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Historical Memory as a Factor of Strengthening Belarusian National Identity

The aim of the paper is to identify the key topoi in the perceptions of the past among the residents of Belarus, i.e., perceptions of some defined sets of events that are granted a certain scale of values. The most obvious way to define certain themes among answers to the open questions is to use the grouping by historical periods, depending on how frequently they have been mentioned. The following historical periods can be singled out: 1) modern history (the chronological framework from the achievement of independence by the Republic of Belarus up to the current moment); 2) history of the Soviet period; and 3) history prior to the beginning of the twentieth century (i.e., before the October Revolution of 1917). However, these periodizations have to be adjusted by the addition of a separate topos of the Great Patriotic War, as the perception of this event is extremely important for the consciousness of the people of Belarus. Furthermore, these topoi will be considered with regards to their degree of coherence/conflict. The hypothesis is forwarded that the consensus about certain historical periods and events contributes to the consolidation of national iden-

tity, while conflicting interpretations of history lead to the weakening of Belarusian identity.

Key words: historical memory, national identity, interpretations of the past, Belarus

Introduction

The end of the twentieth century is marked by the emergence of a particular discourse of historical memory in the context of national identity. Bo Stråth identifies two main reasons for the formation of this discourse:

1. the end of the Cold War led to social and cultural fragmentation, which in turn led to an erosion of interpretative schemes (for example, representations of the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” had lost its relevance and value) and raised the issue of collective memory;
2. the appearance of a new epistemology, which was indicated by such concepts as “construction” and “postmodernism,” and relativization of concepts such as “truth” and “reality” (Stråth, 2000: 17-46).

Based on this epistemological framework, we will try to approach the comprehension of the role of historical memory in the formation and strengthening of national identity.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, creator of the concept of collective memory, the primary function of collective memory was to maintain harmony (and, consequently, group identity) between social groups. The French sociologist argued collective memory is formed and operates within a social framework which is defined by the identity of social groups. An important characteristic for collective memory is identification specificity; it has always been focused on social interests of the relevant social groups. Accordingly, identity precedes memory

and creates the possibility for its implementation (Halbwachs, 2007). According to the English scholar David Lowenthal, different groups mobilize collective memories in order to maintain corporate identity (Lowenthal, 1999: 133). Despite the fact that many of the ideas introduced to the concept of collective memory by Halbwachs have been repeatedly rehearsed and significantly less frequently used in practice in the course of further development of social and human knowledge, this idea (identity as a condition for memory) was short-lived. It is rather possible to talk about the popularity of the opposite viewpoint – memory as a condition for identity. According to E. Melnikova, “conceptualizations of the unity of origin (ethno-genetic and socio-genetic legends) and commonness of the past of all members of a given society determine its integrity and vitality” (Melnikova, 2003: 3).

The two abovementioned intentions can be combined in a more sophisticated and complicated scheme. In this case historical memory and collective identity appear in a bidirectional relationship: on the one hand, the contents of historical memory determine the possibilities and limitations for the work with collective identity; on the other hand, precisely identity is the determining factor for rethinking the past and incorporating it in an evaluation of the present.

Additionally, the analytical division of collective memory by Jan Assman into communicative and cultural ones (Assman, 2004: 60) refers to the dual nature of national identity that is also implemented at two levels, a common level of daily life and solemn articulations of a ritual nature. Historical memory created institutionally is a conjunction of these two levels in the process of communicative interactions, but a certain socio-political context sets its own specificity of discursive frameworks, translation channels, and consumption practices of historical memory.

Thus, for a description of national identity as a certain consistency of perceptions about what the nation is and who belongs to it, the integration of social representations of the past is likewise needed. A particular exigency of rethinking history and finding common perspectives arises in states that are undergoing radical transformations in

their socio-cultural development. This was the case in the new states in Eastern Europe (including Belarus), where the collapse of the Soviet historical model demanded a review and redefinition of national historical narratives, as well as finding ways to unite the conceptualization of their histories.

One of the most important tools for the formation of historical memory used by the state is control over the educational system. Teaching history is traditionally considered to be extremely important for the formation of national consciousness, instilling a sense of patriotism, and propagating various ideological positions.

However, it must be considered that nowadays no state has a complete monopoly over political and cultural space. In any modern national state there are different projects of national identity which also mobilize historical memory for their own purposes. These attempts may lead to divisions in society, and subsequently the history of a nation can act as an arena of struggle for various political powers.

The struggle for political leadership is often seen as a competition of different versions of

historical memory (or resistance to its official version) and different symbols of its greatness, like a dispute about what historical events the nation should be proud of, and which

should better be forgotten. That being said, not only official authorities, but also oppositional powers and various social movements are busy with the construction of historical memory versions suitable for them ("memory" and "counter-memory") (Repina, 2006: 39). Thus, national memory, mostly articulated in the state discourse, is not homogeneous and is characterized rather by the plurality and diversity of the competing versions. Therefore, historical memory may well take the form of "counter-memory," which often challenges and contributes to the destabilization of the official versions of national identity. Consequently, the linear relation "memory strengthens identity" reduces the image of social reality, which is intensified with confrontations and the competition of various projects of national identity that create heterogeneous versions of collective memory. It should be kept

in mind that “different, conflicting memories, in fact lead to the disintegration of society, and in a sense contribute to the creation of parallel societies in one country, or even lead to the ghettoization of ethnic minorities. Striving to get rid of this unnecessary public confrontation, each society is faced with the difficult task of creating of a harmonious cultural memory for the country” (Nikžentaitis, 2008: 369).

Accordingly, historical memory can serve as a factor contributing to the strengthening of national identity if social perceptions of the past are coordinated, but can also give rise to certain conflicts in the national consciousness.

Let us turn to the peculiarities of historical memory of the people in Belarus, using the theoretical framework outlined above. The analysis will be based on the results of sociological research conducted by the Institute of Sociology²⁷¹ in June 2008. The answers to the following two open questions will be mainly considered: “What are the events in the history of Belarus, in your opinion, that one can be proud of?”; and, “What events in the history of Belarus bring you grief and shame?” Additionally, some other issues aimed at studying historical memory of the people of Belarus will be considered during the analysis.

The aim of the research will be to identify the key topoi in the perceptions of the past among the residents of Belarus, i.e., perceptions of some defined sets of events that are granted a certain scale of values. Furthermore, these topoi will be considered with regards to their degree of coherence/conflict.

The hypothesis is forwarded that the consensus about certain historical periods and events contributes to the consolidation of national identity, while conflicting interpretations of history lead to the weakening of Belarusian identity.

The most obvious way to define certain themes among answers to the open questions is to use the grouping by historical periods, depending on how frequently they have been mentioned. The following historical periods can be singled out: 1) modern history (the chronological framework from the achievement of independence by

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the Republic of Belarus up to the current moment); 2) history of the Soviet period; and 3) history prior to the beginning of the twentieth century (i.e., before the October Revolution of 1917). However, these periodizations have to be adjusted by the addition of a separate topos of the Great Patriotic War, as the perception of this event is extremely important for the consciousness of the people of Belarus.

2. The Great Patriotic War

Many researchers noted that a set of ideas about the Great Patriotic War is the most significant for the development of Belarusian national identity (Rudling, 2008; Marplz and Padgol, 2008). The centrality of this event for historical memory is inherent in many European countries. “Today, the revaluation of the past – the Second World War, occupation, collaboration, and resistance – is one of the main themes of public discourse in all European societies” (Vel’cer and Lenc, 2008: 12). For Americans, the most important event in the sphere of international relationships is also the Second World War (Savel’eva and Poletaev, 2007: 309). However, the war is comprehended differently in different countries (Trebst, 2008).

But even considering such a common European “obsession with war,” the Belarusian case is still very special. The closest analogue in terms of memory of the Great Patriotic War is modern Russian society; for our countries this war is still “a patriotic war” rather than “a world war,” it started in 1941, rather than in 1939, and we celebrate the victory on 9 May, not on 8 May, as the rest of the world (Dubin, 2004).

A significant proportion of continuity is easily seen between the way the war is articulated in the public discourse of modern Belarus, and the way the Great Patriotic War was used to legitimize communist rule:

[t]he war, with its numerous real and mythical manifestations of heroism and sacrifice, was excellent mate-

rial for the creation of patriotic symbols and patterns of collective memory. Moreover, the common struggle of the Soviet peoples gave an opportunity to create a model of common patriotism – a common Soviet identity not ignoring, but rather on the contrary, focusing on local specificity. Thus, the myth of the Great Patriotic War, the basis of which constituted ideologems of the moral and political unity of the Soviet society, of the leading role of the Communist Party, of the unity of the Party and the People, the front lines and the home front, of the flaming Soviet patriotism and mass heroism, of the friendship of peoples and so on, was created to play a special role in the unification of the Soviet society (Grinevich, 2005).

The memory of the war continues to be actively reproduced in modern Belarusian society, through virtually all possible channels of cultural policy. Particular attention is paid to the formation of patriotic upbringing through heroic examples of the Great Patriotic War in the educational system (Smaljanchuk, 2008). Accordingly, a special course, “The History of the Great Patriotic War,” has been widely introduced in the university educational system. Media culture is also full of materials referring to this event. It is especially worth mentioning the ongoing broadcasting of films about the war, some of which continue to enjoy a mass popularity. Even during the Soviet period the film-studio “Belarusfilm” was given the informal title of “Partizanfilm,” and the theme of war continues to dominate the Belarusian film industry. Furthermore, the most important national holidays in the Republic of Belarus (Independence Day and Victory Day) are directly related to the triumphant moments of the Great Patriotic War period.

It is therefore absolutely not surprising that according to the results of the survey, the most significant event in the history of Belarus that one can be proud of is the victory in the Great Patriotic War.

However, one can say that the Belarusian image of the war differs from the Soviet one, and has its own specificity, which started to form

during the Soviet era. First of all, the narrative of the Second World War emphasizes the huge number of Belarusian casualties, which accorded Belarus the status not only of a hero nation, but also of a martyr nation, whose victory in the war was paid by a tragic price. This is reinforced by the continuous use of the rhetorical figure that every fourth Belarusian died during the war. Secondly, the exclusive role of the Belarusian people in the victory over fascism is highlighted, where a special part is given to the so-called “Partisan myth.” Consequently, the idea that “the Soviet people were the victors over fascism” gradually fell into the shadows and was replaced by the notion that the Belarusian people were the exclusive victors.

Thus, the Great Patriotic War appears in the consciousness of the Belarusians as an event that is simultaneously tragic (“Belarus took the first most terrible blow in the Great Patriotic War”) and heroic. At times the war is portrayed as a terrible test, a struggle for the right of people not only to exist, but also for universal respect. However, in the open responses to the questionnaire the prevalent themes are of heroism (“heroism during the Second World War,” “the heroic deeds of the Great Patriotic War,” and “the deeds of the people in the Great Patriotic War”), struggle (“the struggle of the people during the war” and “the struggle for liberation”), liberation (“liberation from fascists” and “the liberation of Belarus”), and victory (the category of “Victory in the Great Patriotic War” is mentioned 381 times, and this is in response to an open question). This being said, of all the categories the leading ones are references to the partisan movement (fifteen categories), which proves the actualization of the myth about Belarus as a partisan country.

On the other hand, the Great Patriotic War has its negative sides – huge losses, failure at the beginning of the war, the occupation period, and the related problem of collaborationism. Furthermore, the partisan movement itself looks quite controversial in the unofficial memory transmitted primarily by family channels in Belarusian villages (Shatalava, 2008). These negative moments were widely debated in the media in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but in recent years they

have virtually disappeared from public discourse, both in Belarus and Russia. However, even now one may notice some attempts to use the “counter-memory” about the war to challenge the official image of this event.

In the mass consciousness of the Belarusian people the negative aspects of the Great Patriotic War are virtually non-existent, which can be traced through the responses to the question “What events in the history of Belarus bring you grief and shame?” Even if the war is sometimes present in these responses, it is mostly associated with the bitterness of loss in the war (“bitterness, but not shame,” “death of every third person in the Great Patriotic War,” or “losses in the Great Patriotic War”). But all of the other controversial topics listed above receive only occasional mentioning (“the large number of traitors in the Great Patriotic War,” “the beginning of the War,” “the retreat in 1941,” “police revenge squads,” “the defeat of 1941,” “treason during the war,” or “execution of the Jews”), and are obviously marginal in the formation of memory about the war.

Thus, memory of the victory in the Great Patriotic War among the residents of Belarus is fairly coherent and does not evoke conflicting interpretations. In the mass consciousness it seems a difficult test for the Belarusian people, in which they displayed extraordinary heroism that can be considered as an invaluable contribution to the victory over fascism. These social perceptions of the past are in full conformance with the image of the war operating in the state discourse, as illustrated in the speech by the Belarusian president:

Tell me, what is the greatest achievement of our people for which we must bow down to them? It is the victory over fascism... We have given millions of people to the altar of victory in that war. And the most freedom loving and honest people have always been the Belarusian people. Yes, we had some incidents of treachery. But those were singular incidents. Our people fought with honor and pride (Lukashenko, 2003: 35-36).

It is noteworthy that this situation actualizes the connection between the past and the present, and emphasizes that the victory in the war is the heritage of the people for which one can, and should be, proud of these days. This contributes to the establishment of a sustainable positive emotional link with the national community whose contribution to history is so heroic. The simplicity and non-contradictive nature of this image only contributes to its more successful consolidation in the mass consciousness. Thus, it is possible to agree with other researchers that the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War is the key to the formation of Belarusian national identity, the most sustained and articulated set of representations of the past among the residents of Belarus. This being said, some authors' focus on the continuity with the Soviet myth of the war does not allow the observation that in contemporary Belarus the memory of the war is filled with different content, where the strengthening of national identity is facilitated by the concentration of rhetoric on the role of Belarusian people in the victory over fascism.

3. Modern History

The topos formed by the events of the recent history contributes to the most diverse and rich representations of the past for the inhabitants of Belarus. It contains several important themes that contribute to Belarusian pride (see *Table 1*):

Themes in the historical memory of the residents of Belarus	Number of categories	Number of answers ¹
Gaining independence	70	200
Construction of new buildings	34	76
Sports achievements	49	70
Victories in “Eurovision Song Contest”	20	56
Festivals	12	52
Economic wellbeing	50	51
Presidential rule of Aleksandar Lukashenko	23	34
Independence day	4	32
Cultural achievements	18	19
Celebrations	13	18
Scientific and technical achievements	10	10

Table 1: Themes of the modern history of Belarus that evoke pride among the country's residents

Some of them received significant positive interpretations:

1. According to the opinions of the residents of Belarus, the only event in the history of the country more significant than achieving independence was victory in the Second World War. Achieving independence was mentioned in seventy categories, where different procedural terms were used, leading to the status of “independence”: “recovery,” “announcement,” “formation of an independent state,” “acquisition,” “recognition,” “acceptance,” “proclamation,” “establishment of an independent state,” “preservation,” “becoming,” and “establishment”;
2. The respondents mentioned the construction of new buildings, including the construction of the National Library and ice hockey arenas. There were also negative reactions to large-scale construction projects (“building arenas and sports facilities while the population lives in poverty,” or “pomposity in construction”), but they were less common (only four responses);
3. Among sport achievements, ice hockey victories were especially highlighted (“a victory of the Belarusians over the Swedes in ice hockey,” “fourth place at the Ice Hockey World Championship”), as was Yuliya Nesterenko’s victory at the Olympic Games (“Belarusian runner who won at the Olympics,” and “Nesterenko’s victory over the American hegemony”). The most popular sport, football, is mentioned only once among events that evoke pride, since it appears to be negatively perceived much more often (“games of the national football team,” “lost at football,” and “losing to the Andorran team with the score of 2:0”). However, it should be noted that the research was conducted prior to the successful performance of the BATE Borisov Football Club in the Champions League, which according to the visitors of the most popular Belarusian website www.tut.by, was a major event in Belarus in 2008. Sporting achievements have become a symbol of national pride in

the modern world, promoting social cohesion and strengthening national identity;

4. Respondents were positive about the victories of Belarusian artists at the international musical contest “Eurovision Song Contest,” firstly the victory of Ksenia Sitnik (“victory in the Junior Eurovision Song Contest,” and “Ksenia Sitnik victory”) and the successful performance of Dmitry Koldun (“Koldun’s sixth place,” and “Koldun’s performance on Eurovision Song Contest”). It should be pointed out that in this case the recognition of Belarusian culture on the international level is important, which again contributes to a positive emotional connection with the national community. On the other hand, poor performances of our artists cause bitterness and shame (“for Ruslan Alekhno, who did not enter the semifinal on the Eurovision Song Contest,” “Eurovision Song Contest in 2008 (did not make it to the finals),” and “failure in the Eurovision Song Contest”);
5. Various festivals, among which the festival “Slavonic Bazaar” in Vitebsk stands out.

However, not all the themes from modern history received a positive evaluation (see Table 2):

Themes in historical memory of the residents of Belarus	Number of categories	Number of answers 2
Contemporary politics (actions of the government)	63	95
Socio-economic situation	44	46
Contemporary politics (actions of the opposition)	20	28
The Nemiga tragedy	7	25
Foreign policy	23	24
Abolition of benefits	11	18
Decline of ethics and moral	16	17
“Perestroika” and beginning of the 1990s	11	15
Mass media	12	13
Sports failures	10	13
Situation with the Belarusian language and culture	12	12
Eurovision Song Contest	8	10

Table 2: Themes in the modern history of Belarus that cause bitterness and shame among the residents of the country

Some spheres of life in Belarus raised in the questionnaire caused contradictory reactions from the residents of the country, such as the following:

1. The socio-economic life of modern Belarus. People noted the growth of production (“economic recovery,” “manufacturing of new products,” “growth of industry in the country,” and “improvement of the socio-economic situation of the Republic of Belarus”) and connected it directly with their well-being (“a decent living”). It should be noted that sometimes the living standards of Belarusians were described as very modest (“more or less you can live,” “pensions are paid on time,” and “there is a good choice in the shops”). But among the responses there are also a lot of negative ratings (“an underdeveloped economy,” “negative growth in the market economy compared to the socialist system of development,” “instability in the economy,” and “eternal poverty”), indications of a low level of salaries and pensions (“small wages,” “workers are low-paid,” “a low material standard of living of the average population,” and “the situation of pensioners, particularly rural”), and, conversely, a high level of prices (“high prices,” “price increase,” “rise of fuel prices,” and “ongoing price increases”). It should be borne in mind that the poll was conducted before Belarus felt the impact of the global financial crisis;
2. Political life, which also causes many contradictory interpretations. The results of presidential and parliamentary elections makes part of the population proud (“the election of our President,” “the election of the President,” and “Lukashenko’s victory in all elections”), but the other part of the population considers these results to be events that cause bitterness and shame (“violation of the Constitution during the election of the President,” “Lukashenko coming to power,” “presidential elections of the last ten years,” and “establishment of the ‘superpresidential’ Republic”). There are many references and disagreement with the policy towards the opposition (“the brutal

chasing of demonstrations and meetings,” “when OMON [*special police forces*] use batons,” and “persecution of dissidents”).

Some themes are only present among the events that cause negative feelings. First of all, it is the perception of foreign policy. Among the answers there are indications of complexity towards relationships both with the West (“non-recognition by the western countries,” “Belarus is considered to be a non-democratic state,” “conflicts with the United States,” “we keep failing to join the EU,” and “the absence of Belarus in the European Union”) and Russia (“non-fulfillment of the idea of Union of Russia and Belarus,” “turmoil with Russia on the gas issue,” and “oil conflicts with Russia”). Also, one of the clearly negative events in contemporary history for the residents of Belarus was the abolition of benefits.

Therefore, if a set of ideas about the Great Patriotic War in the consciousness of the people of Belarus is homogeneous and stable, characterized by a set of sustainable metaphors and expressions, modern history brings forth a great variety of interpretations. Some themes of actual history (gaining independence, sports achievements, the construction of new facilities, and victories on “Eurovision Song Contest”) are the least controversial in the public consciousness and can be considered as contributing to the consolidation and cohesion of the Belarusian nation. At the same time, assessments of the socio-economic and political development of the Republic of Belarus are controversial and are unlikely to provide any unifying base.

4. History of the Soviet period

These studies indicate that in terms of the development of a positive image of the past, the Soviet epoch is marked by hegemony of accented and pronounced memory of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, in the shadow of which other events of that period become insignificant.

The October Revolution was mentioned only once, and this is despite the fact that the revolutionary myth in the Soviet Union was one of the most important bases of common Soviet identity. Although 7 November is still a state holiday in the present Republic of Belarus, its meaning and origin is considerably obscured. Noteworthy is the fact that this process develops much more intensively than in Russia. In 1989, 62% of Russians considered the October Revolution to be the main event of the century (in second place after the victory in the Second World War), while in 2003 only 40% of Russians gave it this status (in fourth place) (Dubin, 2008).

Besides the Great Patriotic War, only a few historical events from the Soviet past were cited by respondents as causing a sense of pride (see *Table 3*):

Themes in historical memory of the residents of Belarus	Number of categories	Number of answers
Victory in the Great Patriotic War	89	567
Reconstruction after the war	10	12
Participation in the exploration of space	10	11
Participation in the creation of the UN	6	6
Life in the USSR	5	5
Unification of Western Belarus with the BSSR	5	5
Formation of the BSSR	2	4

Table 3: Themes from the modern history of Belarus that evoke pride among the country's residents

It is interesting that all these events are related directly to the place of Belarus in Soviet history. Even the mentioning of space exploration focused not on the pioneering flight of Gagarin, but on the participation of Belarus in space programs (“Belarusian cosmonauts,” “astronauts Klimuk and Kovalyonok,” and “the space flight of the Belarusians”). The overall category of “life in the USSR” is mentioned only five times (some respondents refer exactly to the period, “when Masherov was the head,” which again displays precisely the Belarusian context). This proves that the history of 1917–1991 in the mass consciousness of the Belarusians is perceived not as the past of the Soviet peoples, but rather as the past of the people of Belarus in the Soviet Union.

At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union is still perceived painfully by a part of the Belarusian population, especially by the older generations who gave the most sharply negative assessment of the activities of Mikhail Gorbachev and Stanislav Shushkevich (37.3% and 39.4% respectively). Other negative events in the history of Belarus are “the disintegration of the USSR,” “the signing the Belovezhsky agreement,” and “the agreement in Viskuli” (although it would be fair to mention that the same events are also mentioned among the events that evoke pride among the people of Belarus).

The assessment of the role of important historical figures of the Soviet period by the residents of Belarus is also mixed (see *Figure 1*).

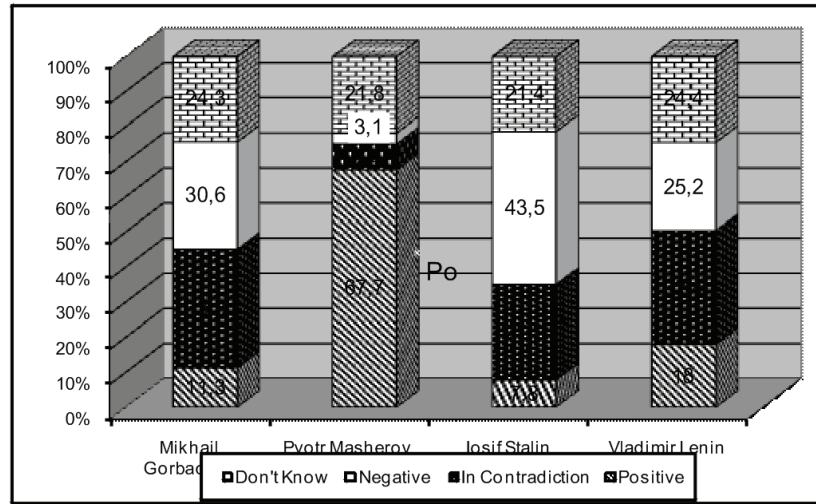


Figure 1: Assessment of the role of different political figures of the Soviet period in the history of Belarus

As we can see, only the assessment of the role of Pyotr Masherov (leader of Belarusian Communist Party in the 1970s and 1980s) is certainly positive. But the most positive assessment of his role came from the people of Belarus over the age of forty who lived during the period when Masherov headed the Belarusian government (see Table 4). For them, the positive evaluation of this historic figure reaches 80%, but for the younger generation (under twenty years old), this figure is no longer of such significance, and the level of positive assessment drops to roughly one half (to 38.5%), while more than one third of the representatives of this generation (36.3%) were not prepared to assess the role of this historic figure.

Assessment of the role of Pyotr Masherov in the history of Belarus	Age groups						Total
	Up to 20	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	over 60	
Positive	38.5	56.2	64.0	80.0	79.7	73.9	67.7
Inconsistent	17.6	11.9	7.4	4.2	3.8	4.7	7.4
Negative	7.7	4.6	1.9	1.6	2.7	2.8	3.1
Don't know	36.3	27.3	26.7	14.2	13.7	18.5	21.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4: Assessment of the role of Pyotr Masherov in the history of Belarus by different age groups of the residents of Belarus (in %)

Thus, even the positive evaluation of Pyotr Masherov is not a unifying factor for social perceptions of the past among the residents of Belarus, since it is relevant primarily for the older generation and leads to a generation gap in the historical memory.

Meanwhile, for the Soviet period there are several sore points for social perceptions of the past among the residents of Belarus (see *Table 5*):

1. The Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster in 1986. This event tops the “black list” of events that cause feelings of sadness and shame (“the accident at the Chernobyl NPP,” “the explosion at the Chernobyl NPP,” “bitterness: Chernobyl,” “little information about the nuclear fallout,” “migration of people from contaminated zones,” and “the Chernobyl catastrophe”);
2. The war in Afghanistan (“the Afghan war,” “war in Afghanistan,” and “Belarusian participation in the war in Afghanistan”);
3. Stalin’s repressions (“the repressions of 1917-1953,” “repressions of Stalin’s times,” and “repressions, murders”);
4. Collectivization (“the years of collectivization,” “collectivization of the 1930s,” and “collectivization and its consequences”).

Themes in historical memory of the residents of Belarus	Number of categories	Number of answers
Chernobyl catastrophe	17	184
Disintegration of the USSR	17	93
Great Patriotic War	17	50
Stalin's repressions	19	34
Collectivization	5	16
The USSR period	10	11
Afghan war	5	9

Table 5: Themes in the modern history of Belarus that cause bitterness and shame among the residents of the country

Thus, the Soviet period in Belarusian historical memory is not perceived univocally. As we have noted, the positive image of the Soviet past is formed mainly due to the domination of the memory about the victory in the Great Patriotic War, while the other events of the Soviet period are perceived contradictorily. It should be also noted that even the leadership of the country by Stalin during the war did not save him from a pronounced negative assessment of his role in the history of Belarus by the respondents. The older generation of Belarusian residents retain nostalgic memories of Masherov's government, but for younger generations the same period of the past loses its significance. Therefore, the memory of the Soviet past (with the exception of memory about the victory in the Great Patriotic War) can hardly be a consolidating factor for strengthening Belarusian national identity, since it generates conflicting interpretations and serious disagreements in the views of the people of Belarus.

5. Pre-Soviet History

The most underrepresented period in the mass consciousness of the people of Belarus is the history of the country in the pre-Soviet era.

However, the distant past of the Belarusian people did not cause any adverse reactions. From this period, only four events were mentioned among the events in the history of Belarus that cause bitterness and shame: the Union of Lublin, divisions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the suppression of the rebellion under the leadership of Kastus Kalinowski, and a single mention of the Livonian War (1558-1583).

Far more frequently mentioned were events from the history of Belarus which evoke pride (see *Table 5*), such as the categories related to the activities of educators (“the creation of the first books by Francysk Skaryna,” “the publishing of the first book in Eastern Europe,” and “the Enlighteners Efrosinya of Polotsk and K. Turawski,” which number a total of twenty-six categories) and the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) (“the creation of the GDL,” “being part of the GDL,” and “the flourishing of culture during the time of the GDL,” which number thirteen categories). Additionally, the period of the Polotsk principality, the battle on Nemiga, the Battle of Grunwald, the Battle of Orsha, the constitution of 1791, the war of 1812, the Kosciuszko and Kalinowski uprisings, the issue of “Nasza Niwa,” and the First World War were mentioned.

Themes in the historical memory of the residents of Belarus	Number of categories	Number of answers
Activities of Enlighteners	27	32
The GDL period	13	23
The Battle of Grunwald in 1410	10	17
Rebellion under the leadership of K. Kalinovsky	5	12
Creation of the Belarusian People's Republic	4	8
The Battle of Orsha in 1514	4	5

Table 6: Themes of the pre-Soviet history of Belarus that evoke pride among the country's residents

It should be mentioned that some events, particularly the war of 1812 and the First World War, can hardly relate to the achievements of Belarusian national history from a historical point of view. References to these events show that representations of inclusion of the history of Belarus into the broader historical and cultural area with Russia are still present in the historical memory of Belarusians (the origins of these representations can be located in the remnants of Soviet education, but may also be formed through the current strong information impact on Belarus from the Russian cultural field).

Despite the weak actualization of representations about the pre-Soviet past of Belarus, this historical period has the greatest potential for strengthening national identity. For the representation of historical events, the remoteness in the past has its undeniable advantages: the possible contradiction between cultural and communicative memory (or, in other words, between the official and unofficial memory) is removed, which allows greater freedom for the creation of a positive image of past events. The poor knowledge of the history of the country before the beginning of the twentieth century by the inhabitants of Belarus can be interpreted as a "clean plate," which can be filled with a constructed memory. This is where it has benefits over the period

of modern history, which inevitably causes conflicting interpretations. This potential source has already begun to be used in education as well as in the media (such as historical publications in the newspaper *Belarus Today* and the cycles of historical shows broadcast on public television), but as evidenced by the survey data, the possibilities of historical memory in this case are not yet fully utilized.

In this regard it is noteworthy that among all of the historical figures that have influenced the course of Belarusian history, the educators of the Middle Ages, such as Francysk Skaryna and Efrosinya of Polotsk, received unambiguously positive assessments (respectively, 83.4% and 82.6% of respondents evaluated their contribution to history as “positive”); in this positive perception, representatives of all socio-demographic groups are unified. Hence, the emphasis on the educational activities of the most important cultural figures can serve as a unifying factor contributing to the coherence of historical memory of Belarusians.

The perceptions of key Belarusian historical figures, such as Kastus Kalinowski, Vitawt, and Wsiaslaw the Magician, are listed below (see *Figure 2*):

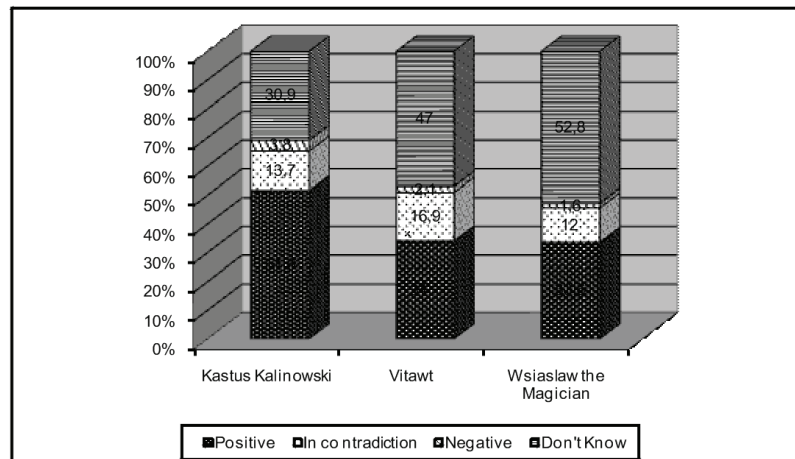


Figure 2 : Assessment of the role of different historical figures of the pre-Soviet period in the history of Belarus

As we can see, the residents of Belarus are unfamiliar with these historical figures, since about half of the respondents found it difficult to assess the roles of Vitawt and Wsiaslaw the Magician. But in this case, more important is the almost complete absence of negative ratings, which suggests that with the proper promotion the inhabitants of Belarus are quite willing to accept these historical figures as national symbols, since at least they do not cause any negative emotional reactions. The absence of any significant generation gaps in the assessment of the role of these historical figures is remarkable, although the number of those who could not answer naturally increased among the older generations (yet it did not lead to an increase of negative assessments).

6. Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of the degree of conflict/coherence of the main topoi in the historical memory of the people of Belarus leads to the following conclusions:

1. The most important historical myth contributing to the construction of modern Belarusian national identity is the memory of the victory in the Great Patriotic War; the consistency and simplicity of this memory only contributes to a coherence of representations of the past.
2. The most saturated and diverse aspect of Belarusian historical memory is the topos of modern history, which includes numerous contradictory assessments and interpretations. Some themes of modern history (the establishment of independence, sports achievements, the construction of new facilities, and the victories in the musical contest “Eurovision Song Contest”) can be regarded as contributing to the consolidation of mass consciousness, whereas the interpretations of the socio-economic and political development of the Republic of Belarus is not as homogeneous.
3. The memory of the Soviet period in the history of Belarus is noted by a hegemony of the memory of the war which overshadows all other events. However, negative (or controversial) assessments of political leaders of this period by the residents of Belarus (with the exception of Pyotr Masherov) show that Soviet history can not serve as a unifying factor for the integrity of historical memory.
4. The biggest potential for strengthening Belarusian national identity belongs to the topos of social representations of the history of Belarus before the beginning of the twentieth century. This topos has two important characteristics: 1) blankness (the content can be modified without any problem); and 2) positive-to-neutral percep-

tions in the mass consciousness. The consolidating role of assessments of the educators Francysk Skaryna and Efrosinya of Polotsk indicates that the pre-Soviet Belarusian history can be quite effectively used to form the commonness of representations of the past and present of the Belarusian nation.

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