related perspectives and themes over several decades is a testament to the perniciousness of official memory as he perceived it. During the war, the author had been a frontline officer, yet it was the unfamiliar experiences of partisans that he depicted in many of his mature works.

The novella *Kruhlyanski most* (“The Bridge at Kruhlyany,” 1968) is perhaps the most direct affront to partisan heroization. The story revolves around two teenagers, both victims in different ways. The first is the principal character Stsiapan Taukach, who is for his young years a seasoned partisan. At the outset of the tale, he is in confinement at a partisan base, awaiting a military tribunal. The remainder tells us why: on a

routine exercise in a four-man team, he is betrayed by two of his fellow fighters. They firstly allow the leader, a positive character much admired by Taukach, to die needlessly. They then recruit a second eager teenager with the sole aim of using him as a decoy, in a plan which is designed to sacrifice the boy’s life. Angered by the second death in particular, Taukach shoots the more senior of the two rogue partisans and becomes embroiled in a disciplinary affair. The narrative ends with Taukach waiting for the commissar’s arrival, confident of his innocence.

In this story, the roughness of partisan life is laid bare at multiple levels. If the sinister betrayals which make up the basic plot show “the banditry, anarchy and cruelty of the some of the partisans’ detachments” (Gimpelevich 2005: 85), the portrayal of the motivations behind the actions conveys the ordinariness of individual fighters. Foreshadowing devices at the outset also point to abjection as a defining experience of many partisans: a description of Taukach’s harsh treatment at the hands of his partisan captors is followed by an overview of his first experiences of partisan life. His recruitment was marred by mistakes which led to temporary imprisonment, after which he was abandoned by his fellows during a police raid, and similar cases of mistreatment (Bykau 1980–1982: 3/348). The lack of a definitive conclusion to the story—that we never find out whether Taukach is acquitted—makes the young man’s defiance the lasting impression of the novella. Rather than the justice of Soviet military law, it is Taukach’s youthful honesty and bravery which shines through, against his sharply contrasting partisan experience.

The joint taboos of collaboration and betrayal are the themes of stories such as *Sotnikau* (translated as “The Ordeal,” 1970) and *Paistsi i ne viarnutstva* (“To Go and Not Return,” 1978). Both feature pairs of partisans as protagonists, one of whom decides to defect. The narration alternates between the two perspectives, a dense explication of their innermost thoughts on a situation-by-situation basis. This device serves to chart the various justifications for treacherous behavior, thereby contextualizing immorality and muddying the ethical portraits of the characters. They are neither partisan heroes, nor inherently evil collaborators—the moral dualism of Soviet official discourse is negated. These two novellas also feature minor characters whose exchanges with the partisans cast the movement as a whole in an ambivalent light. For instance, one of the lesser heroes of *Sotnikau* is a village elder (*starasta*, a local official acting as liaison with the occupation forces). When the two partisans come to ask him for food, he firstly implies that partisans usually

come looking for vodka, then he exposes the shallowness of their line of questioning:

Do you read?

Sure, reading is no harm to anyone.

Soviet or German books?

The Bible.

Oh yeah? Interesting. I've never seen a Bible...

...

You are an enemy. And do you know how we deal with our enemies?

That depends on to whom one is an enemy. – replied the old man, as if not seeing the impending danger, quietly but firmly.

To your own. Russians.

To my own I am no enemy. (Bykau 1980–1982: 2/157–158)

If the first exchange is a veiled attack on the dualism of the Soviet worldview, the second reinforces that notion by revealing the foreignness of the two main characters to the place in which the action unfolds. The *starasta*, as we learn later in the story, is indeed acting in the interests of his villagers in working for the occupiers, protecting them by acting as a buffer. Whilst the partisans consider themselves and, importantly, the *starasta*, to be “Russians,” this is a label he rejects. Rather than answering positively that he is a Belarusian, however, he covertly reproduces an age-old trope of Belarusian anti-colonial discourse, the trope of “localness” (*tuteishasts'*): he does not name an identity (see Pershai 2008). Similarly, in a scene in *Paistsi i ne viarnutstva*, the partisans ask some villagers whether any “foreigners” (*chuzhyyia*) have entered the village. Their answer is non-committal, suggesting that partisans are just as foreign as Germans (Bykau 1980–1982: 3/155).

It may be argued that in these stories, the partisans are themselves victims—a message which in itself contradicts the official pathos surrounding these quintessential heroes. Their deceit, betrayal, and other troubles are conditioned by circumstance and universal human weakness. They are not, as individuals, at fault. However it is the smaller characters, the non-combatants, the innocent and often terrified villagers, who put the partisan woes into perspective. Bykau endows his fighters with individual voices, giving us elaborate pictures of the tragedy of warfare, but his real sympathies appear to lie with those who speak in fragments, only in answer to questions posed, who avoid the gaze of others

and are half-hidden from the reader. This is an impression reinforced by a later novel, *Znak Biady* ("The Sign of Misfortune," 1982) in which just such a family becomes the main focus. In Bykau's partisan stories, these villagers are the subaltern under-class created by Soviet myth making, mistreated by the history of the war and excluded from its memory. Bykau's skill lies in the way he illuminates their presence, countering the pathos of the partisan myth with the espousal of a hidden, undefinable Belarusian identity.

Whereas Bykau confronts the partisan myth by writing alternative histories, the anti-colonial rhetoric of Uladzimir Karatkevich (1930–1984) rests on alternative memories: i.e. if Bykau's stories animate the history of the war in a vastly different light to the state discourse, Karatkevich offers other periods of the past as models for Belarusian identity. Karatkevich's *oeuvre* includes very few works related to twentieth-century conflict; he is best known for his historical fiction set in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. The major work which combines these two subjects is his first full-length novel, *Nel'ha zabyts'* ("One Cannot Forget," 1962), whose publication as a book was suppressed for two decades.⁶ Here, a connection is made between the January Uprising of 1863 (an event to which he would return several times in later writings) and the present day, in the form of a love story. The anti-Russian rebellion of Polish–Lithuanian nobles in the territory of Belarus acts as the reference point for an ideological resistance which identifies the official Soviet war cult as an oppressor of national memory.

In the prologue, set in the 1860s during the uprising in Belarus, a Russian officer helps a desperate woman whose insurgent husband is awaiting execution by the imperial authorities. The officer, Horau (Gorov in Russian), is appalled by the behavior of his fellow officer, a loyalist Belarusian who impedes the woman's passage to the site of the execution. The woman fails to reach her husband, even though she holds a letter of pardon signed by the Tsar himself. Horau then challenges his companion to a duel, killing him, thereby avenging the wrongly killed warrior and earning the respect of the aggrieved wife. In the main body of the novel, the action moves to Moscow a century later, where an aspiring author named Hrynkevich arrives from Belarus to join a literary-historical study course. Hrynkevich, a descendant of the prologue's executed insurgent, falls in love with an instructor named Iryna Horava, whose ancestor was the officer who tried to save the elder Hrynkevich. The two protagonists' ultimately tragic romance provides a sentimental

reconciliation after the historical injustices depicted in the prologue. Moreover, Hrynkevich's memory of World War II adds a dimension of confrontation with official methods of commemoration.

Traumatized as a teenager by events of the war, Hrynkevich's bitterness translates into a discontent with the post-war aftermath in Soviet society. He has a number of arguments about the meaning of World War II, including with Horava:

I am thinking about the people whose lives were shattered by those events, who lay with their eyes wide open in 1937 and then voluntarily went to the front in 1941. Maybe it's worth staying silent, not destroying those people's faith.

Here Hrynkevich lost his temper.

Don't you think that the truth is better than hypnosis? (Karatkevich 1987–1990: 3/150)

Hrynkevich's experience of Stalinist terror is only hinted at, but his memorial forthrightness is a theme which permeates his character throughout the novel. Through the figure of Hrynkevich, Karatkevich exposes the yawning gap between official discourse's purportedly comprehensive commemoration of the war and the denial of injury, in this case inflicted by Stalinism. Later on in the story, Hrynkevich has another row with a fellow intellectual about the significance of the bygone war. He looks through the window and becomes immersed in his thoughts: "In all certainty, when they shot the [World War II] partisans, the blood must have been very red against such snow. The motherland [*radzima*], red against white, blood on snow" (Karatkevich 1987–1990: 3/202). In this phrase, Karatkevich evokes the colors of the pre-Soviet alternative Belarusian flag,⁷ a white-red-white tricolor drawn into the snow in the blood of executed partisans. Thus, Hrynkevich mourns the losses of the past by making connections between different eras: in the first example, World War II and Stalin's purges; and in the second, the war and the nationalist uprisings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Similarly, the tragic romance with Horava, which unfolds amidst the echoes of the 1863 rebellion, turns into mourning after her death from a fatal disease. These acts of double mourning hint at the connection between military rebellions such as the January Uprising and an alternative war memory: both are forms of national resistance. Hrynkevich's musing on the

partisans’ blood implies that for Karatkevich, the partisan idea belongs to an older tradition of resistance, the memory of which need not contradict a process of sincere mourning for the victims of the recent war.

Bykau and Karatkevich were among a generation of artists who defied official strictures and articulated a perspective which was grounded in local (Belarusian) history, especially the trauma of personal injury and collective loss. The former’s alternative histories of the war foregrounded individual experience and resonated with readers’ actual memories of the war: Bykau “gave them all a voice” (Gimpelevich 2005: vii). The latter’s appeal to remember and value pre-Soviet models of Belarusian identity debunked official representations of the war. Thus, in their anti-colonial discourse, they enabled modes of identity other than the Soviet uniformity demanded by the concept of the Partisan Republic.

THE PARTISAN AS PASTICHE AND PARODY: BELARUSIAN PARTISANS AND DE-SOVIETIZATION

In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the state-sanctioned restrictions on discourse were lifted. As the horizons of permissible expression broadened, so the reconstitution of a post-colonial subjectivity within new political borders became a narrative imperative. As a now-classic analysis of post-colonial writing puts it: “[t]he crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it with a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 38). In Belarus after 1991, “seizing the language of the centre” did not necessarily mean using *Russian* as a linguistic medium in which to deconstruct colonial discourse as, say, African and Caribbean literatures have embraced English and French, subverting those languages’ lexical and grammatical norms in the process. Rather, the task of reconstructing a “discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” involved the *ideational* rewriting of Belarusian memory: it inevitably entailed a de-Sovietization of the partisan concept.

However, in Belarus, unlike in other ex-Soviet republics, (re-)nationalization was a short-lived affair. Aliaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994 on an electoral platform that tapped Soviet nostalgia, and since then has employed a policy of recycling the Soviet past in order to prop up its state ideology (Lewis 2011: 372–373). Expensive renovations of

Soviet-era museums, combined with new memorials and monuments, have contributed to an expansion of the commemorative arsenal, whilst the state has also gradually adapted its practices to fulfill a nationalizing agenda: the war myth has become less Soviet and more Belarusian, but the sacralization of partisan heroes is largely unchanged (Rudling 2008 and Chap. 3; Marples 2012, 2014).

Meanwhile, a new generation of artists and activists has sought to redefine Belarusian identity. Whereas some have sought to nationalize the partisan, others have preferred a strategy that can be defined as hybridity, i.e. the “creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zones produced by colonization” (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 96). The former open themselves up to the criticism that “the efforts of the native to rehabilitate himself and to escape from the claws of colonialism are logically inscribed from the same point of view of colonialism” (Fanon 1967: 170). However, the advocates of a hybrid, in-between Belarusianness seek “not to restore lost forms of telling and knowing but to pick apart the disjunctive moments of discourses authorized by colonialism and authenticated by the nation-state and rearticulate them in another—third—form of writing history” (Prakash 1992: 17).

A glaring example of the tendency to nationalize the partisan is a collective of historians based around the journal *Belaruskі Rezystans* (“Belarusian Resistance”). Siarhei Iorsh and his collaborators have tried to “return” what they claim is the “real Belarusian partisan” to national memory: according to their argument, an anti-Soviet Belarusian insurgent army was fighting the Soviet order in the forests of Belarus until as late as 1957 (see also Rudling, Chap. 3). However, their research is based on a suspect methodology and makes highly exaggerated claims, using few archival sources; instead, they tend to rely on the memoirs of émigré intellectuals, who had little or no contact with Belarus at the time of writing, and were clearly motivated to aggrandize anti-Soviet, nationalist sentiment in Belarus (Grzybowski 2011: 515–530). In addition to these historical writings on the Belarusian partisan, a number of “documentary” films have been made and aired under the label of “PartyzanFilm” (*ПартызанФіlm*, using Belarusian spelling), placing an uncompromising nationalist slant on the historical record. Thus, in their *Belarus under German Occupation* (“Belarus’ pad nemetskai akupatsyiai,” 2009), the Nazi *Generalkommissar* Wilhelm Kube is incongruously glorified as a Belarusian nationalist.⁸

A non-historicizing nationalization of the partisan is achieved by the rock outfit N.R.M. (*Nezalezkaia Respublika Mroia*, “Independent Republic of Dreams”), which has enjoyed great popularity in post-Soviet Belarus partly thanks to its espoused patriotism. In 1997, they released a studio album (“Made in N.R.M.”) in which partisan themes play a major role. These songs, the most explicit of which is named simply *Partyzanskaia*, declare that Belarusians are indeed partisans, proud sons of their homeland who fight foreign occupation:

[Chorus]

We are partisans, forest brothers.

We are partisans, on familiar terms with war.

We are partisans, we love our country.

We’ll cleanse our country from foreign bands.

The use of the present tense in the chorus, as well as verse lines such as “it’s clear that we’ll have to dig up our machine guns again, it’s clear that we’ll have to shoot again,” leave no doubt that the foreign occupier is not the Germans of over five decades previously. Written and performed in the years following the rise of the Lukashenka dictatorship, N.R.M. reclaimed the partisan theme as a weapon in the contemporary political struggle against the pro-Russian and neo-Soviet Lukashenka regime. Whilst the regime resurrected Soviet modes of memory for its own legitimation, N.R.M. turned those very same models against them through creative inversion.

A hybridizing approach is provided by the poet-humorist, Andrei Khadanovich. In his *Pesnia Belorusskikh partizan* (“Song of the Belarusian Partisans,” 1999), Khadanovich employs absurd rhymes to subvert the Soviet partisan myth by poetic stealth. The poem is a parody of a famous Soviet military chant (*Oi tumany moi, rastumany* by M. Isakovskii and V. Zakharov) and is written in Russian, unusually for Khadanovich in particular and for Belarusian poetry in general; it has a few Belarusian words thrown into suggest that the partisans are speaking in the hybrid tongue of culturally Russified Belarusians. This linguistic choice makes a mockery of the idea of the *Belarusian* partisan, and the iconoclasm builds up in the verses. Khadanovich opens by crudely rhyming “Partisans” with “Tarzans,” and sends the partisans off on a round-the-world trip to various exotic lands:

O, Tarzans, forest Tarzans!
 Long live the monkey King Kong!
 Off to camp went the Partisans,
 Off to faraway Hong Kong! (Khadanovich 1999)

The middle stanzas are each set in a different country, and bizarre rhymes combine to give surreal events and descriptions which parody and sometimes invert the traditional heroic descriptions, for example:

The popular masses do not give in
 and go off to Tibet to fight...
 The Belarusian super-pilots
 have still not suffered victory!

Following the arc of the poetic narrative, however, are subtle references to real politics: the partisans' bumbling world conquest sees them overhaul Pol Pot and Ho Chi Minh, and the final stanza's reference brings them to Belavezha Forest, suggesting the poem's "plot" is an adventure to destroy Communism which ends with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁹ The poem's close has the Belarusian partisans issue a warning to Moscow after their symbolic "return" from Belavezha:

They cried "hooray" thrice,
 at the edge of the Eurasian landmass,
 and then turned around,
 and departed for the Belavezha Forest.
 And then they turned around again—
 start shivering now, *Moskals!*¹⁰

Khadanovich's poem hints at the ongoing relevance of the partisan myth in the de-Sovietized context, stripping the partisans of their Soviet-era triumphalism and also featuring the anti-imperial themes noted in the work of N.R.M. above. However, the poet simultaneously ridicules the idea of an anti-colonial, nationalized partisan through linguistic trickery and the poetics of the absurd. This ambivalent treatment reveals a delicate awareness of the danger of restorative historicism in a nationalist vein: Khadanovich refuses to create new myths, preferring to side with ironic subversion.

The nationalistic commitment of N.R.M and the postmodern playfulness of Khadanovich are brought under one editorial “roof” by the contemporary journal *pARTisan*. Edited by conceptual artist Artur Klinau, the journal was founded in 2002 with an opening manifesto which provided an intriguing explanation of the choice of title. Klinau, who authored the text and was perhaps taking some of his cues from Karatkevich, argued that the theory of the partisan had been the life-blood of Belarusian culture since the Partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century, when the Belarusian lands were fully incorporated into the Russian Empire. The imposition of the Soviet myth of the partisan, however, was an aberration which not only colonized the cultural space of Belarus but also overhauled the very concept of the partisan, causing the partisan idea to splinter within itself. In his words:

The appearance in the Belarusian cultural sphere of the Soviet god-hero—the Great Partisan—creates a surrealistic image of the parallel existence of two partisans; meanwhile, the anti-partisan becomes the referent for the partisan. The anti-partisan is the demon in the midst of the simulacra of Soviet gods. (Klinau 2002: 19)

Now, therefore, the time has come to revive the Belarusian partisan via the figure of the anti-partisan, that is, by a cultural resistance which is at once partisan-like in its stealth and political commitment, but once-removed from the tainted legacy of the Soviet partisan.

Khadanovich and Klinau’s explicitly postmodern treatments of the partisan support Linda Hutcheon’s (1988: 4) assertion that literary postmodernism is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political.” *Pesnia Belorusskikh partizan* and the manifesto for *pARTisan* are examples of *parody* of the Soviet myth of the Partisan Republic, and for Hutcheon “[p]arody is the perfect postmodern form, ... for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (ibid.: 11). The nationalized partisan, however, can be analyzed in terms of Fredric Jameson’s rival theory of postmodernism, against which Hutcheon is polemicizing. For Jameson, postmodern culture can only be *pastiche*, because “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in imaginary museum of ... culture” (Jameson 1991: 17–18).

Therefore, the postmodern and the post-colonial combine and coexist in Belarus' post-Soviet space. The Belarusian post-colonial condition is characterized, on the one hand, by a dependency on the lingering hold of the colonial myth: the partisan is still the master signifier of Belarusian identity and it consigns culture to pastiche. On the other hand, the partisan has been appropriated by the opposition discourse: a new, hybrid form of Belarusianness is emerging as a cultural construct, in which the Soviet partisan is parodied and reinvented. Nonetheless, both trends compete with the Soviet and neo-Soviet partisan myth. The renewed memory wars of "Europe's last dictatorship" call for a reformed and de-Sovietized partisan.

CONCLUSION

"Fighting" against official discourse in the face of censorship and state violence is inherently similar to being a partisan. Thus, the Soviet-era prose of Vasil Bykau (1924–2003) has been described as "a campaign of partisan warfare, of indefatigable, relentless attrition [against Soviet orthodoxy]" (Ellis 2011: 108). Originally a colonial myth, the Partisan Republic also became a metaphor describing the epistemic struggle raging within Soviet Belarusian society. The irony of the Partisan Republic creating the conditions for a new guerrilla war of memory was not lost on Belarusian culture, and became an explicit theme after 1991.

Perhaps fittingly, cultural rebellion does remain metaphorically underground. State violence has been a defining feature of Lukashenka's Belarus, and there is a history of reaction against writers, musicians and historians whose criticism of the regime threatens to gain popularity. For example, the first major independent film in Belarus, Andrei Kudzinenka's *Okkupatsiia. Misterii* ("Mysterium Occupation," 2003) was banned from cinemas for more than five years, ostensibly for its unfavorable portrayal of the wartime partisans (see Lewis 2011). In 2010, the opposition newspaper *Narodnaia Volia* ran a series of historical articles which challenged official histories of the war and the partisan movement. Its offices were picketed by angered supporters of Lukashenka and the newspaper was threatened with closure. In late 2012, the scholarly journal *ARCHE* was closed down, and its editor-in-chief forced to emigrate, after a forthcoming issue on the history of the war was confiscated by the authorities. (The journal re-emerged several months later, with a new editor.)

Yet the cultural forms which do reach the surface represent a distinct movement which seeks not only to “correct” the history of the partisan movement at the factual level, but to appropriate the myth and redefine Belarusian identity. Analysis of the diverse forms of the de-Sovietization of the partisan idea reveals that in post-Soviet conditions the partisan is far from a unifying symbol. Multiple narratives of Belarusian partisanhood compete with each other, as well as with the Lukashenka regime’s resurrection of Soviet myths about the war. It has even been suggested, on the pages of *pARTisan* itself, that the partisan idea is “dead” because the political conditions under which culture evolves have changed (Artsimovich et al. 2012: 10–12). In summer 2016, a project was announced that hints at the further self-ironization of the partisan idea. Andrei Kureichik, a popular film director, declared that he was working on an “eccentric youth comedy—if you like, a [Belarusian] equivalent of *The Hangover* [a 2009 Hollywood comedy].” The project is entitled *PARTY-ZAN Film*, and the plot is said to follow young Belarusians trying to “make money ... by making films! By using the fact that in our country, from year to year, war films are made” (“Partizanfil’m.” 2016). Kureichik, it appears, is embarking on a near-total carnivalization of the partisan trope, satirically mixing Hollywood-style comic debauchery with a mocking treatment of the country’s traditional obsession with World War II. Detaching “partisan” culture from both the Soviet cult of the war and the post-Soviet opposition to this cult, *PARTY-ZAN Film* may be the next heuristic step in the decolonization of Belarusian war memory.

Thus, when Belarusians now say, perhaps jokingly, that their country is a Partisan Republic, they may no longer be referring to World War II. And if they are, they may no longer be proud of it. Whether they have found a way out of Bykau’s “rosy fog” is debatable, but they are increasingly aware of it, and learning to live with its effects.

NOTES

1. In Bykau’s novel *Kar’er* (1986), conversation plays an important role in bringing to the surface suppressed stories about the war.
2. See Kukulin (2005) for an overview of this theme in the Russian context.
3. See, for instance, prose works by Ales’ Adamovich, Vasil Bykau and Viktor Kaz’ko.

4. There was, of course, a significant shift in emphasis from the Stalin period to later decades. Whereas during Stalin's lifetime, official historians underlined the leader's personal role in guiding the Soviet Union to victory, later histories emphasize the collective leadership of the Communist Party. Also, there were major shifts from decade to decade regarding the aspects of the war (and Soviet history generally) which could be spoken of. However, especially in Belarus, the overall mode of representation of the Great Patriotic War was very stable. See Kulish (1996) and Kuz'menko (1998).
5. In contrast, a central Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow was planned from the 1950s onwards, but only opened in 1995.
6. Having first appeared in the literary journal *Polymia* in 1962, it only appeared in book form in 1982.
7. The white-red-white tricolor was the symbol of the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic of 1918, and later of anti-Soviet Belarusian nationalist movements. It is still actively used today as an alternate national flag by opponents of Aliaksandr Lukashenka.
8. See Rein (2011: 148–152) for a detailed explication of Kube and his motives.
9. The signing of the Belavezha accords in December 1991 officially brought an end to the USSR.
10. The untranslatable *moskali* is a pejorative term which denotes Russians.

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