

Henadz Sahanovich

## THE WAR AGAINST BELARUSIAN HISTORY

“A.G. Lukashenka is very persistent in struggling against the falsification of history, particularly in secondary school textbooks.”

*Statement by the non-governmental organisation “Historical Knowledge”*

During the Soviet era, the history of Belarus did not exist as a separate subject in the curricula of secondary and higher educational institutions of the BSSR. It was studied as a part of the history of the USSR, or, de facto, Russia. The situation had not changed before the break up of the Soviet Union, when history as a science was freed from party control and a new political reality called for the appropriate renewal of historical education. The change began as early as 1991 with the publication of a conceptual draft for historical education in Belarus. According to the new concept, the history of the USSR was taken out of the curricula and its entire content was moved to world history, while the history of Belarus was granted the status of a separate subject — for the first time ever. The guiding principles of the adopted concept oriented the teaching of history toward the realisation of the national specificity of Belarus, the revival of historical memory and national awareness, and recognising patriots of Belarus regardless of their ethnic origin.<sup>1</sup> Those priorities were matched by the new curriculum of historical education developed by a competent committee of scientists and pedagogues chaired by Mikhas Bich and published as a separate paper after its trial publication in newspapers. Following this curriculum, experts developed 20 new aids on history that were published in Belarusian before the beginning of the 1993/94 school year. For the first

time in Belarus, the country's history was considered from the general viewpoint of the nation, not of class relations. The origin of Belarusian state traditions was associated with the Polatsk Duchy and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The authors unveiled the devastating wars that Muscovite Tsars fought in Belarus, and were decidedly negative in their evaluation of the totalitarian Soviet system.

The new textbooks interpreted the Belarusian past in an entirely new way, free of Soviet spin



<sup>1</sup> The Teacher's Newspaper. November 30, 1991.

which irritated the devotees of the bygone regime. Alaksandar Lukashenka's election as president spelt the end of democratically-oriented historians and set the stage for the return of a Soviet-style vision of the past. With replicas of the Soviet-style state symbols newly installed, Belarus' new leaders turned their attention to Belarusian historical science and began to shape interpretative models in accordance with the Soviet vision of the past. Since that time historical education in the country has become a battlefield under the keen eye of state ideologists.

In August 1995 the Main Department of Socio-political Information headed by Wladimir Zametalin announced, through the state-owned media, the president's decision to ban new textbooks on history and revert to the old, Soviet-era textbooks. Panic struck the Ministry of Education as such a move was unfeasible on purely technical grounds. On learning this Lukashenka publicly declared that the instruction to revert to the old textbooks did not in fact exist. A special conference with the president and representatives of the Ministry of Education on August 23, 1995 ended with the decision to temporarily allow the use of the "national democratic" textbooks while preparing alternative ones for the subsequent school year. A special state commission was established in the Cabinet to review and correct teaching aids on history. The commission was chaired by Zametalin himself and its members were primarily old Stalinist-school professors, the historians Piotr Petrykaw, Alaksandar Filimonaw, and Valery Charapitsa, philosopher Vyachaslaw Dashkevich and others. Thus, Belarus had openly taken a course to divert historical education to the new (that is, old) ideological track and specifically to its re-sovietisation. It was a war against Belarusian history. Three years later, during an official conference in the National Academy of Science, president Lukashenka first publicly voiced the essence of state policy on humanitarian education: he boasted of "having overcome in the past few years the de-ideologisation of the secondary and particularly higher schools of education."<sup>2</sup>

Sifting the texts of teaching aids through the sieve of ideological censorship, the state commission was guided by Lukashenka's policy rather than historical truth. However, even censored textbooks left many members of the commission dissatisfied. It is possible that the commission members themselves inspired the complaints concerning the books they had adopted. Newspapers printed numerous letters and articles by "veterans" and "teachers" denouncing the disgraceful books. The non-governmental organisation "Historical Knowledge," founded in the spring of 1996, played a spe-

cial part in the campaign against the new textbooks and the national approach to history. It united several dozen Soviet era scientists who proclaimed themselves "the protectors and advocates of Soviet state system and power,"<sup>3</sup> and assumed the role of a kind of expert body that became surprisingly authoritative among state leaders. The group headed by Professor Adam Zaleski published a programme that promised to "fight the falsification of the past... using the world experience of revolutions and counterrevolutions."<sup>4</sup> Naturally, the "falsification fighters" were most concerned about the presentation of World War II, the evaluation of the partisan movement and the Soviet order. However, the distant past was also within their interest. The critics, for example, saw russophobia in *The History of Belarus in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries* by P. Loyka, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade textbook. They could not accept the author's positive evaluation of the 1596 Church Unia. Another "russophobe," M. Bich, author of *The History of Belarus. Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century to 1917*, was harshly criticised for not putting a positive spin on such a "great event" as the partition of Poland and Belarus' incorporation into the Russian empire. The 9<sup>th</sup> grade textbook *The History of Belarus between 1917 and 1992* by V. Sidartsow and V. Famin irritated the critics by the mere mention of a "totalitarian regime directed against the people" and "national and cultural oppression" in the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

The state commission was closely watching the curricula of teaching aids on both Belarusian and world history. From *Contemporary World History* it crossed out the definition of the term "totalitarianism," everything related to the Soviet Union's co-operation with Hitler's Germany as well as the mention of Stalin's negative role and his guilt for the beginning of World War II.<sup>6</sup>

In conjunction with criticising "disgraceful" publications, the representatives of the old Soviet school began to write their own, truly alternative textbooks, in which they evaluated events and epochs in full accordance with the regime's ideological course. For example, Vasil Milavanaw's 8<sup>th</sup> grade textbook *History of Belarus. Late 18<sup>th</sup> — 1917* printed in 1998 interpreted the partition of Poland as a "progressive move" that gave the Belarusians "an opportunity to shake off the oppression of Polish and Lithuanian landowners" (page 4). Another alternative book for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students was *The History of Belarus. Late 18<sup>th</sup> — 1999*, edited by Yauhen Novik. This book presented Russian General Mikhail Muravyov, known as the "hangman" for his cruelty in suppressing the 1863-64 national liberation uprising, as "an energetic statesman who knew well how to do what he was called upon to do." The denouncement of the 1922

<sup>2</sup> Vedy (Knowledge), #43-44 (1998).

<sup>3</sup> A. Zaleskiy. 'I Turn It the Way I Like It' // Narodnaya Gazeta. May 24, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> The statement of the scientific association "Historical Knowledge" // Narodnaya Gazeta. August 16, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> V. Chernyavskiy 'What Is the Alternative?' // Vedy. #25-26 (September 10, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Zgoda. #4. March 15-31, 1999.

USSR founding treaty and the founding of the CIS were referred to as state coups.<sup>7</sup>

The authorities paid equally close attention to historical education in institutes of higher learning. Before its re-sovietisation began, the Institute of History in the Academy of Science published the two volume *Studies of the History of Belarus* (Minsk, 1994–95) based on the national state concept. This was the first time that the country's history was rewritten in a sovereign Belarus. For the next few years it was used as an aid for students in higher educational establishments (HEES) but contradicted the new state policy of higher education. "Court" historians moved to fix the flaw, and by 1998 a group of history teachers produced an antithesis to the academic studies — a two-volume HEE aid entitled *The History of Belarus*. Its authors were so engrossed in political correctness that they made numerous factual errors while presenting the Belarusian past from the perspective of old Russian and Soviet historiography. Their product was a rehash of the history of "the north-western realm" which exasperated both the scientific public and students. The magazine "Belarusian History Review" (BHR) and the annual bulletin of the Institute of History published articles that criticised *The History of Belarus* for its numerous errors and blatant ideological re-assessment of history. The authors, however, retaliated with a political snitch: "The [BHR] magazine is edited by representatives of foreign countries, ... has its people in the USA and countries of Europe," "it is known who directs their music, who pays for it..."<sup>8</sup> The magazine was labeled as having a "pro-western, pro-BPF political and ideological orientation, being printed abroad and brought to Belarus."<sup>9</sup> The presidential periodical "Belarusian Thought" called the employees of the Institute of History "agents of western special services" who try to use the concept of history to "prevent the creation of a union state between Belarus and Russia."<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, other textbooks stamped with "passed by the Ministry of Education" (e.g., P. Chygrynaw's *Studies of the History of Belarus*) also sought to please presidential policy rather than seek historical truth.

As the campaign of textbook revision proceeded and the members of "Historical Knowledge" lodged political accusations against their opponents, the atmosphere in historical science and education turned foul. The situation was particularly charged by the open letter of old orthodox historians to Alaksandar Lukashenka eloquently entitled "The Work for the Restoration of Historical Truth Meets Furious Resistance from National Extremists."<sup>11</sup> The Board of the Belarusian Association of Historians responded with a



strong protest against labelling and attempts to turn back Belarusian historical science to the Bolshevik era.<sup>12</sup> However, the authorities openly sided with the small circle of Soviet fundamentalists who volunteered to "renew the historical truth."

Under these circumstances every attempt to revise Soviet history was met with a ferocious reaction from war veterans and Lukashenka's ardent adherents within Slav-patriotic circles. A characteristic example is the case of Ihar Kuznyatsow, a researcher of

<sup>7</sup> *The History of Belarus. Late XVIII — 1999*. A teaching aid for the 11<sup>th</sup> form. Editor: Ya.K. Novik. Minsk, 2000. pp. 59, 183.

<sup>8</sup> Ya. Novik, H. Martsul, Zi Zuyeva, I. Kachalaw, V. Lyutava. *Arguable Alternatives and Ordinary Falsification* // Education and Up-Bringing. Person, society, world. 2000. #2. P.p. 116, 128.

<sup>9</sup> Ya. Novik *To Write and Teach True History, Not Create New Myths* // The Belarusian Thought. 2000. #10. p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem p. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Narodnaya Gazeta. June 19, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> A Statement of the Board of the Belarusian Association of Historians // Narodnaya Gazeta. July 24, 1996.

Stalinist repression. Due to an intense campaign of slander conducted against him in the press he was forced to defend his honour in court. In 1998, in response to the scientific conference "Political Repression in Belarus: 1917–1997" organised by Belarusian historians, the head of "Historical Knowledge," Adam Zaleski,<sup>13</sup> and his colleagues (including artist Mikhas Savitski) requested the Prosecutor General of Belarus to initiate criminal proceedings against the authors of the conference publications in order to "protect the honour and dignity of president A. Lukashenka" (?!). Mikhail Myasnikovich, head of the presidential administration, sent a letter to the Institute of History with a stereotypical order to "sort out the workers" and "take appropriate measures." The "historians' case" was dealt with by the prosecutor's office. In addition to the voices of war veterans and their Soviet orthodox non-governmental commission (V. Korzun, A. Zaleski, etc.) who claimed that the Nazis were responsible for the mass shooting in Kurapaty, prosecutor general Aleh Bazhelka was now saying that it was unknown who was buried in Kurapaty. He alleged that the investigation was very biased before 1995 as it was conducted by "specialists of the Institute of Archaeology in the Academy of Science headed by Zyanon Paznyak."<sup>14</sup> The "new truth" about Kurapaty was becoming officially accepted.

Political censorship of historical literature was introduced in 1996. One of the first books removed from the printing list of the "Mastatskaya Litaratura" (Art Literature) publisher was (along with titles by Vasil Bykau and Larysa Heniush) *Ten Centuries of Belarusian History* by W. Arlow and H. Sahanovich. Officials considered the latter work "written tendentiously with a russophobic slant" despite the professional review the book had undergone in the Institute of History that recommended it for publication. In 1997 responsible officials secretly decided to stop the sale of a popular book *Whence Our Kin* by W. Arlow. An unmistakable sign of the introduction of censorship was the removal of the Pahonya emblem from the cover of the third volume of *The Encyclopaedia of the History of Belarus* in 1996. This was done by the new leaders of the Belarusian Encyclopaedia publisher, the deputy editor-in-chief of which was Piotr Petrykaw, formerly director of the Institute of History and one of the most zealous apologists of the bygone Soviet era. He severely criticised management of the Encyclopaedia claiming that the first volumes of *The Encyclopaedia of the History of Belarus* were permeated with "a strong anti-russianism and stubborn

russophobia."<sup>15</sup> Mr. Petrykaw cited articles written by employees of the Institute of History and accused the institute of the "complete falsification" of history. Mikhail Kastsyuk, director of the institute, and his deputy Mikhail Bich entered the debate pointing out the groundless and political nature of the accusations by their ex-colleague.<sup>16</sup> However, this failed to clear the menacing clouds that were gathering over the institute's board.

Under the new leadership of the Belarusian Encyclopaedia, the subsequent volumes of *The Encyclopaedia of the History of Belarus* were edited during the publishing process. Even articles already set for printing were withdrawn for censorship. Mr. Petrykaw completely eliminated the word "russification" and removed all criticism of Russia and the Soviet regime. This crude interference with the text resulted in many historians (in particular, Valyantsina Vyarhey, Andrey Kishtymaw, Wladimir Konan, Mikola Kryvaltsevich, Henadz Sahanovich, etc.) resigning from further co-operation with this publisher and withdrawing their articles.

The next blow to national historiography was the attack on an editorial of the historical chronicle "Pamyats" (Memory). In 1998, "Historical Knowledge" members K. Damarad and A. Khakhlow sent a letter to the presidential administration and the state committee for the press that strongly criticised the chronicle's publication as well as Ales Petrashkevich, head of its organisational and methodological centre, who allegedly belonged to "the reactionary school of Belarusian historical science" that emerged after the "counterrevolutionary revolt in October 1991."<sup>17</sup> The publisher was accused of the same old sins: its local chronicles did not highlight the importance of 1917 to the world; they diminished the role of the Communist party, socialist construction and victory in World War II; exaggerated Stalin's political repression; glorified exploiters (i.e., princes and landowners) and encouraged an anti-Russian attitude. The dispute resulted in the removal of Petrashkevich, a famous Belarusian playwright and historian, from his executive position in this important encyclopaedic centre.

The siege on the "falsifiers'" main stronghold, the Institute of History (a centre of historical studies that comprises the country's best minds), began in 1995 and is not yet over. The official press called the flagship of Belarusian historiography "a nationalistic reserve"<sup>18</sup> and complained that its activity "contradicts the historical truth and the policy of the president of the Republic of Belarus."<sup>19</sup> The most vicious attacks were made by the newspaper "Vedy"

<sup>13</sup> A. Zaleski published the book 'I.V. Stalin and the Treachery of His Political Opponents', Minsk, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> A. Prakaiovich. 'Prosecutors Get Hold of Historians' // Naviny. #119 (November 6, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> P. Petrykaw. 'The Mist of Russophobia Shrouds in the Belarusian Encyclopaedia' // The Belarusian Thought. 1996. #3.

<sup>16</sup> M. Kastsyuk. 'Politicised History Cannot Be true Science' // Holas Radzimy. August 8, 1996; M. Bich. 'The Mist of Dilettantism and Tendentiousness' // Holas Radzimy. September 12, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> A. Petrashkevich. 'The Old Hoop of a Mankurt is Back above the Head of the Belarusian' // Narodnaya Volya. December 22, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Optimal Version is the Golden Mean': An interview with N. Stashkevich // Byelorusskaya Niva. 1999. #402.

<sup>19</sup> P. Petrykaw. 'The Mist of Russophobia Shrouds in the Belarusian Encyclopaedia' // The Belarusian Thought. 1996. #3.



(Knowledge), a periodical of the National Academy of Science and the Ministry of Education. Mr. V. Dashkevich, member of the State Commission for Teaching Aids, was appointed editor-in-chief. The newspaper's most persistent and crude criticism was aimed at the academic *Studies of the History of Belarus*, which it accused of the same old "anti-Russian orientation and diminishing the role of the Soviet period"<sup>20</sup> as well as a general distortion of history. The critics tried to present the historians of the Academy of Science as professionally inept and placed the main blame on Mikhail Kastsyuk, the director of the institute. Printing dilettantish, often anti-scientific articles by members of "Historical Knowledge," permeated with emotion and political clichés, Vedy's editor-in-chief promised to assemble them into a special teaching aid "with which all secondary schools and HEEs must become familiar."<sup>21</sup> To prevent the re-election of Academician Kastsyuk as director, the Presidium of the Academy of Science violated its own statutes and did not announce a contest for the vacancy. Moreover, in October 1999 during the celebration of the Academy's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary its president Alaksandar Vaytovich made severe political accusations (reaching the level of insult) regarding the institute's management. One month later he issued an edict assigning Mikalay Stashkevich as acting director of the Institute of History. The new appointee once worked for the Institute of History of the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party.

An expressive symbol of the organised attack on the Institute of History was a memorial board attached to its wall in early 2000. The tablet commemorated, in the Russian language, Pavel Horyn, a former president of the Belarusian Academy of Science and the person entrusted by the Bolsheviks to smash the national democrats and organise an academy that would be "truly communist and subordinate to the interests of socialist construction."<sup>22</sup>

It would appear that Mikalay Stashkevich has not yet accomplished the task to re-educate the academic historians. The viability of the faculty of the Institute of History and the inefficiency of the bulldozer policy were shown by the elections to its scientific council in early 2000. Primarily scientists with an expressed professional, civil, and national attitude were elected in secret voting. Therefore the academic presidium, despite its promise to hold an official election for director by the end of 2000, never dared give the institute's employees the lawful opportunity to elect their leader themselves. Instead, academy president Alaksandar Vaytovich publicly warned that he had a plan to abolish the Institute of History and, in its place, establish a national institute of history within the presidential administration, em-

ploying only cadre with a suitable political orientation. Perhaps, that would be the only way to get rid of those who, out of their professional duty, do not agree with placing historical science at the service of a political regime.

If this plan is implemented and the presidential administration gains control over historical science, one can only guess what the newly-fledged historians will "discover" about Belarusian history! The credo of the "correct" coverage of Belarus' history (in fact, a pathetic version of "west-Russian" and pan-Slavic theories) was recently expressed by one of these "experts" in a publication of the institute of socio-political studies of the presidential administration: "The Belarusian... by his theoretical and practical life is a Russian person" whereas the anti-Slavic West "is fighting a total information and psychological war against the pan-Russian worldview of our people..."<sup>23</sup> No comment.



**Henadz Sahanovich**, born 1961. Graduated from the faculty of history of the Minsk Pedagogical Institute (1984), studies for a doctor's degree at the Institute of History at the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. Since 1987 has been working in the Institute of History of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. Published few books devoted to the history of Belarus and The Duchy of Lithuania.

<sup>20</sup> A. Zaleski. 'On the Account of the "national concept" ' // Vedy. September 24, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Vedy. January 28, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> S. Kandybovich. 'The Defeat of the National Movement in Belarus'. Minsk, 2000. p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> L. Krishchapovich. 'Belarus and the Russian Civilisation'. Rus and Belarus. Minsk: the Institute of Socio-Political Research within the Administration of the president of the RB, 1999. pp. 134–135.