

## **The Power of History: A Description of the History of Polish–Belarusian Relations in the Post-Stalinist Soviet Mass Media as a Justification of Russian Domination over Belarus**

In this report, I will briefly introduce the research objectives of my scholarship, describe some initial conclusions (along with the potential academic income from it), and reflect on my experience at the OSA.

The main aim of my project was to attempt to conceptualise the Soviet media's description of the history of Polish-Belarusian relations as a source of legitimisation of Russian rule/domination over Belarus. The focus of my interest was on how this problem was presented in the context of the description of the interwar period (i.e. during the existence of the Second Polish Republic). However, the focus was also on all other alternative periods, for example, representations of the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Empire. The intention of the study, then, was to examine the main instruments of rhetorical influence on the masses and the possibilities of creating an alternative, unambiguously propagandistic image of the reality of the past. The final task, according to my plan, is to add to our knowledge, on the basis of the selected case, a new set of information that will help to better understand the Soviet model of revisionist and public use of history for political purposes to justify a profoundly imperialist policy.

The study covered print media from 1953 to 1991, but due to the nature of the collections, most sources were from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The main focus was on the mass media of the BSSR, as the population of the republic was the main target of the propaganda campaign, but the all-Soviet mass media were also considered. The basis of my research was three collections (see below) containing materials closely related to the topic I am interested in. Taking into account the number of possible sources of information, I have tried to make the broadest possible selection of materials that correspond to the topic and represent two dimensions of media discourse, namely: all-Soviet and

local, i.e. Belarusian. This approach gives me the opportunity to familiarise myself with the OSA collection and assess its potential for possible further research on related topics.

During my stay, I used the following collections (also here I note the most important boxes processed during my research):

- HU OSA 300-80 Soviet Red Archives (due to the nature of the collection, which is entirely represents the all-Soviet mass media discourse and the lack of a selected topic similar to my interest required, in this case the basis was a large-scale investigation based on the searching of the keywords in the name of the selected boxes /such as: Belarus, Poland, History, 1939, historiography, etc/, which established the commonality of their content with the topic of my interest. Unsurprisingly in some of the boxes I managed to find only two or three notes on the issue that interests me. In other – the number was in the tens.)
  - HU OSA 300-80-2:26
  - HU OSA 300-80-2:24
  - HU OSA 300-80-2:31
  - HU OSA 300-80-2:32
  - HU OSA 300-8-46:1
  - HU OSA 300-80-6:6
  - HU OSA 300-80-3:10
  - HU OSA 300-80-3:10
  - HU OSA 300-80-1:619
  - HU OSA 300-80-1:620
  - HU OSA 300-80-1:646
  - HU OSA 300-80-1:647
  - HU OSA 300-80-1:652
  - HU OSA 300-80-8:4
  - HU OSA 300-80-1:93
  - HU OSA 300-80-1:676
  - HU OSA 300-80-1:685
  - HU OSA 300-80-1:686;
  
- HU OSA 300-85 Samizdat Archives (in the Samizdat collection I have paid special attention to the analysis of the discourse of the Soviet media by the staff of Radio Liberty; in a brief and readable form they give the essence of its understanding by foreign observers: among other things, some

reports mentioned topics related to the subject of my research interests. However, as a rule, the subject of interest to me was discussed very briefly.)

- HU OSA 300-85-12:14
  - HU OSA 300-85-12:180
  - HU OSA 300-85-12:250
  - HU OSA 300-85-12:27
  - HU OSA 300-85-12:109
  - HU OSA 300-85-12:108
  - HU OSA 300-85-12:200
  - HU OSA 300-85-12:158
  - HU OSA 300-85-14:1
  - HU OSA 300-85-14:5
  - HU OSA 300-85-9:112
  - HU OSA 300-85-9:114
  - HU OSA 300-85-9:119
  - HU OSA 300-85-9:2
  - HU OSA 300-85-44:3
  - HU OSA 300-85-44:15
  - HU OSA 300-85-44:28
  - HU OSA 300-85-44:29
  - HU OSA 300-85-9:106;
- Also, during my stay I worked with the Regional Press Collection 7/2/7 (in this collection, special interest was given to local Belarusian print media, especially those produced on the territory of the three regions: Brest, Grodno and Minsk; at the moment I believe that even after the end of the scholarship there are still a huge number of materials that was out of my reach).

In total, I have processed more than 40 boxes, mainly from the collections mentioned above, and copied more than 800 pieces of material in the last two months. Above I have mentioned only the most important, which contain the most references to the subject I am interested in and which, in my first opinion, can be considered the "core" of all my project. But in this case, of course, it is only a first selection.

During my stay at the OSA, I collected materials for further processing and - albeit only partially, as I lacked the time for a more in-depth analysis during my stay at the OSA - verified the initial hypothesis. A

full investigation will be conducted in the coming months.

My initial hypotheses were:

- Widespread use of the image of the "evil" Poland in Soviet media coverage;
- A negative portrayal of the common Polish-Belarusian history;
- The portrayal of Russia as the protector of Belarus from the Polish threat;
- The dominance of the concepts of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

For some hypotheses, the results of the first review were surprising to me, as they differed from the current state of knowledge and my assumptions. For example, taking into account the OSA collection, I can state that the image of Polish-Belarusian relations was completely ignored by the Soviet media until the late 1970s. When it was used, it was only sporadically and with very little significance for the overall direction of the narrative. There is also very important pattern: mentions of these relations appeared generally only in All-Union press; this topic was completely ignored in the Belarusian (especially within the local newspapers') texts. Moreover, I found that Marxist-Leninist stereotypes did not seem to dominate in the description of the topic of interest. Instead, according to my observations, the Russian imperialist intellectual tradition as created by the famous Russian historiographers in the 19th century (e.g. D. Ilovayski, M. Pogodin etc) was used. The only exception to the rule was the widespread use of lexemes characteristic of Marxist-Leninist ideology. In this case, however, the use of most of the classical lexemes such as "class", "bourgeoisie", "proletariat" etc. was closely linked to the nationally oriented discourse and had minimal relation to the deeper meaning of the above-mentioned terms in accordance with the Marxist tradition.

Taking into account some of the discoveries I made during my time at the OSA, I am currently thinking about several academic texts in which I will present some of the most interesting assumptions I made during my time on the scholarship. Considering my academic plan for the next year after my fellowship ends, I would like to prepare the first manuscript (in Polish) in which I will summarise some of the most general research findings for a wider audience. After that, I plan to write at least one more text (in English) using the materials I obtained during the research but focusing on only one selected aspect of the issue (see the following paragraph). At the same time, I will do a review of the collected materials and think about the concept of its further use according to my current research at the time.

Speaking about manuscripts as a topic of particular interest, I see a very interesting pattern in the mass media that deserves its own academic description, namely the rise of national-oriented rhetoric in the local press of Belarus from the late 1970s to its peak in the early 1990s. Given the nature of Belarusian society and the absence of any deep nationalist traditions in it, this observation is particularly

interesting as a basis for thinking about why and by whom such rhetoric was used in a society absolutely ambivalent in national consciousness terms. As a potentially interesting issue, I would also like to mention the tricky nature of the description of the common Polish-Belarusian past, because in my opinion it became over time an intellectual trap for the local elites, who often based their own decisions on an initially false and highly propagandistic representation of reality. An equally important question of interest could lead to the statement that the current reality in the region caused hardly by the imagination and prejudice. This statement is absolutely not innovative. However, my project gives a new look at the already established way of perceiving the problem, namely thorough the prism of the print media.

In summary, I was pleased to be awarded a two-month Visegrad Scholarship for archival research in the Open Society archives of Vera and Donald Blinken at the Central European University. I can rate the time I spent at the OSA as extremely fruitful and an excellent opportunity to further develop the subject I am interested in. I hope to use this experience in the future to continue my academic career. It is worth to mention, that during my stay, I have had many opportunities to familiarise myself with materials that are not the subject of my current research at the moment, but may be a good base for the next research projects. For example, I found many previously unused sources that can contribute to a better understanding/description of why Belarus turned into an autocracy after a very short period of democracy, as well as the development of attitudes towards the Holocaust in the Belarusian mass media. I consider both of the above topics to be extremely interesting and to have great potential for implementation in separate projects in the future.

Last but not least, I am very grateful to the OSA staff, especially the Reference Service, my Supervisor and the Administration, for providing me with a comfortable infrastructure for my research and for helping me to solve all possible problems during the whole period of my Scholarship. For my part, I would gladly recommend the Visegrad Scholarship Program to all scholars interested in researching the Cold War era. I would also like to thank the Visegrad Foundation for the financial support that enabled me to conduct archival research.

S.B.

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