

## THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR 1941-1945

### Liberation of Belarus and its input into the Great Victory

*The Great Patriotic War triggered tremendous human casualties and devastation in Belarus. Not a single country involved in the hostilities was faced up with such appalling atrocities and destructions, the way Belarus was. The war left a deep mark in history and minds of the Belarusian people.*

*Every third resident of Belarus perished in the War. Of 270 towns and communities, over 200 and almost 90 per cent of buildings in Minsk were ruined. More than 9 thousand villages were devastated. In pre-war prices, material damage was about half the national wealth of the country.*

#### Defence of Brest Fortress

The Brest Fortress, south-west of Belarus, was the first to withstand an attack of the German troops in the Soviet Union. At the time of the attack on June 22, 1941, around 7-8 thousand Soviet soldiers were deployed in the Brest Fortress. From the very first minutes of the war, Brest and the Brest Fortress were under massive air and artillery strikes; heavy infightings took place at the border, in town and in the fortress.

On the offensive was 17,000-strong German infantry division in full outfit. The enemy was ten times stronger and better equipped.

The battle in the Brest Fortress became fierce and protracted, lasting many days. The defence of the Brest Fortress set an example of courage and resilience of the Soviet and Belarusian people in standing for their freedom and independence. The defenders of the Brest Fortress – soldiers of more than 30 nationalities of the



Commander of Artillery Regiment 546, Major Miheev at control centre near Rogachev in Gomel region, July 1941 (photo by courtesy of the Great Patriotic War Museum in Minsk)

USSR – made a greatest heroic act of the Great Patriotic War.

#### Atrocities

Barbarous killings of innocent civilians and atrocities swept through Belarus during the fascist occupation. One of the gravest tragedies of the kind hit the village of Khatyn in Minsk region in March 1943.

What happened was fascists driving all residents into a barn and setting fire. Whoever attempted to flee from the burning barn was shot down by the fascists. 149 residents, including 75 children, were burnt alive. Looting and fire all around the place followed.

Today there is a memorial giving tribute to all those perished where the massacre took place years ago.



Minsk destroyed, 1944 (photo by courtesy of the Belarusian State Archive of Motion- and Photo Documents)

Trostenets death camp, largest across the occupied territories of the USSR, was built by the fascists in Belarus, in the district of Minsk. Over there, fascists exterminated both civilians and prisoners of war from different countries such as Poland, Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia. More than 200 thousand people were tortured, shot and burned by the Hitlerites.

In Minsk, fascists set up one of the largest ghettos in Europe. As it operated, more than 100 thousand people became its prisoners. An overwhelming majority of them died of hunger, diseases and tortures.

#### The Righteous among the Nations

The Belarusian people stands prominently for its heroism in the rescue of Jews during the war. Holocaust killed over 800 thousand Jews in Belarus. About 30 thousand Jews survived. Many of survivors lived on

thanks to Belarusian people, who took risks and hid Jews in their own homes, putting their lives and their relatives' in jeopardy.

The authorities of Israel introduced the title "The Righteous among the Nations", awarded to people who had saved Jews in the wartime. Today, there are 22 thousand righteous globally. And over 600 of them live in Belarus, making Belarus Number 8 in this honourable rating.

Sheer heroism and valour of ordinary Belarusians describe the people as responsive and compassionate, anxious to give a helpful and selfless hand to those in trouble.

### Partisan Warfare

The partisan movement in Belarus contributed a lot both to the liberation of the country and final victory of the Soviet Union over fascism.

The movement took root in the prime days of the invasion and reached an all-time high in 1943-1944. A mere 12 thousand partisans at the end of the summer in 1941 multiplied tremendously to reach 150 thousand who fought on in 140 partisan brigades. Overall, a total of 370 thousand partisans fought their battle in Belarus. Over 44 thousand of them died in action.

The scale of partisan movement was self-evident as single partisan zones sprang up in 1943 (2.5 years before the hostilities were over), recaptured by the partisans and estimated at 60 per cent of the occupied territory. Government was restored in those areas, bringing the life of civilians back to normal.

Critical to the partisan movement in Belarus were special task forces sent in by the Chief Intelligence Department of the Red Army, People's Commission for Internal Affairs and People's Commission for State Security. Well-trained and equipped, the soldiers on the force launched special operations, sabotaging vital communications, collected information about the



War Veterans with families at the Victory celebrations  
(photo by courtesy of the BELTA News Agency)

enemy, helped local partisan outfits get in touch with Moscow authorities.

The partisan regiments were multinational, with Belarusians largely outnumbering other nationalities, over 70 %.

Other massive groups included Russians, around 20 per cent, Ukrainians – nearly 4 per cent.

The partisans also involved over 1,200 foreigners: Poles, Slovaks, Germans, French, Italians, and other Europeans.

An inherent part of the partisan movement in Belarus was active resistance in urban areas of the country that brought together 70 thousand in underground groups and organizations.

The subversive operations of those organizations included sabotaging industrial facilities operated by the fascists, rescuing Soviet POWs and ghetto prisoners, collecting intelligence for the partisan command and the Red Army.

Overall, three years into the war, from June of 1941 till July of 1944, the partisans of Belarus killed and wounded nearly 500 thousand Hitlerite soldiers,



Partisans of Nevsky Brigade 101 of Minsk region, 1944, Mihanovichy village, Starobinsky area in Minsk region (photo by courtesy of the Great Patriotic War Museum in Minsk)

commissioned officers and collaborators, derailed over 11 thousand troop trains, destroyed more than 940 headquarters and garrisons, blasted 18.5 thousand vehicles, brought down and blown up around 300 aircraft, destroyed 930 military warehouses, other military materiel and facilities of the enemy.

### Input into the Great Victory

It is joint efforts of the anti-Hitlerite coalition and Resistance fighters that defeated the fascist Germany and its allies. However, the peoples of the Soviet Union, Belarus included, and the Soviet Army shouldered up a major and overwhelming burden of the war.

Historical evidence and facts indicate that from 190 to 270 German divisions were thrown into the Soviet-German battlefield from the onset of the war until mid-1944. And from 9 to 20 German divisions were engaged with British and US troops in Northern Africa, from 7 to 26 divisions in Italy.

Even the opening of the second front in Europe left the Soviet-German front with nearly 2.5 times more German troops than elsewhere, in the western and Italian fronts.

It is the Soviet Army that crushed the main forces of the fascist military machine. Of 13.6 million lost by fascist Germany during World War Two, ten million lost their lives in the Eastern front.

Belarusians took part even in the French Resistance. Their ranks included former partisans, underground activists, POWs who escaped fascist concentration camps and joined Resistance in France.

Overall, Resistance included around 17 thousand Soviet patriots, brought together in 55 partisan regiments.

It is unacceptable to underestimate, in any way whatsoever, the input of the peoples of the Soviet Union and Soviet Armed Forces in defeating fascism. For Belarus, it is worldwide recognition of the contribution made by the country to defeating fascism that made Belarus a UN founding member.

From 1945, Belarus has been heavily involved in the UN, behind a variety of initiatives designed to maintain peace and security, develop efficient and equal international co-operation.

At the very first session of the UN General Assembly, on the proposal of Belarus, a resolution was passed on the extradition and punishment of war criminals.

The resolution contained a demand that all UN member states step up measures to search for war criminals and extradite them to the countries where their crimes were perpetrated.

In Belarus, the Day of Victory, 9 May, is celebrated at the highest political level possible. As Minsk was liberated from the fascist invaders on 3 July, it is now the Day of Independence in Belarus.



House of Government in Minsk, 1944  
(photo by courtesy of the Belarusian State Archive of Motion- and Photo Documents)



House of Government in Minsk, 2009  
(photo by courtesy of the Interfax News Agency)

*“The Victory in the Great Patriotic War is the greatest asset of our people. We, thankful descendants, bow down before valiant war veterans and home front workers who, with their immortal heroism in the years of the Great Patriotic War, offered us an opportunity to live peacefully and work on free soil. At the cost of numerous lives, the Belarusians earned the right to independence”.*

Alexander Lukashenko  
President of the Republic of Belarus