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THE EDUCATIONAL USE OF VIDEOED MEMOIRS AND MATERIAL ON THE HISTORY OF THE MINSK GHETTO AND THE MALY TROSTENETS EXTERMINATION SITE

The Historical Context

The consequences of the Second World War were catastrophic for Belarus. The Nazis and their collaborators burned 209 towns or regional centres and around 9,200 villages. In 628 of them, the inhabitants were burned alive together with the settlement. The loss of life was particularly heavy and substantially affected the make-up of the population (IBB Dortmund et al. 2016: 65). According to official data, over 2.2 million of the inhabitants were killed – almost every fourth person. Jews were especially hard hit: 810,000 or 82% of the 990,000 Jews in Belarus perished (Navitski 1998: 260).

There were more than 110 areas during the war for the habitation and later extermination of Jews – ghettos. Around 100,000 Jews were interned in the Minsk ghetto, one of the largest in the Nazi-occupied Soviet Union, including deportees from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Lithuania. For decades, no attention was paid to the history of the Minsk ghetto and the Maly Trostenets extermination camp ¹ in either Germany or Belarus. It was the final destination not only for Soviet prisoners of war, resistance fighters and civilians, but also for tens of thousands of Jews from Minsk and adjacent small towns, as well as from places which were part of the Third Reich, for example Brünn, Cologne, Hamburg, Königsberg and Vienna. First reports about the crimes of the Nazis in the vicinity of the village of Maly Trostenets near Minsk appeared as early as 1943. In 1944, Soviet periodicals published a report of the Extraordinary State Commission of the USSR *On the*

Ascertainment and Investigation of Atrocities of the German-Fascist Invaders in Minsk and Environs. But the veil of silence regarding victims of the Holocaust, forced labourers and former prisoners of war, who did not fit into the conception of the victors, also applied to the history of Maly Trostenets. Not until 1965 was a compact set of documents published in the compendium *The Crimes of the German-Fascist Occupiers in Belarus, 1941–1944*. Maly Trostenets is mentioned as a place where 206,500 people were killed (IBB Dortmund et al. 2016: 31). And while the exact figures may be the subject of scholarly debate, this tragic locality will forever be engraved in European memorial culture as the place of a terrible tragedy.¹²

Commemorative Policy and History Education Regarding the Victims of Nazism in Belarus

In Belarus, unfortunately, the tendency remains to officially cherish the memory of victories but to forget the prisoners of death camps, ghetto inhabitants or forced labourers. The first monuments erected in Belarus extolled the victors. Those who did not fight to the death but were deported to Germany as forced labourers and later returned to their homeland were often seen as Nazi collaborators. Some of them were punished or they were forced to conceal their experiences as forced labourers (Rebstock 2017; Zahra 2009). From the beginning, endeavours to study and popularise the events of the war were carried out by Party and Soviet-government bodies in Moscow. They aimed for a broad museification of the partisan struggle in Belarus. Commenting on present commemorative policy towards the war in Belarus, the independent expert Alexei Bratochkin considers that,

“commemoration of the Great Patriotic War, whose canon was formed in the late-Soviet era, has become the basis for the model of collective identity. [...] An open re-Sovietisation of memorial culture took place in the period from 1994 to 2003, utilising the Soviet historical narrative and model of commemoration.” (Bratochkin 2016: 6)

The events of the Holocaust and their treatment today remain a contradictory, problematic issue, which has been hushed up since Soviet times. The concealment of the facts about the mass extermination of the Jews manifested itself at commemorative places, where monuments referred to the murdered Jews simply as “civilians”, “Soviet citizens” or “victims of fascism”. The Communist Party and local authorities aimed to prevent the memorialisation of the victims of the tragedy which befell the *Jewish* people. Somewhat more attention began to be given to the topic after “conditional” recognition by the country’s top leadership – the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko – who in 2008 visited the Yama, a memorial on the site of the former Minsk ghetto dedicated to 5,000 Jews who were murdered on 2 March 1942.¹³ On 22 June 2015, Lukashenko unveiled the first part of the Maly Trostenets memorial complex, where he also spoke of the ghetto and referred to both places as killing sites during the war. And yet there is still no special mention of this in the new memorial, where specialists estimate that the majority of victims were Jews.

As long as historical memory in Belarus is treated primarily as a political issue, its preservation and educational activities based around it will face particular problems. Several of these can already be identified:

1. An orientation towards a “general history” compulsory for all, independent of different contexts and individual choices.

This becomes evident when we consider that there is only one authorised, official textbook for each school subject in the education system of Belarus. In terms of the preservation of memory, the result of this arrangement is that no emphasis is placed on the various participants’ individual and group problems or their complex history. Accordingly, oral history is more likely to be used in such circumstances for manipulation – to affirm the overall conception presented in the textbook as the only correct one.

Here, too, the human factor is significant. Much depends on the individual school teacher – whether he or she wants to present the topic of the war and show an alternative to the textbook information, and whether he or she has the time to prepare an “unofficial” lesson with the students in

order to take a critical look at the information presented. Most staff restrict themselves to inviting veterans to talk to the class or visiting the *Museum of the Great Patriotic War*, which goes to further cement the standing of “general history”. Active education, where students are involved in activities towards the creation of a product of their own, takes place considerably less often, although the curriculum does envisage students undertaking “research” and “project work”. These are often essays on the perception of the topic through the prism of family history.

2. Emphasis on heroisation and/or victimisation.

This problem flows from the premises set in the public remembrance discourse by official organisations, which are not yet prepared to adopt the European experience of critically interpreting the past.

3. Insufficient attention to the history of the Holocaust.

The Second World War is studied at school in Year 10 (11 years of formal education) in the subjects “World History” and “History of Belarus”. The respective textbooks touch on the Holocaust in just a few paragraphs. The terms “genocide” and “ghetto” are used, but the word “Holocaust” does not crop up even once. Despite the tremendous losses suffered by the Jewish population, the history of the Catastrophe in Belarus is dealt with only superficially in the elective course “The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People” for students at tertiary level. According to Ales Smalyanchuk (2017) the tragedy of the Holocaust in Belarus continues to remain in the shadow of traditional Soviet myths about the Great Patriotic War.

The Historical Workshop and the Development of its Digital Archive Society can try to help resolve these problems by organising independent educational initiatives. One of these is the *Leonid Levin Historical Workshop*, a Belarusian-German project ¹⁴ (hereafter: the Workshop). This initiative provides a different perspective for examining the topic of the war by using the testimonies of eyewitnesses, including those conserved in video format. Recordings of such interviews are becoming particularly relevant now that very few witnesses are still alive.

The first initiatives to make the history of the Minsk ghetto and the Maly Trostenets extermination site visible for the public emerged in the 1990s. The cities of Bremen, Düsseldorf and Hamburg installed memorial stones at the former Jewish cemetery in Minsk to commemorate murdered fellow countrypeople. The Yama monument was reconstructed and a figural composition added by the architect Leonid Levin. The international education centres in Dortmund and Minsk, together with the *Union of Belarusian Jewish Organisations and Communities*, decided to establish the Historical Workshop. Since 2003, it has been a place of remembrance and study open to all who wish to learn about the history of the Minsk ghetto and the Holocaust. It allows all interested members of the public, witnesses and researchers from various countries to engage in dialogue, express their views on history from different perspectives, and fight against prejudice. The Workshop supports former victims of the Nazi occupation of Belarus, develops and implements educational programmes on history, and organises meetings with eyewitnesses for the young generation. It runs research programmes and projects to expand and deepen the knowledge of teachers, social workers and museum staff about the Holocaust and the culture of memory regarding the war. We, the Workshop's team, also work to intensify the discussion on the inclusion of more information about the Holocaust in secondary and tertiary learning. Publications containing the recollections of former captives of the Minsk ghetto, forced labourers, Righteous among the Nations, and prisoners of the Auschwitz death camp are a further educational resource for schools and universities. Since 2014, interviews with these eyewitnesses and other archive material on the history of the Nazi occupation have been collected and housed in the *Witness Archive of the Minsk Historical Workshop* 15.

The archive of the Workshop was created to document the life histories of Belarusian victims of Nazism in Russian and German, as well as to provide the public with information about the fate of Jews deported from the German Reich and murdered in the Minsk ghetto or Maly Trostenets. This material is being actively integrated into the learning process. The archive's target group consists of Belarusian secondary and tertiary students, school teachers

and university lecturers, visitors to the Workshop and, last but not least, the victims of Nazism themselves and their relatives who seek to preserve the memory of the dramatic wartime events for future generations.

Since the fate of many of the victims of Nazism is still unknown, the development of the digital archive's collections is carried out by the Workshop team on an ongoing basis as new personal and archive documents arrive, in cooperation with diverse educational institutions in Belarus and abroad. In future we plan to create an English version of the website. The archive contains 338 life histories in Russian and German, including 22 video and five audio interviews. The Righteous among the Nations collection is of particular interest for those who deal with video interviews.



Righteous among the Nations Viktor Chorny, Credit: Leonid Levin Historical Workshop Minsk

The main thrust of our work is to promote the utilisation of previously collected interviews. Although we continue to organise meetings with surviving witnesses, we also experiment with other applications of oral histories. Testimonies recorded in sound and image give us more opportunity to illustrate historical information (“giving history a face and a voice”), to make the reconstruction of events realistic and interesting for young people, to demonstrate different points of view and to maintain a bond between generations. The Workshop actively cooperates in these endeavours with the *Belarusian Oral History Archive (BAVG)*, a unique depository of the memoirs of witnesses about various events of the twentieth century, which contains over 1,100 interviews in more than fifty collections.¹⁶ Around half of them are in video format. Since the war caused indelible trauma to most of the witnesses, it is present in practically all the recordings, and many contain information about the Holocaust in Belarus.

The primary aim of the Workshop is to further the use of memoirs of living survivors for educational purposes. We currently have three main avenues of activity:

1. An exhibition about Maly Trostenets
2. A competition for school students
3. Educational material on the history of the Minsk ghetto

Memoirs as an Educational Resource at the Exhibition about Maly Trostenets

The *Maly Trostenets Extermination Camp. History and Remembrance* exhibition was prepared by historians from Austria, Belarus, the Czech Republic and Germany (IBB Dortmund et al. 2016). The exhibition honours the memory of the victims and shows the routes by which they were taken from Austria, Czechoslovakia and Germany to the killing site in Belarus. It is being hosted in various European cities.

The exhibition has a programme of complementary activities. The Workshop team’s regular sessions with secondary and tertiary students in Belarus involve methodological and didactic work focussing on a range of aspects,

including videoed memoirs about the events in Maly Trostenets that are presented at the exhibition and the Witnesses Archive of the Workshop that is accessible at the exhibition. It also organises meetings with witnesses, some of them from abroad. In this framework, we hold seminars for teachers on “Methods of working with students on the Great Patriotic War of the Belarusian People based on the exhibition”. The participants will later be able to work on similar topics using the methods they have learned.



Exhibition on Maly Trostenets, photo: Dirk Planert

“The Victims of Nazism and Killing Sites in Belarus”: An Oral History Competition for Students

The Workshop’s archive still has an insufficient stock of oral accounts of surviving witnesses to the war like from old residents of Minsk who can still give informative interviews about the history of the Minsk ghetto and Maly Trostenets. The team has decided to turn to young people for assistance, wishing at the same time to instruct them in the methodology of oral history and the collection of interviews with surviving witnesses. It was therefore decided to organise a competition for secondary and tertiary students lasting until the end of 2017. The goal is to document the fates of previously unknown victims of the killing sites in Belarus, to enlarge the Workshop’s digital archive and to popularise this resource in the education sector in Belarus.

Participants in the competition prepare a biographical portrait of a little-known victim of the killing sites based on interviews with that person’s relatives, photographs from family archives and other documents. The entry is submitted in essay form together with a copy of a video interview and accompanying documentation.

Information about the victim’s life before the war, their life during the occupation, and the family’s ways of preserving the memory of the person are to be the key units of meaning in the biographical portraits. Participants can obtain informational support by consulting with the Workshop team and may also use its digital archive and library, where the best entries will later be included. Recording a video interview with a witness to the period of occupation of Belarus is central to preparing an entry for the competition. Our target group consists of witnesses or their close relatives who have information about particular victims of killing sites. Oral history is an indispensable method because of the dearth of written source material, and it allows us to understand how the events of the past were perceived by an ordinary person subject to them. By conversing with eyewitnesses, participants can learn about the witnesses’ paths in life, their horrendous experiences, as well as the individual and societal traumas caused by the deaths of friends and relatives.



Eyewitness Maya Krapina and students. Credit: Leonid Levin Historical Workshop Minsk

At the same time, we are aware that it is not enough to rely on recorded oral history interviews alone due to the difficulty of finding immediate witnesses. The organisers have therefore oriented students to also search for other sources of information, especially in the accessible oral-history archives with existing video interviews on the topic. One of the difficulties of holding the competition is to find well-considered ways to motivate both teachers, who are extremely busy with work-related responsibilities, including the “compulsory” state competitions, and students, who are often averse to taking initiative and showing independence in research work.

Therefore, in order to reach the largest possible audience on the one hand and achieve good results on the other, particular arrangements have been made:

1. The theme of the competition has been broadened to allow the collection of information about **any** of the killing sites in Belarus and their little-known victims. This motivates the participants through a connection to local history, potentially anywhere in Belarus, in contrast to the narrower topic of Maly Trostenets. The students are asked first of all to search for histories of people they may be able to find out about in their own families and social environment.
2. Special methodical material has been prepared, some of it available for download, with a detailed description of the stages involved in the process and with prompts of what to do if difficulties arise on this path. Particular emphasis is placed on the responsibility for making a quality recording of the interview and learning the particularities of talking with an eyewitness traumatised by the war.
3. Interactive seminars have been held for interested teachers and (individual) students with practical exercises to sensitise them for preparing a biographical portrait of a killing-site victim using various sources, above all oral history. They were familiarised with the methodology for presenting the victim's path in life, dividing it into the most important periods (for example: childhood, life before the war and survival during the war), focussing in particular on wartime events. Much attention was given to the opportunities of using videoed memoirs from the archive of the Workshop and its partner, the BAVG. For teachers, the seminars accentuated the didactic possibilities of using the competition entry as part of their educational activities.
4. The possibility of publication can provide a further stimulus for participants.

Educational Material on the History of the Minsk Ghetto

As long as old residents of Minsk are alive, we need to try and preserve their narratives for the future. The competition for students is thematically broad and largely educational in orientation, so it cannot fully assist in *professionally* gathering sufficient material on topical issues for filling the

blanks in the history of the Holocaust in the Minsk area.

From its inception, the Workshop successfully cooperated with individual Minsk schools, which provided excerpts for publication from the memoirs of surviving witnesses to the war from their districts of the city; these were later put out as books of memoirs. Analysis shows that a considerable part of this information was collected in the form of memoirs prepared by the witnesses themselves, and the information from interviews was derived without using the proper methodology for conducting conversations with witnesses. This led us to the idea that it made sense to ask the respondents who had given information for our paper-based editions via the schools, if they are still of sound mind and adequate memory, for additional interviews for the Workshop's archive. These would be collected with an eye to quality, using a special thematic questionnaire on the history of the Holocaust in the Minsk area. The preliminary collection of information and the contacting of witnesses require a considerable amount of time. This has to do with the complexity of selecting information about people who were of conscious age during the events in question and are still able to speak for a videocamera. We therefore will use various avenues to search for witnesses through specialised organisations and announcements in the media.

In the course of one week in July 2017, a concerted drive was carried out with volunteers to collect such oral accounts in the form of a research field trip organised by the Workshop in partnership with the BAVG. 20 selected volunteers (historians, multipliers and students) took a short course in the basics of conducting an oral-history interview, with immersion in the history of the Holocaust in Belarus, the Minsk ghetto and the Maly Trostenets extermination site, and afterwards went out to talk with eyewitnesses. We gathered over forty video interviews – more than 120 hours of footage – with important witnesses for the Workshop's archive. Most of the survivors have Jewish roots and were born in the 1930s (the oldest in 1923).

Thematic transcription of the most important excerpts will now be carried out in order that they can be used for preparing a set of worksheets on the Holocaust, the Minsk ghetto and Maly Trostenets, with the goal of subsequently

applying them in school lessons. For this purpose, a group of didactic specialists from Belarus and Germany has been brought together to use the testimonies recorded during the field trip and create a quality educational product. When the set of worksheets is ready, we plan to test it in classrooms to popularise its use and help spread it to other schools. We also aim to organise a round table with curriculum designers in 2018 to actualise dialogue on the importance and necessity of making the history of the Holocaust more present in school lessons.

In future, this material will also be used in the educational activities of the Workshop to supplement the excursion to the exhibition devoted to the Minsk ghetto. We also plan to offer it to libraries and museums thematically linked to the Second World War. Interested members of the public will be able to download the material from the Workshop's website.

Anticipated Difficulties

- The need to prepare material which corresponds to the specific official, ideological framework in order for the product to be authorised for use in schools. The solution may lie in meeting with active teachers and discussing what formulations and formats of material to choose so that it can be used in lessons without any problems.
- The difficulty of obtaining the Ministry of Education's approval for the material under consideration for use in schools. In Belarus there are no channels for independent initiatives to have a say in the development of the curriculum, since it is strictly controlled by the state. The production of true quality materials, their testing in real classroom conditions and cooperation with official institutions may be a solution. The Workshop has experience in promoting educational products. We cooperate towards this end with regional institutes for the development of education. This partnership will enable us to officially provide teachers with a set of materials to accompany out-of-class activities or thematic lessons. It is very important that, (a) the materials be of high quality and completely ready for use (not requiring additional financial outlay by the teacher); (b)

methods be used which are innovative in Belarus, e.g. oral history. These two criteria are taken into account by the Ministry of Education, as well as the institutes and organisations which cooperate with it.

- Low motivation on the part of teachers to use such material. This problem must be resolved by holding events to popularise the product, explaining how easy it is to integrate it into the education process.
- Whether or not to use the testimonies of people who were children at the time of the war. This will be decided collectively by the authors after analysing the structure and content of the material.



Blagovschina in 2014. Leonid Levin Historical Workshop Minsk

Outlook

Consequently, although the Workshop is still at the initial stage of using videoed memoirs in educational work, its activities are channelled towards making it the mainspring for integrating interviews with victims of Nazism into the learning process in Belarus, and one of its prime objectives is to heighten the presence of information about the history of the Holocaust. Perhaps this will have a positive effect on changing the content of school textbooks.

Although the Workshop still mainly just collects video interviews with surviving witnesses, albeit using the latest recording techniques, its team is already working in parallel with multipliers to orient them towards the search for new perspectives on familiar topics, and to independently record quality conversations with eyewitnesses. Preparing specific products aimed at interpretation of the videoed memoirs for exhibitions and publications is a positive direction in the Workshop's activities. Motivating teachers and students, and having information about the history of the Holocaust included in school textbooks and other educational material, remain problems in Belarus, but these are in the stage of being resolved.

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- 1 Maly Trostenets was the largest killing site on the territory of Belarus and the occupied areas of the USSR. It was set up by the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) on the south-eastern outskirts of Minsk. The toponym “Trostenets” covers several sites: the Blagovschina locality – a place of extermination; the Shashkovka locality – a place where corpses were incinerated and large numbers of people were killed and the corpses burnt; and the labour camp itself. This range of localities impeded later definition of the place – extermination camp, extermination site or killing site? In any case, it served as a place of annihilation from 1942 to 1944.
- 2 Of these 206,500 people killed in Maly Trostenets, about 150,000 were Jews murdered in Blagovschina. In addition to Jews, other groups were also exterminated, including prisoners of war and members of the resistance. According to Christian Gerlach, the overall numbers were smaller: He estimates that 60,000 people were killed during the Nazi occupation near Trostenets. See Gerlach, C. (1999). *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944 (Calculated Murder. German Economic and Extermination Policy in Byelorussia from 1941 to 1944)*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, p.770.
- 3 An obelisk to commemorate the victims, with inscriptions in Russian and Yiddish, was inaugurated at the Yama in 1946 (IBB Dortmund et al. 2016: 209).
- 4 <http://gwminsk.com>, accessed 28 July 2017.
- 5 <http://zeitzeugenarchiv.gwminsk.com>, accessed 28 July 2017.
- 6 <http://nashapamiac.org>, accessed 28 July 2017.