

# Belarus Headlines

Issue XV

September 19 – October 2, 2007



Office for a Democratic  
Belarus

## Inside this issue

**Interview with  
historian Dr. Ihar  
Kuzniatsou** 1-3

**Politics and Society** 4-5

**Economic News** 5-6

**EU and Belarus** 6-7

## Culture News

**Vasil Bykau  
Writing Freedom** 8-9

## Ihar Kuzniatsou: “Repressions are Both History and Reality in Belarus”

*A wave of terror swept over the Soviet Union 70 years ago. 1937 became the bloodiest year in the history of the Soviet-era repressions. Why did the communist regime resort to the policy of massive executions and deportation? How big was the scale of the repressions? Which place do they have in minds of the Belarusians today? These and many other questions are answered by Dr.*

*Ihar Kuzniatsou, coordinator of the Belarusian branch of the International historic and educational charitable association “Memorial”, member of the Belarusian Association of Journalists.*

**In the countries of the former Soviet Union, the words “Stalin” and “repressions” traditionally go together. Is it correct to limit the period of repressions with the beginning and the end of the Stalin’s rule?**

No, of course not. Active repressions began much earlier, immediately after the “October coup” of 1917. *Cheka*, the first Soviet secret service, was created in December 1917, headed by Dzerzhinski. This organization was the first to adopt the practice of extrajudicial executions. Political enemies were eliminated without even keeping up appearance of any courts or tribunals.

**Which periods would you**

**single out in the history of the Soviet repressions?**

Historians speak about the period of active repressions beginning with the October coup in 1917 and coming to an end with the death of Stalin in 1953. After that, the era of Khrushchev and Brezhnev came, and the repressions became much milder. The repressions die away during Perestroika and cease after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.

However, in Belarus, unlike in most other former Soviet Republics, the repressions continue until now, moreover – they are building up.

**How many people were subject to the repressions in the Soviet Union?**

The first official information was published in 1991. It was said, that about 3 mln. people were subject to repressions during the Soviet rule, including 600,000 of those who were executed. However, these numbers were deliberately lowered. No less than 20 mln. people were murdered during this time, and according to some sources – almost 60 mln. Speaking about the number of the repressed, the range is enormous, but in any case it is dozens of millions.

**How extensive were repressions in Belarus?**

According to the official information, about 600,000



people were repressed in Belarus. The independent research shows, however, that not less than 1,5 mln. people became victims in our country. Note, that this number does not include those who were repressed psychologically and economically. Children and spouses of the “public enemies” were fired from their jobs and could neither find one again, nor receive any financial support from the state.

**What was the ultimate goal of the repressions? Why did the Soviet state adopt such a brutal policy towards its people?**

Why did the Soviet regime need repressions? Nobody has found an answer to this question, and probably no one ever will. In the USSR one didn’t even have to have a single “wrong” thought in order to become a “public enemy”. It is hard to

## Repressions are both history and reality of Belarus...

comprehend how massive this process was. When you study cases of that period, you see that in the mid-30s it was mostly intelligentsia, which was repressed. Already in 1937, repressions touched literally everyone. In the execution lists one can find kolkhoz peasants, unemployed, housewives, etc. And, most unbelievable, two thirds of these people were absolutely loyal towards the Soviet rule! The people, who didn't have a single thought about damaging the regime in any way, were executed. Perhaps, the communist rulers wanted to cultivate the feeling of fear in the country. Everyone ought to be afraid, and first of all those who believed in the communist idea. These people suffered the most, but continued to believe. The situation was totally absurd.

**There is a rather widespread opinion that Stalin didn't know about the real scale of repressions. Allegedly, it was his surrounding, which got out of hand. Is that true?**

Indeed, some people believe that Stalin had nothing to do with the repressions. Supposedly, his secret services got out of control and started massive executions. This belief is completely refuted by the scientific research. The repressive process was strictly regulated and all the instructions came directly from the Central Committee of the Communist party, from Stalin and Politburo. One should mention the infamous order #00477, signed by Mr. Ezhov, People's Commissar of NKVD (predecessor organization of KGB). It introduced the so-called "genocide instructions". It determined in advance, how many people should be arrested, executed or deported in every single administrative district of each of the Soviet republics. Moreover, even the social structure of the repressed-to-be people was regulated. The "genocide instructions" determined how many priests, engineers, intellectuals, workers, peasants, etc. should be arrested. It was often carried to the point of absurdity. For instance, some regions ran out of priests, but the instructions kept on coming from above. Then local secret services "borrowed" priests from neighbouring regions. It was vital not simply to fulfill, but, so to say, to over-fulfill the order. Those, who fell

behind the numbers set in instructions, ran the risk to end up in the same holes, where they buried the executed.

**Why did the peak of the repressions fall on 1937-1938?**

Speaking at the March congress of the communist party in 1937, Stalin proclaimed the following thesis: "As the socialism becomes successful, the resistance of enemies will increase". The order #00477 was the immediate result of the Stalin's speech – the words of the "chief" were put into practice. A massive purge began, which had the gravest consequences. Just in the single year of 1937 about 7% to 15% of the total population of the Soviet Union was eliminated.

**The people who executed the sentence – didn't they become victims also?**

Concerning the people who were members of the so-called "troikas", "dvoikas", extraordinary councils and execution squads – this is a very difficult issue. They are usually called butchers, but I would add that they were victims too. They were forced to execute the orders. Some took part in the repressions because they genuinely believed in the Soviet idea, they believed to be executing real enemies. Others did so because they wanted to stay alive, because they thought that by killing others they would save themselves and their relatives. But in 1938 it was the time for them to pay... Those, who were the most active in implementing the policy of repressions, were eliminated. According to the official information, more than 20,000 *Cheka* officers were executed during the Stalin's rule. The regime got rid of witnesses, so that no one would be able to find out what really happened in the thirties.

**Which peculiarities did the repressions in Belarus have?**

In Belarus the repressions were more massive. It was believed, that the situation in this country is full of threats to the regime because the republic was bordering the capitalist Europe. Thus, the rates of the peasants' deportation from Belarus during

the period of massive collectivization (creation of kolkhozes) are higher than in Russia or Ukraine. Deportation from the borderlands was a usual practice. People were deported to faraway territories, such as Siberia or Kazakhstan. The people who were used to live in Belarus were not adapted to living in such harsh climatic conditions. It was a form of genocide, elimination of people without any trials and sentences.

Another peculiarity of repressions in Belarus was the fact, that the country's intelligentsia was practically eradicated in the early 30's. Most Belarusian intellectuals, writers, poets and scientists were accused of being members of hostile organizations (all of which were forged by secret services). The sentences were relatively "mild" at that time – intellectuals were more often deported than executed. However, in 1937 the bloody tide caught up with them in concentration camps in Siberia and elsewhere. They were eliminated before their exile term expired. On the whole, 90% of all Belarusian writers and poets were murdered. By comparison, in Russia this figure is closer to 20%.

The sad anniversary will be marked this year – 70 years ago, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October, 1937 more than 100 outstanding intellectuals were shot dead in the NKVD prison in Minsk.

**The executions by shooting were very widespread, but it was not the only way of eliminating people. What other methods did the Soviet regime use to fight "public enemies"?**

The so-called "philosophers' steamships" were, undoubtedly, the mildest form of repression. During Lenin's rule they were used to deport the unwanted intellectuals to the West. By doing so, the Soviet regime has fueled scientific communities in Europe and in America, doing the capitalistic world a great favour. Such an approach, however, was rather an exception than a rule. The most massive repressions were implemented by the extrajudicial bodies. They are guilty of about two thirds of all murders and imprisonments of innocent people. The most widespread form

## Repressions are both history and reality of Belarus...

so-called “troikas”, which worked in every administrative district of the USSR. “Troika” (Russian for ‘three-piece’), as the name implies, consisted of three people – first secretary of the local committee of the communist party, prosecutor, and the chief of the local branch of NKVD. These three people determined the fate of any person *in absentia*.

Administrative deportation was another type of repression. Deportations were most characteristic for 1922-1932, when whole villages and towns were deported into the depth of the Soviet territory. This was a period of massive collectivization, when peasants were forced to join collective farms, giving up most of their possessions and personal freedom. Those who refused were repressed, as well as those, who were too well-off. Deportations were also used to eliminate the homesteads, which were quite numerous in Belarus.

Court trials were purely formal and rare. The executions by the list were common practice. We also have evidence, that many people were executed without their death being documented at all. As a result, the person vanished, and even today relatives have no information about the time and place of the person’s death.

**The Holocaust is believed to be the most documented crime in human history. What about the Soviet repressions? How thoroughly were they documented in archives, and how easy are these documents to be accessed?**

First of all, all the repressive actions were secret, and many of them were not documented. Second, many of the documents, such as the deeds stating that the execution took place, or maps with execution sites marked, were destroyed in the first years after Stalin’s death by the members of his clique, who remained in power and wanted to cover their tracks. Third, in Belarus, the KGB archive is completely sealed off for scientists, the police archive is very difficult to access, and parts of the National archive are not accessible as well. We know nothing about all

but three execution sites in the country.

**How are the Soviet repressions interpreted in today’s Belarus?**

The present Belarusian regime has virtually no attitude towards this problem. For Belarusian authorities, the Soviet repressions are non-existent. The Citizens’ Committee on Honoring the Victims of the Stalin’s Repressions has recently asked the president and the council of ministers to proclaim 2007 as the year of remembrance, and the 29<sup>th</sup> of October as the Day of Remembrance of the Repression Victims. There is no answer. By giving this silent refusal, the regime shows that it doesn’t want to have anything to do with this problem.

Now I would like to tell a couple of words about the scientific sphere. With the beginning of Perestroika and the break-up of the Soviet Union, a special working group on the study of the Soviet repressions was created at the Institute of History of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. However, this group was dismantled shortly after the presidential elections of 1994. Since 1995 none of Belarusian scientists has been officially researching the repressions. What is more, not a single thesis on the issue of the Soviet crimes was defended during this time. It is not because researchers don’t want to deal with this topic, but because the regime has introduced such a procedure, which makes it simply impossible.

The scientists are divided over the issue. Those representing the official point of view claim that the repressions were justified and natural, because no state can exist without them. The French Revolution is usually given as example. Other historians, who operate the objective information, see things differently. They clearly show that the Soviet rule was not too different from the Nazi regime by its cruelty. I can even say, that the methods used by the NKVD were often more brutal than those used by Gestapo and SS on the occupied territories of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

**Which affect did the repressions**

**have on the minds of people?**

Beginning with 1996-1997, the official Belarusian press has practically published nothing on this topic. If it did so, then the repressions were presented in a positive light. The whole new generation grew up without knowing about the brutality of the Soviet system. The older generation didn’t know about the repressions before, and didn’t accept the truth about them during Perestroika. Information given in present textbooks for schools and universities is very limited and presented in the traditional Soviet context. Allegedly, the October revolution was successful and needed to fight the enemies on the way of its development.

In Belarus, you see neither rethinking of the lessons taught by history, nor revealing the names of the butchers, nor public repentance. The people who know nothing about the tragic pages of its history are not capable of becoming a normal civilized nation. As a historian, I am appalled when I hear from our journalists, including those working for the independent media that the issue of the repressions came out of fashion. This is not a suite, which may or may not be in fashion. This is a national tragedy, the memory of which should be passed from one generation to another. The issue of the repressions remains topical also because the feeling of fear is still here. It lives in our genes. The fear presses upon Belarusians, who are still suffering from the syndrome-1937. We can’t say that the repressions are history in Belarus. Here they are both history and reality. But I am sure that this period will eventually be over some day.

*Questions by Ales Kudrytski, for the Office for a Democratic Belarus*



*Photos by Shastouski*

30/09/2007



## Politics and Society

### Belarus to Deport Foreign Priests

Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandr Kosinets said that all foreign Catholic priests will be sent out of the country over the next few years.

Out of the roughly 350 Catholic priests in Belarus the majority are foreign, and almost all of those are Polish. Belarus has been targeting foreign Catholics since last year, deporting all those without papers, reported the U.S.-based Stratfor intelligence firm.

Now the campaign is extended to all foreign Catholic priests.

Kosinets said Thursday that "foreign priests cannot conduct religious activities in Belarus because they do not understand the mentality and traditions of the Belarusian people."

21/09/2007

Source: zenit.org

### Activist Imprisoned for 10 Days Because of EU Flags

A democratic activist Leanid Navitski has been kept in the confinement cell in Akrestsina Street for three days. He was detained on September 21 for carrying some EU flags with him. It was reported that Navitski would stand trial for organization of "The European March". Later he was sentenced to 10 days of imprisonment for preparations before the European March.

24/09/2007

Source: ERB

### Aliaksandr Milinkevich Invited European Leaders to the European March

Leader of the movement "For Freedom" Aliaksandr Milinkevich sent an invitation for the European March to president of the European Commission, president of the European Parliament and heads of several European states. "We invite our friends to stay with us on this day of October 14 and we will be grateful for your solidarity and support. The majority of Belarusians look to Europe with hope and expect a normalization of our relations with the EU", it is said in the invitation.

Leader of the movement "For Freedom" stressed the importance of this event to Belarusians.

"The democratic forces of Belarus organize this march in order to demonstrate the willingness of Belarusians to be within the European family of free nations. This will be the March to the future free and European Belarus. It

will be the beginning of our road to the free and united Europe.

In this situation, it is very important for us to have the attention from the international democratic community in regard with the preparation of the March. The democratic forces intend to have merely peaceful manifestation and suggest the authorities to be cooperative, despite the extended repressions and arrests of our friends and colleagues and the increased number of political prisoners in Belarus. We think about the future of Belarus and see it within Europe", it is said in the invitation letter.

24/09/2007

Full text of the appeal can be found here:

<http://democraticbelarus.eu/node/2336>

### Information about New Criminal Case against Zmitser Dashkevich is Confirmed

Information that a new criminal case started against the political prisoner Zmitser Dashkevich, who is serving his sentence in a Shklou labour camp, has been confirmed.

After the interference of the Office of Public Prosecutor, the prisoner's lawyer Alyaksandr Halieu managed to see the materials of the case. The new criminal case was mentioned in Dashekevich's letter to his friends.

It turned out that Zmitser had refused to be a witness in the criminal case against a youth activist Ivan Shyla who was accused of acting on behalf of an unregistered organization. According to Halieu, the next interrogation of the opposition member is assigned for September 27.

25/09/2007

Source: ERB

### Georgian Parliament Approves Ambassador to Belarus

The parliament of Georgia has approved David Zalkoniani as the Georgian Ambassador in Minsk, the Georgian news agencies reported.

This Caucasian country did not have an embassy in Minsk, but has recently decided to open one.

Georgian political commentator Ramaz Sakvarelidze explains Tbilisi's decision to open an embassy in Belarus by the desire to develop trade and economic cooperation between the countries. He also said that the world community's attention "is shifting towards the Baltic countries and Eastern Europe, and Georgia is part of this process".

Previously, David Zalkoniani served as the Georgian envoy in Uzbekistan .

26/09/2007

Source: BelaPAN

## Politics and Society

### Bush Criticises Belarusian “dictatorial regime” in the United Nations



The US President George Bush criticized “dictatorial regimes” in Belarus, Iran, North Korea, Syria and Myanmar (Burma) in his speech at the General Session of the United Nations Organization.

He urged to fight against “despotism and violence” in the whole world. At the same time, President Bush stressed, it is necessary to support states that had started democratic changes.

26/09/2007

Source: Charter’97

### Representative of the Belarus’ Defence Ministry to Take Part in NATO Seminar on Control over Arms

A representative of the Belarus’ Defence Ministry will take part in a seminar on the control over conventional arms, which will be organized by NATO in Brussels on October 4-5, BelTA was told in the press service of the Defence Ministry of Belarus.

The 16th seminar on the control over conventional arms will be held under the auspice of the Nato’s Verification Coordinating Committee /VCC/ and will focus on the situation around the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty as well as issues related to building up trust and security in the OSCE region. Belarus will be represented by Colonel Alexander Buzhan, chief of the national agency for control and inspections.

28/09/2007

Source: BelTA

### House of Representatives Accepts Kanaplyow’s Resignation from Post of Chairman

The House of Representatives on Tuesday voted to approve the resignation of Uladzimir Kanaplyow from the post of its chairman. The issue topped the agenda of the opening day of the lower parliamentary chamber’s fall session. Eighty-eight members of the House of Representatives voted to accept the resignation, while 19 voted against in a secret ballot. Mr. Kanaplyow was absent from the opening sitting. According to some information, he is undergoing medical treatment.

While speaking before the vote, lawmakers heaped praise on Mr. Kanaplyow. “I have heartache as we consider this extremely important issue,” Vasil Khrol said, describing the politician as the “strongest link of Belarusian parliamentarism.” “If it were not for Uladzimir Kanaplyow, we would not have had such a close-knit body that makes decisions in such an organized manner,” he added.

Valyantsin Simirski lauded Mr. Kanaplyow for having managed to “organize lawmakers’ work aimed at making lawmaking activity more efficient” and firmly sticking to “the president’s line in drafting laws.”

02/10/2007

Source: naviny.by

## Economics

### Belarus' Foreign-Trade Deficit Soars in 2007

The Ministry of Statistics and Analysis has revealed that Belarus' foreign-trade deficit in the first seven months of 2007 amounted to \$2 billion. In the same period of 2006, the foreign-trade deficit stood at \$990 million. The ministry explained that the deficit was primarily due to increased imports of “intermediate products,” such as energy, raw materials, and components. Following the rise in Russian gas prices and oil-export duties as of January, Belarus also registered a deficit of \$790 million in trade in energy in the first seven months of 2007, compared with a surplus of \$226 million in the same period of 2006.

19/09/2007

Source: Radio Free Europe

### Belarus Supports IAEA in Nuclear Energy Programmes

Viktar Gaisenak, deputy foreign minister, said at the 51st General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency: “Belarus is among the states interested in concrete dialogue on issues related to launching their national nuclear energy programs under the auspices of the IAEA.” He said Belarus intended to continue cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog to enhance international non-proliferation guarantees.

20/09/2007

Source: RIA Novosti

## Economics

### Belarusbank Gets \$150m Syndicated Loan



Belarusbank has received a \$150m syndicated loan. A relevant agreement was signed in London. The original sum of the loan (\$65 million) was increased 1.6 times.

The loan is arranged by Banco Finantia (Portugal), Bayern LB and Commerzbank (Germany), VTB (Russia) and VTB Europe (UK).

The loan will be granted for a year with

the right to prolongation for one more year. The interest rate is LIBOR+3%p.a. According to Deputy Chairman of Belarusbank's Board of Directors Vladimir Novik, the syndicated loan is beneficial for Belarusian borrowers in respect of both its volume and interest rates.

25/09/2007

Source: BelTA

### Beltransgaz Might Be Sold Ahead of Schedule

Belarus will be forced to revise the deal with Gazprom in the first half of the next year and sell 5 percent of Beltransgaz's shares to the Russian gas giant Gazprom ahead of schedule.

Anonymous sources suggest that this proposal is indeed being discussed at the level of the Finance Ministry and Energy Ministry. If Beltransgaz's shares are sold early, the budget could be immediately refilled with \$1,875,000,000 instead of \$625 million next year.

02/10/2007

Source: ERB

### Belarus Picks out China's Yuan as Reserve Currency

The National Bank of Belarus has made China's yuan one of reserve currencies, the bank announced officially. The previous reports said that Belarus may add China's yuan and Japan's yen to the reserve list.

So far, the reserves of Belarus have been kept in three currencies - the U.S. dollars, euros and Russia's rubles. Adding China's yuan to the reserve list could be attributed to higher weight of China's economy in global GDP and to development of trading relations between China and Belarus, said the official statement of the National Bank of Belarus.

For comparison, Russia keeps its gold/foreign exchange reserves in five currencies - the U.S. dollars, euro, yen, Britain's pounds and Swiss francs.



01/10/2007

Source: Kommersant

## EU and Belarus

### PACE President Urges EU to Ease Visa Procedures for Belarusians

The president of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) urged the European Union to ease visa procedures for Belarusian citizens.

While talking to reporters in Vilnius on September 24, Rene van der Linden called on the 27-nation bloc to set a "reasonable visa fee" that could be afforded by "ordinary" Belarusians, according to the PACE press office.

The PACE president said that Europe was ready to "reopen dialogue with the Belarusian authorities" but stressed that the process could not begin without specific steps on the part of Minsk, "in particular the release of those considered as political prisoners."



25/09/2007

Source: BelaPAN

## EU and Belarus

### Cristina Gallach, Spokesperson of the EU HR Javier Solana: the EU Will Closely Follow the European March in Minsk



"We very much regret the charges brought against Victor Ivashkevich, who has now

been released. The arrest of a member of the organizing committee of the European March was a very bad signal to both Belarusian society and the international com-

munity.

The European march of 14 October is planned to be a peaceful event, bringing together a wide strata of Belarusian society, favouring closer relations between Belarus and the European Union.

We welcome the fact that civil society has sent a clear message of wanting to build genuine dialogue with the authorities around the issue of the march.

This message has underlined the non-confrontational nature of the project.

The European March should go forward as planned. There is no doubt that the European Union will be following this very closely."

26/09/2007

EU Council Press Service

### Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner Comments on the European March and Recent Arrests

Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, said:

"I welcome the initiative taken by Belarusian civil society to organise a European March in Minsk on 14 October in order to express the support of the Belarusian people for closer relations between Belarus and the EU.

It is good to see that Belarusian civil society has taken up the EU's offer to Belarus to enter a full partnership, provided that Belarus would take convincing steps towards democratisation."

In this context, I am concerned by reports that a number of organisers of this peaceful march have been arrested.

I would expect the Belarusian authorities to act in accordance with their recently reconfirmed position of getting closer to the EU. These actions are in contrast to this position.

I urge the Belarusian authorities to immediately release all those detained on political grounds and to respect the basic human right of the Belarusian people to express themselves and to assemble, including on the 14th October."

27/09/2007

Source: [ec.europa.eu](http://ec.europa.eu)



## The European Movement Supports Belarus



"The European Movement welcomes the initiative of the Belarusian democratic forces of holding the European March on 14 October in Minsk. "The March should become the expression of the will of Citizens of Belarus to have closer relations between Belarus and the European Union. The European Movement will invite the members to come to Minsk on this day.

We notice the wish of the Belarusian authorities to establish a better cooperation with the European Union. At the same time we express great concern about repressions against Belarusian citizens who take part in the promotion of the European March. Facts of detentions of

those who use the European Union symbols became known to us. We express great concern about it and our members shall inform the governing bodies of the European Union and governments of the member states on these facts."

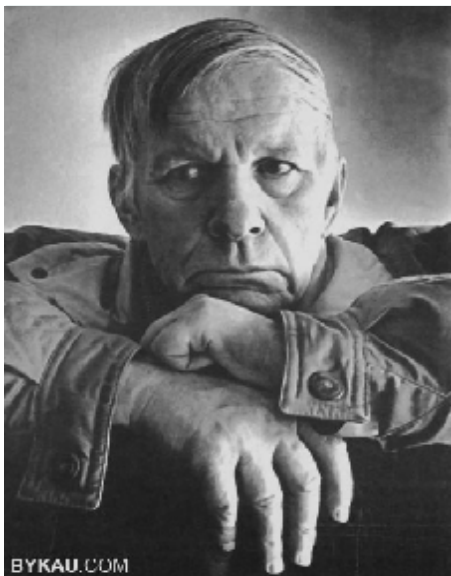
The European Movement upholds the European aspiration of Belarusian's. "We are ready to support all actions to help Belarus to practice European values by respecting democratic values and achieving personal and economic freedom and prosperity", reads the statement.

01/10/2007



## Culture

### Writing Freedom



Vasil Bykau: WWII veteran, famous author and dissident, praised by people and hated by their oppressors

He was first buried in 1944. One day a postman brought an envelope to the relatives of the junior lieutenant Vasil Bykau, which contained a letter telling them about his death on the battlefield of the WWII. His name was even inscribed on the obelisk near Kirovograd in the list of the buried soldiers. Miraculously, Vasil Bykau returned home, with two wounds and a full load of bitter war memories. This was how his story of fame and suffering began.

Vasil Bykau was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June, 1924 in the village Bychki in the North-Eastern Belarus. As the WWII broke out, he volunteered for the Red Army. Bykau fought in Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Austria. He first published his writings in 1947 describing the war the way he saw it from the trenches, not the way it looked like from the bunkers of the Soviet generals. He wrote about soldiers, officers and common people on both sides of the front. Remarkably, his characters were

neither heroes nor villains, but humans in the first place, forced to make a tough choice. Their real enemy was often hiding not across the battlefield, but within themselves. From his very first page, Bykau remained faithful to the existentialist approach. Any war, according to the writer, is the "borderline condition", offering a horrible alternative between the animal-like desire to remain alive and the need to remain human, often paying the deadly price in return.

In 1965 the Belarusian literature magazine "Maladosc" published Bykau's story "Dead don't hurt". In 1966 it appeared in the liberal Soviet magazine "Novy Mir". The story told about a group of wounded Soviet officers trying to break free from the pursuit of Nazi troops near Kirovograd in the winter of 1944. Bykau described the chaos of the escape and the cruelty of the KGB officers, supervising the group. He pictured a captive German soldier who seemed to be more human than some Soviet commanders. In the 60s, all this was equal to the bomb explosion. In the Soviet Union, it was simply unthinkable to write about the war the way Bykau did. The massive campaign of harassment began. Literary critics "lambasted" the writer in major Soviet newspapers. Someone threw stones in his windows during the night. Almost every day Bykau was summoned for talks to KGB or Communist party headquarters in Minsk.

Despite of all the critics, many people sensed that it was Bykau who told the truth. Belarusian writers collected more than 80 signatures under the petition demanding to stop the harassment of the author. His talent and fame forced the Soviet regime to allow his works

to be published. Bykau kept writing, trying to outwit his censors. Then, a different approach was used – along with censoring his works, the regime started to pelt Bykau with all kinds of state awards in order to tame him and create the illusion that the writer is not persecuted.

Bykau embraced the period of democratic changes in the late 80's. He eagerly joined the democratic movement and supported the cause of rehabilitation of the victims of the Stalin's bloody rule. Meanwhile, after some years of political warming, the ice age of Lukashenka began in 1994. The new political regime boycotted Bykau. The publishing of his works was suspended. The manuscript of Bykau's new books "Sciana" ('The Wall') had been collecting dust on a shelf of a state publishing house for three years, until it became the "people's book" – enthusiasts collected money and published it privately.

"Sciana" is the collection of Bykau's short stories, dealing with the whole range of typically Belarusian troubles. The story "Sciana", which also gave the book its title, tells about a prisoner, who applies enormous efforts to break the wall of his cell. However, having accomplished that, he finds himself in a prison's courtyard, surrounded by another wall with gallows nearby. „Living in a prison, like dying, had no sense“, — concludes the author. In another story, "Zhouty Piasochak" ('Yellow Sand') Bykau addresses the issue of Stalin's repressions. A secret police wagon is taking a group of prisoners to an execution site. All of them have different histories and personalities. None of them is dreaming of freedom, even when the wagon gets stuck in the mud, and the guards make the condemned get out and push the car forward.



## Culture

### Writing Freedom

State-owned Belarusian newspapers cracked down on the writer the way they did three decades ago. Some publications were even written by the same authors, old enemies of Bykau. Exhausted by the persecution, Bykau accepted the invitation of the Finnish PEN-Center and went to Helsinki in 1998. Two years later he moved to Germany. Pushed away by the government of his motherland, Bykau was given a possibility to live in the country against which he fought half a century before.

Why did the new regime bully the author, who had long since become the “people’s writer”, whose works found their place in school textbooks? Bykau mercilessly criticized the government of Lukashenka. He disgusted the regime, which silenced Stalin’s repressions and treated people with just as little respect, as the Soviet one. “He [Lukashenka] doesn’t need Bykau,” wrote the author in 2000. “He has a disciplined and powerful cohort of his own authors who write his biographies. They write about him, describe his life. This is all he needs. He has no understanding for anything beyond that. Everything Lukashenka and his regime do is directed towards the full liquidation of the country’s sovereignty. He has absolutely enslaved the country”.

The support of Bykau, who remained the undisputed moral authority for many people in Belarus, was an enormous boost to the democratic opposition and to anyone who refused to believe the official propaganda. If Bykau said that things were black, then they simply couldn’t be white as the regime claimed.

In 2002 Vasil Bykau moved to the Czech Republic. The author explic-

itly pointed out that it wasn’t a political exile – he merely asked the Czech government to give him the right to live and work in the country. Vaclav Havel answered that Czech Republic would be honored to host the writer.

Cancer did what the bullets failed to do. It was also in Czech Republic, where Vasil Bykau had his stomach tumor removed. An old soldier, Bykau was used to looking into the face of death without fear. In 2003 he returned to Belarus. Shortly afterwards the writer died in the oncology hospital in Barauliany near Minsk.

The regime of Lukashenka, which had ousted Bykau from the country, cynically tried to capitalize on the author’s death. The retired police general Mikalay Charhinets, head of the infamous regime-faithful Union of Writers, attempted to orchestrate the funeral ceremony and even tried to prevent Vasil Bykau’s coffin from being wrapped into the banned white-red-white national flag, but was quickly shoved aside. On the way to his final rest, Bykau was followed by over 50,000 people, but ignored by the president. “Unfortunately, this was a person who didn’t accept the policy, which Lukashenka implements today in Belarus”, said the president in an interview after Bykau’s death.

For Vasil Bykau freedom was the main problem of his literary work, the main moral and physical value, given to every living being. Perhaps, this is what angers his old and new enemies the most. After all, freedom is something all oppressors hate – and fear.

*Prepared by Ales Kudrytski*

*Office for a Democratic Belarus*



*Young Vasil Bykau in Romania, 1944*



*People came to say the last good bye to the great writer (Bykau’s funeral, Minsk 2003)*

Photos by [www.bykau.com](http://www.bykau.com)

More information about Bykau:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasil\\_Byka%C5%AD](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasil_Byka%C5%AD)

We on the WEB

[www.democraticbelarus.eu](http://www.democraticbelarus.eu)