

Holocaust symbolism in the Belarusian memory of Maly Trostenets

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Abstract

This article analyzes the memorial complex that was built in 2015 at the site of the former Nazi camp Maly Trostenets. Although the complex has incorporated symbolism connected to how the Holocaust is remembered in Western Europe, it does not overcome some of the aspects of the old Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War.

Key Words

Belarus, Holocaust memory, Maly Trostenets, memory culture, monuments

In June 2015, the Trostenets memorial complex was unveiled just outside the Belarusian capital Minsk.¹ It is dedicated to the victims of the Nazi forced labor camp Maly Trostenets and its extermination sites in two nearby forests. The last state-sanctioned monument was erected at the site during the Soviet era in 1963, to commemorate the Soviet citizens who were murdered there. That many of these Soviet civilians were killed because they were Jewish was not reflected in the monument, nor was the fact that many victims were deported Jews from Western European countries. Despite the large number of victims coming from various European countries, the site remained unknown for a long time. It garnered more interest in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, Maly Trostenets still remains almost absent from the memory of the Holocaust in the rest of Europe today. This analysis of the Trostenets memorial complex, which consists of a number

of monuments, shows how the fact that Maly Trostenets fell into oblivion provides space for a specific Belarusian interpretation of the Holocaust in Europe.

In early 1942, the SS in Minsk created a camp on the site of the former Karl Marx kolkhoz in the village of Maly Trostenets on the outskirts of Minsk. It was used as a forced labor camp for Soviet Prisoners of War (POWs), Jewish and non-Jewish Belarusians, and Western European Jews. Some three kilometers from the camp lies Blagovshina forest which had been used as a killing site by the NKVD to eliminate prisoners held in Minsk prison in the days prior to the German occupation.² From early 1942 onwards, the forest once again served as one of the main execution sites. At first, Belarusian Jews from the Minsk ghetto were executed there, while from May 1942 onwards Western European Jews deported from cities located in present-day Germany, Austria and the Czech

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2 Today in Belarus there is still not much attention to the victims of the NKVD, after this history was almost completely silenced during the Soviet era. The victims of the NKVD at Blagovshina remain therefore a difficult topic to address, in particular because of the lack of sources on this topic. However, there are some advocates—such as Belarusian historian Igor Kuznetsov—for this memory, who have attempted to include the Stalinist victims in the new memorial site at Blagovshina forest as well (Borel 2014; Korsak 2014).



Figure 1. Gates of Memory.

Republic met the same fate there. Between October and December 1943, Sonderkommando 1005-Centre was deployed in Blagovshina forest with the aim of removing all traces of the massacres, including the destruction of mass graves by digging up and burning the remains. In early 1944, another killing site, located in Shashkova forest just southeast of the Maly Trostenets camp, was used to burn the corpses of people who had been killed in gas trucks. Many of these victims came from the Minsk region and were killed in anti-partisan actions. The use of Shashkova forest and the site of Maly Trostenets as killing sites continued until early July 1944. After the liberation of Minsk, the Extraordinary State Commission, established by the Soviet authorities to investigate mass graves, estimated that approximately 206,500 people had been killed at all three sites in and around Maly Trostenets.³

Despite the relatively high number of Western European victims, Maly Trostenets remained unknown in the West until the 1990s and early 2000s. Around this time, interest in this killing site increased, both abroad and inside the new Belarusian Republic. As the old Soviet monument erected at the site in the 1960s only mentions a very specific group of victims, the “Soviet citizens who were tortured and burned by the German-fascist invaders in June 1944”, local memory entrepreneurs and foreign NGOs began to lobby for a monument to honor all

victims at Maly Trostenets. These efforts eventually led to the creation of the memorial complex. In June 2015, the first part of the complex was unveiled at the former camp. Belarusian president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, gave an address at the main monument, the *Gates of Memory*, to a crowd of veterans, survivors and other interested people (Fig. 1). In his speech, he referred to other countries which “share the pain of Trostenets” with the Belarusians; at the same time, he lauded the wartime accomplishments of the Red Army and the “greatness of the Soviet people whose descendants we are” (The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus 2015). The shared pain of Trostenets refers here to the idea of European countries having a shared past in which the Holocaust is a key feature, while the reference to the greatness of the Soviet people relates directly to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War, which was the master narrative in the Soviet Union regarding the period of 1941 to 1944. This acknowledgement of both sides – the Soviet inheritance and the shared European past – has also been reflected in the design and narrative of the new memorial site. While particular choices reflect attempts to place the history of Maly Trostenets more thoroughly within the framework of the European memory of the Holocaust, the overall design of the memorial complex and the narratives conveyed in plaques still demonstrates a strong connection to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War and a building style common to Soviet war monuments.

The memorial complex is situated on the outskirts of Minsk, on the boundary with the small village of Maly Trostenets, standing in stark contrast to its surroundings. Against the background of tall apartment buildings and a supermarket across the street, a sign directs visitors towards the different elements of the complex: ‘the road of death’, the ‘ruins of the death camp’ and the ‘site where 6500 prisoners were burned’ (Fig. 2). The apartments overlook the main monument, the *Gates of Memory*, and the *Road of Memory* that leads to it. Large stone blocks with commemoration plaques listing all sites where the Nazis committed crimes in Belarus are located on both sides of the road. The road culminates at a ten-meter high bronze sculpture depicting a group of human figures emerging from two very high gated doors. The figures are only half-dressed, most of them in rags or in striped outfits and there is a look of despair on their faces. The bronze doors imitate a wooden camp gate and appear to be wrapped in barbed wire. One of the gated doors has a sign on it stating “Kl. Trostenets”.

In the Soviet Union and in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), there was little or no room to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust as Jewish victims were simply seen as Soviet civilians. This was not just the case for those people who were Jewish, but also for those who were targeted as Soviet POW, partisan

³ According to the Extraordinary Soviet State Commission to Investigate German-Fascist Crimes, 150,000 people were killed in Blagovshina forest, 50,000 in Shashkova forest and another 6,000 in the camp at Maly Trostenets. This number seems to be on the high side as scholars have estimated that approximately 60,000 people were killed at these killing sites (Gerlach 1999: 770).



Figure 2. Indication sign Trostenets memorial complex.

or part of another minority group. Although the idea of viewing everyone as Soviet civilians also enabled commemorations of different groups under the same heading, it mostly translated into rendering the Holocaust invisible and resulted in indifference towards the fate of people persecuted for the fact that they were Jewish. In post-1991 Belarus, there is still not much space for the memory of specific groups of victims, although this situation has begun to change and the country has slowly started to embrace its Jewish past (Waligórska 2018: 334–335). Most of the victims of Maly Trostenets were either West-

ern European or Belarusian Jews, and this fact seems to be underlined in the symbolism employed at the memorial site. Several aspects of the memorial complex draw connections to Holocaust icons embedded in European memory of the Holocaust. The striped pyjamas worn by the figures depicted in the monument remind the visitor of the striped pyjamas that prisoners in concentration camps had to wear. The sign “Kl. Trostenets” evokes the abbreviation KL, *Konzentrationslager*, placed in front of the names of the concentration camps such as KL Dachau, KL Buchenwald or KL Auschwitz.

Although monuments are never a literal representation of the past, in his speech at the unveiling of the monument, president Lukashenko stressed that the architects had a difficult task in “preserving the historical truth and giving a complete picture of people’s suffering” (The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus 2015). The project director and leading architect of the memorial complex, Anna Aksënova, likewise emphasized that this was the ambition of the design team, stating that “the memorial complex is being created with the goal of remembering the victims of the National Socialist regime and to safeguard the historical authenticity of the site” (Aksënova 2013: 46). Viewing the monument in light of these comments, an issue arises with the ‘authenticity’ of the ‘historical truth’ that is being represented. In his study on Holocaust icons, Oren Baruch Stier reminds us that “Holocaust symbols must convey a degree of historical authenticity if they are to be used to communicate the truth of the events they are intended to represent” (Stier 2015: 5). In the case of the memorial *Gates of Memory* and the Trostenets memorial complex, the ‘historical truth’ is not being reflected in its entirety.

The main problem lies in establishing whether Maly Trostenets was a concentration camp or a death camp. Although many people were murdered in and around the camp complex and camp prisoners faced the constant threat of being beaten, shot or hanged by the SS and other guarding personnel, the main function of the camp was to provide and supervise forced labor. The camp was created in 1942 by Eduard Strauch, commander of the Sicherheitspolizei in Minsk (KdS Minsk) (Gerlach 1999: 708). It was primarily used as an agricultural center for the KdS in Minsk and comprised a number of barracks, workshops for labor, and a manor house (Urteil in der Strafsache gegen Georg Heuser 1963). The majority of people who were killed at Maly Trostenets, were killed at one of the execution sites in the nearby forests directly after their deportation and never set foot on the camp premises. Although there are some similarities between Maly Trostenets and other entities in the Nazi camp system, in contrast to the majority of the concentration camps (KLs) in the Reich and occupied territories it was not under the authority of the *Inspektor der Konzentrationslager* (IKL). Instead, it was run by the SS Minsk. The inscription on the monument, “Kl. Trostenets”, does not refer, in this case, to the camp itself, but to a sign that hung near the entrance of the village Maly Trostenets during the war, bearing the German name of the village, *Klein* (small) *Trostenets*. Neither are the uniforms of the people depicted on the monument backed by historical reality: the inmates of Trostenets did not wear the striped pyjamas worn by concentration camp prisoners. For a monument that was created “to preserve the historical truth”, it seems somewhat problematic that these historical elements are not authentic.

When putting the topic of authenticity aside, the two references to concentration camps do draw a direct line to the symbolism of the commemoration of the Holo-

caust. Why is it, then, that this type of Holocaust symbolism has been employed at the memorial site? Where does this idea come from and what is the function of this specific symbolism at the former camp? The symbolism of the memorial site, constructing Maly Trostenets as a concentration or extermination camp, articulates, on the one hand, a legacy of the Soviet framing of all Nazi camps as *lager smerti* (death camp). It was not only camps under the authority of the SS that were regarded as death camps but also camps under the control of the Wehrmacht where many people died. Consequently, the fate of people persecuted as Jews was not differentiated from the fate of other persecuted groups. On the other hand, the misconceptions of the function of Maly Trostenets seem to result from the different understandings of the Holocaust pertaining in Eastern and in Western Europe. The French Catholic priest, Father Patrick Desbois, begins his *Holocaust by Bullets* with a quote from a Red Army nurse: “Where we come from, the Nazis machine-gun the Jews but in the west they kill them in camps (Desbois 2008: xv).”

Indeed, while the vast majority of Western European Jews were deported to concentration and extermination camps in occupied Eastern Europe (such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Majdanek), many Eastern European Jews were shot by Einsatzgruppen or other Nazi killing units in forests, dunes, or in fields close to where they had lived. This is what Desbois frames as “the Holocaust by bullets”, supplementing the traditional (Western) association of the Holocaust with concentration and/or extermination camps. Maly Trostenets was a place where these two dimensions of the Holocaust crossed paths: both Belarusian Jews and deported Western European Jews were killed in the Holocaust by bullets in the forests around Minsk in the vicinity of Maly Trostenets. But, as Mary Fulbrook rightly states, “the enormity of the Holocaust is often summarized in one word: ‘Auschwitz’” (Fulbrook 2018: vii). This understanding of the Holocaust as the mass murder of Jews in camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau has accordingly been applied to Maly Trostenets.

There is, however, another dimension to Maly Trostenets being framed as a death camp, even though it did not serve such a function. In his speech at the opening of the new memorial complex, President Lukashenko spoke of the countries who share the pain that the Belarusians feel about Maly Trostenets. In 2013, the project director of the memorial also claimed that the memorial site is a “part of a shared European memory culture and it remembers the National Socialist genocidal policies towards the civilian population of Europe” (Aksënova 2013: 46). The idea of Maly Trostenets being a key site in the European memory of the Holocaust is important for Belarus, which is the most isolated country in Europe and has been ruled by Lukashenko since 1994. Owing to sanctions imposed by the European Union, whose primary aim is to bring about the abolition of the death penalty and to change the undemocratic climate in the country, Belarus is heavily reliant on Russia. However, since the occupation of Crimea

in 2014, this political direction has changed. President Lukashenko has started speaking in Belarusian in public – previously, he would only speak Russian – and has acted as a negotiator in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia by hosting two summits in 2014 and 2015. With this move towards Europe, there is a need to become part of a European history as well. As James E. Young writes in *Textures of Memory*, “By creating common spaces for memory, monuments propagate the illusion of common memory. [...] By creating a sense of a shared past, such institutions as national memorial days, for example, foster the sense of a common present and even a sense of shared national destiny” (Young 1993: 6). This sense of a shared future, achieved through the praxis of commemoration and a shared space of remembrance, is also at stake in Maly Trostenets.

Despite the willingness to bring the memory of the Great Patriotic War and a shared European memory of the Holocaust together, there are still some significant contradictions left to overcome. The Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk, renovated and reopened in 2014, did incorporate the history of the Holocaust and the fate of the Belarusian Jews into the main exhibition whereas previously the topic was almost absent from the museum. However, the part of the exhibition dedicated to Maly Trostenets does not mention the fact that the majority of its victims were Jewish. The sign on the entrance to the new memorial complex reproduces this logic too by failing to address the identity of the victims of the Holocaust (Fig. 3). It says: “The Trascianec camp is a Nazi center for the extermination of Minsk residents and residents of other Belarusian towns and villages, members of anti-fascist underground struggle, the partisan movement, the Red Army prisoners of war, civilians deported from Europe.”⁴ Another memorial site, which became part of the Trostenets memorial park in 2018, shows a small shift in this discourse. The memorial in Blagovshina forest – the former execution site – was established by the executive committee of the city of Minsk, in close cooperation with German NGO’s. At the monument it is stated that “In 1941–1943 the Nazis exterminated massively population of Belarus, members of the anti-fascist underground struggle and partisan movement, the Red Army prisoners of war, prisoners of the Minsk ghetto, and the Jewish population deported from Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Poland and other European countries in Blahaŭščyna Forest.” Indeed, the new monument hereby acknowledges the fact that the Western European deportees were Jewish. However, the Belarusian Jews, who are here described in a cumbersome and ambiguous way as the ‘prisoners of the Minsk ghetto’, are still not openly recognized.

Although the memorial at Maly Trostenets tries to incorporate the history of this site into the European history



Figure 3. Entrance sign at the Trostenets memorial complex.

of the Holocaust, some aspects remain unacknowledged. In particular, the use of Holocaust symbolism and the framing of the main monument as an attempt at an authentic representation of the past give rise to expectations that all victim groups killed at the site will be represented; but this is not the case. Regardless of the strong focus on the shared European past and, thus, on the Holocaust, the main reason why the majority of people were killed at Maly Trostenets – simply for being Jewish – remains absent. Even though contemporary Belarus allows more space than there was in the Soviet Union to commemorate Jewish victims, it seems the new memorial complex at Maly Trostenets does not yet fully overcome the Soviet legacy of camouflaging the Holocaust.

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4 The names on the English part of the plaque are a Belarusian transliteration, which is only a recent development as this would previously have been mainly in Russian. Because of this and because most of the used sources are in Russian, the Russian transliteration (Library of Congress) of Maly Trostenets is being used in this article.

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