

At engagement's edge: heritage experts and Holocaust education in Belarus

Larissa Allwork

To cite this article: Larissa Allwork (2024) At engagement's edge: heritage experts and Holocaust education in Belarus, *Holocaust Studies*, 30:1, 108-131, DOI: [10.1080/17504902.2023.2261800](https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2023.2261800)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2023.2261800>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Oct 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 827



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

At engagement's edge: heritage experts and Holocaust education in Belarus

Larissa Allwork 

History & Impact, University of Derby, Derby, England

ABSTRACT

Using semi-structured interview methodology and qualitative 'thick description', original interviews were recorded with heritage experts who educate about and engage the public with Holocaust history in Belarus. Significantly, the interviews explored grassroots realities and gave voice to practitioners at risk of marginalization in Belarus's repressive cultural politics. Rigorously analyzing these research interviews within the context of regionally relevant academic literature and an online international workshop (2021), an original interpretation is offered. Namely, that Belarus has historically shifted from an opportune moment regarding Holocaust engagement and education to being 'at engagement's edge' following the August 2020 elections and Ukraine conflict (2022).

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 July 2022
Accepted 19 September 2023

KEYWORDS

Belarus; Holocaust education; interviews; heritage; public engagement

Introduction

This article comprises a qualitative analysis and Clifford Geertz influenced 'thick description' of semi-structured interviews with heritage experts linked to Holocaust education in Belarus.¹ The interviews explore the subjective experiences of heritage experts working in Belarus and are contextualized within a critical reading of academic interpretations of the institutional memory framing public understandings of the Second World War (SWW) and the Holocaust in Belarus. Belarus is central to the historical study of the Holocaust and the preservation of Europe's heritage of the SWW for education and commemoration. For as Timothy Snyder argued in *Bloodlands* (2010), his controversial history comparing the mass violence unleashed by the territorial aggrandizement of the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, the lands that constitute modern day Belarus were, '... at the centre of the confrontation between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during the Second World War.'²

Serious political challenges were factored into the design and completion of the semi-structured interviews, conducted in May/June 2020. Aleksander Lukashenka's 'authoritarian populist' (Kamitaka Matsuzato) government came to power in 1994 on a platform which maintained Belarusian independence, advocated for closer cultural ties and a good energy deal with Russia and rejected aggressive economic privatization in favor of the

CONTACT Larissa Allwork  L.Allwork@derby.ac.uk

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

revival of aspects of Soviet style welfarism.³ The Belarusian government has subsequently been heavily criticized in relation to the transparency of its elections as well as ongoing violations in regards to the human rights of political dissidents and press freedoms. These violations have seen the country called ‘Europe’s last dictatorship’ by liberal politicians and media outlets. For example, in 2005, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that Belarus was, ‘the last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe.’ The state’s reputation for coercive capacity vis-à-vis dissenting voices has intensified further since the August 2020 elections in which Svitlana Tsikhanouskaya, Mariya Kalesnikava and Veranika Tsepkala disputed the pro-Lukashenka election result, alleging vote rigging and supported by a wave of protests in Minsk and nationwide against election fraud and police violence.⁴

Awareness of these politics was significant in thinking about how the interviewees performed their voice, negotiating the desire for openness, the necessity of self-censorship and my role as an interlocutor from the UK. In terms of ethical considerations, all participants consented to being interviewed and have had the opportunity to check transcripts and this article. Interviewees were given considerable control over anonymization and redaction of information from interview transcripts. Given the escalating political situation (which has not remained static throughout this project), interviewees were asked during the peer review process if they were still comfortable with being included. Each of the three interviewees endorsed this article’s publication.

Participants were interviewed about how their practice intersected with the schools-based curriculum, extra-curricular activities of teachers and their own approach to educating young people and others about the Holocaust. Here ‘Holocaust education’ is used both within and beyond a schools context to signify the use of primary and secondary sources such as archival documents, historical images, oral testimonies, interpretative texts and site visits to teach young people about the Third Reich’s mass murder of six million Jews.⁵ In the West, this is often within the wider context of promoting learning about the history of the Nazi regime, the SWW and that regime’s wider atrocity crimes as well as framing this history within the need for young people to practice moral reflection and liberal, pro-tolerance behaviors. Here the ‘West’ is understood as a ‘contested, narrated and clustered’ civilisational identity narrative built on idealized but critiqued liberal, democratic and capitalist values and often connotating a post-Cold War and post-Soviet political community associated with NATO and/or EU membership.⁶ A paradigm of this type of education in Europe, which simultaneously involved teacher training and extra-curricular dissemination were projects funded by the Education Working Group of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (2001–2008, now the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance [IHRA]).⁷

However, as Christine Beresniova has noted, Western frameworks which construct Holocaust education as a liberal ‘moral endeavour’ risk disallowing post-Soviet experiences from being approached on their ‘own terms’, with multiple approaches and varied context specific meanings.⁸ Within the Belarusian context then, the educational curriculum in schools is strictly controlled and education about the Holocaust marginalized within an institutional culture of remembrance still heavily dominated by the (arguably postcolonial) legacies of the Soviet discourse of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ (GPW). Indeed, given Belarus’s continuing adherence to and regional connection to

Russia's triumphal institutional memory of the SWW as well as its scepticism towards human rights discourse, it is perhaps unsurprising that in the post-Soviet era, many of the challenges that trouble Russia's approach to Holocaust education are also apparent in Belarus. For example, Olga Konkka has observed that while Russia has made important progress in relation to its Holocaust education (e.g. the presence of Holocaust history in curricula and textbooks; 27 January commemorations, extracurricular school museum exhibitions, individual research projects and local memorial maintenance), significant difficulties still remain.⁹ These challenges include a reluctance to acknowledge and commemorate the Jews as a specific victim group of the Nazis as well as a willingness to politicize and demonize regime opponents through invoking the memory of Third Reich collaborators.¹⁰

Nonetheless, whilst these similarities with Russian Holocaust education exist, Belarus's distinct trajectories must also be acknowledged. Much local activism and international collaborative work in Holocaust education and heritage, explored later in this article, was strengthened during the period of 'soft Belarusianisation', a period when the regime sought to explore its own independent identity. This trend was intensified by Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014) and fears that Homel or Mahileu could be next, leading to Belarus softening its position towards Western states and implementing some liberalizing reforms at home.¹¹ Though much of this work had started at the grass-roots level prior to 2014, 'soft Belarusianisation' created a more conducive environment for ostensibly non-political, single-issue organizations, such as NGOs and museums, to work adjacently to the school curriculum, develop civic society and explore facets of Belarus's specific language, history and culture, including the experiences of Belarusian Jews as ghetto internees and/or partisans during the SWW.

This article will show that important Holocaust education initiatives by heritage practitioners in Belarus pre-existed but were often encouraged during 'soft Belarusianisation'. The majority of these existed beyond the school curriculum, were aimed at young people but also demonstrated wider demographic reach and included innovative forms of engagement such as the development of apps and interdisciplinary arts commemoration projects. However, creating a sustainable environment for education and engagement with this history is becoming more challenging, particularly following Belarus's elections in August 2020, which resulted in the intensification of state repression of dissident voices in Belarus.¹² For whilst Lukashenka's Belarus is known for post-election crackdowns (e.g. 2010), the events of August 2020 were unprecedented. For example, the Viasna Human Rights Centre claimed that over 7,500 people had been detained by the authorities, and 500 cases of torture had been documented in August 2020;¹¹⁵ whilst former Dean of International Relations at the Belarusian State University and critic of the regime, Victor Shadursky described the state's terror in the wake of the elections as 'comparable to the Stalinist repressions.'¹³

This article will function as a reminder that there are diverse voices in Belarusian society, and that whilst international sanctions for political repression (and now conflict and security, following Russia's war against Ukraine, beginning 2022) must be respected, it is also important for the future preservation of Holocaust history, heritage, and public dialogue that the wider world find spaces where these voices can be heard and actioned.

Interview context: challenges and opportunities, 1994 – summer 2020

This section will focus on key developments in Holocaust education and heritage in Belarus from Lukashenka's inauguration as President in 1994 until May-June 2020. Both before and during this time-period, individual and collective memories of Belarusian heroism and suffering during the SWW played a significant role in the construction of Belarusian national identity. This is understandable as the war and the devastation that it unleashed had a profound impact on people's lives. Based on extensive archival research, historian Franziska Exeler has estimated that between 1.7 and 2.1 million Belarusians, 'or 19–22 per cent of the population that by June 1941 lived in the territories that would constitute post-1945 Soviet Belarus were killed or died as a direct result of the war.'¹⁴ The current Belarusian state claims a higher number than this of one in three Belarusian deaths resulting from the conflict, although the evidence base for this figure is unclear.¹⁵

What memory politics researchers Claudio Fogu and Wulf Kansteiner would view as the dominant 'institutionalized' memory of the war represented in monuments, museums and street names is highly selective in Belarus,¹⁶ fundamentally shaped by but also departing from the Soviet legacy of the official state commemoration of the GPW. The USSR version stressed Belarus's contribution to pan-Soviet victory, whilst in the post-Communist period the dominant Belarusian public narrative tended to present the nation as the main agent and benefactor of wartime heroism.¹⁷ Popular tropes included the role that Belarusians played in blocking the Nazi assault on Moscow as well as the heroic role played by what Petr Kalinin called the 'Partisan Republic' in resisting the Third Reich and disrupting Axis supply and communication lines as part of Operation Bagration. Aligning with this, veterans of the conflict were celebrated, and the heroism of the Soviet partisans and Red Army liberators were glorified. Alongside the heroic partisan resistance narrative, there continued to be a strong emphasis on victimhood and how the conflict necessitated sacrifices by all Belarusians. For example, the Khatyn Memorial Complex, which marks the site of a village destroyed during the SWW, also universally commemorates approximately 9200 villages which were razed during the conflict.¹⁸

However, historical experiences that problematize this narrative of unified national resistance and suffering, such as evidence of anti-Semitic behavior by Soviet partisans or the extremity of the Nazis total, global anti-Semitic intention to persecute and murder the Jews is often marginalized (in Belarus alone, approximately 500,000–671,000 Jews perished – almost the entirety of the republic's Jewish population).¹⁹ For instance, the number and ethnicity of Jewish victims has rarely been registered at memorial sites which tend to focus on other categories of victimhood.²⁰ Furthermore, when Jewish specificity has been recalled it was often utilized for specific political and symbolic purposes by the regime. An example of this would be when Lukashenka visited the Yama memorial in Minsk following international outrage at anti-Semitic comments he made in Babruisk in 2007.²¹ For Marples, this tendency towards state amnesia in relation to the more challenging aspects of the Nazi past is part of a much broader nexus of state sanctioned marginalization of public discussion of critical and challenging issues in the present. Challenging issues marginalized include: confronting Soviet crimes, the health-care legacies of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (1986) and the hospitalizations and deaths

resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic (the state's mismanagement of which was a factor for the electoral disillusionment with Lukashenka in 2020).²² Bearing in mind these developments between 1994 and 2020, it would be interesting to see how interviewees reproduced, critiqued or transformed areas of 'silence' in relation to official institutionalized memory of the Holocaust and the SWW.

These challenges in representing the Jewish experience of persecution during the SWW are also a long-standing issue in Belarus's official secondary school history curriculum. On 24 August 1995, a Presidential decree was passed which set-up a State Commission which tightly controlled the reviewing and authorizing of the publication of Social Sciences textbooks.²³ Encouraging a: 'Return of Soviet methods of teaching, historical links with Russia, [and a] glorification of the Soviet past',²⁴ school textbooks for students between the grades of seven and eleven have tended to primarily focus on glorifying the GPW, telling the story of the Soviet partisan resistance while more historically difficult issues, such as instances of collaboration with the German occupiers have rarely been discussed.²⁵ This didactic focus has proved problematic for the representation of the Nazi's intended persecution and mass murder of the Jews during the SWW.

Based on materials compiled by Irina Polyakowa, a history teacher from Hrodna in Western Belarus, Marta Szymńska (a Polish Literature and Language academic) analyzed the problematic representation of Jewish history in the Belarusian History curriculum and accompanying textbooks published between 2000 and 2010.²⁶ Whilst Szymńska's analysis is now over a decade old (it is dated May 2011), it does provide a useful time capsule of textbooks developed after the consolidation of power but before post-2014 'soft Belarusianisation'. At this time, the history of Belarus was taught in Belarusian secondary schools between the grades of 6 and 11. The curriculum's purpose was to inform students about key events in making the nation and to impart lessons that would shape students as national citizens. Within this context, the curriculum suggested that the implementation of legal restrictions against Jews should be discussed in the 9th grade and 'the concepts of genocide and the Holocaust' should be introduced in the 10th grade.²⁷ Although gestured towards as topics, Szymńska described the specific treatment of Jewish and Holocaust history in Belarusian syllabi as '... very deficient.'²⁸

In terms of Szymńska's content analysis of eighteen history textbooks produced in Belarus (2000–2010), six of them contained no reference to Jewish history and/or the history of the Third Reich and its collaborators persecution and mass murder of the Jews.²⁹ Some of the other textbooks briefly mentioned the history of Nazi occupation policy and anti-Jewish violence. For example, one 9th grade textbook discussed the process of ghettoization and the targeting of the Jews by the Nazis;³⁰ another 9th grade textbook introduced the 'German Nazi occupation regime in Belarus' and offered a short numeric note on ghettos and Jewish victims.³¹ Related themes were also touched on in 11th grade textbooks. For example, an 11th grade textbook on world history described the rise of the Nazis in Germany and their anti-Semitic propaganda;³² whilst a second 11th grade textbook on Belarusian history from the nineteenth to the early twenty-first century contained key statements about the Nazi's mass violence. First, in a chapter on the 'German Russian War', it was noted that Jews and gypsies were targeted for total extermination; second, the significance of the Minsk ghetto as a site of persecution was recognized and third, the textbook noted that over one hundred Jewish

ghettos were established.³³ Common shortcomings observed by Szymánska included the decontextualization of Nazi anti-Jewish violence from complex historical causal explanations and the region's Jewish history.

More recently, political scientist Anna Zadora has analyzed the rigid discourses that condition the representation of the Holocaust in Belarusian school history textbooks. In research published in 2017, Zadora found that only one of the Belarusian textbooks that she surveyed specifically used the term 'Holocaust'. Most of the time less specific terms with greater connotative currency to imply a wider demographic such as 'mass murder', 'genocide' and 'planned extermination of the Soviet people' were employed.³⁴ The textbook that directly used the more specific term 'Holocaust' was Alexandre Kovalenia's, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People (in the context of the Second World War)*, published by Minsk State University in 2004, for use by 11th graders on a special course about the SWW.³⁵ Interestingly, this textbook did not feature as part of Szymánska's content analysis, whose focus was Jewish history more broadly, as opposed to the history of the SWW and the Holocaust specifically. Significantly, Kovalenia offers a definition that locates the 'Holocaust' as a specific Jewish experience: 'The Holocaust was the extermination of the Jewish population of Europe by the Nazis during WWII'.³⁶ Kovalenia's textbook also provided maps which showed key ghettos and camps. However, Zadora also noted shortcomings, which included a lack of wider European historical context as well as rather limited descriptions of major killing sites such as Maly Trastsianets, Auschwitz, Majdanek and Treblinka.³⁷ Reflecting on her textbook survey more broadly, Zadora also noted that all of the Belarusian textbooks were quite weak in terms of discussing specific victim groups targeted by the Nazis such as Jews, Roma and Sinti and physically and mentally disabled people.³⁸ Textbook limitations meant that a lot of education about Holocaust history in Belarus in this period was extra-curricular or stimulated by independent programs; was motivated by specific teachers and/or alternative pedagogues and was often done in collaboration with NGOs, heritage organizations and/or charities.

Thus, there is an opportunity to understand how learning about the Holocaust operated in Belarus at a more informal level through the schools' liaison/ education practices of heritage organizations and NGOs, particularly in the post-2014 period of 'soft Belarusianisation'. Wilson has shown that following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Belarus sought to pragmatically diversify its foreign policy and implement minor liberal reform at home.³⁹ This included allowing representatives of the new private economy to sponsor cultural initiatives led by NGOs, a significant development as most political NGOs were/are prohibited.⁴⁰ This political and international relations context is key for Magdalena Waligórska's interpretation of Jewish heritage in Belarus (2018). Waligórska argued that the preceding years had been significant because they had seen the growth of small, informal activist networks as well as a renewed interest in regional and state-level Jewish and Holocaust history commemoration projects.⁴¹

Illustrative of this are the small Minsk Jewish Museum, the Marc Chagall Art Centre (Vitebsk), as well as the inclusion of Jewish history in the narratives of regional museums in Maladzechna, Mir and Mstislau. Additionally significant have been the activities of Jewish curator from Belarus, Maya Katznelson, who established the Centre for

Belarusian-Jewish Cultural Heritage (BJCH) in 2019.⁴² Thus, for Waligórska in the years preceding 2020, a growing:

... synergy of interests – of local activists wishing to commemorate Holocaust victims, the democratic opposition interested in inscribing Belarus into the European narratives about the past, and the Belarusian authorities keen on opening a channel of communication and cooperation with the West – ... [created] a situation of opportunity.⁴³

This ‘situation of opportunity’ has been shown by the work of the History Workshop Leonid Lewin Minsk, an international German-Belarusian collaboration between NGOs IBB Dortmund, IBB Minsk and the Union of Belarusian Jewish Organizations and Communities. The History Workshop has built a digital oral history archive featuring the life histories of Belarusian victims of the Third Reich and acts as a repository about the fate of Jewish deportees from the Third Reich who were killed in the Minsk ghetto or Maly Trastsianets concentration camp.⁴⁴ Recognizing the limitations of the Belarusian history curriculum, the History Workshop has used its collection of oral testimonies to engage schoolteachers and Belarusian secondary and tertiary students with histories of the Holocaust and the Third Reich’s victims. Members of The History Workshop Team used video memoirs and historical witness talks to enhance the Maly Trastsianets exhibition for secondary and tertiary students.⁴⁵ Furthermore, ‘books of memoirs’ prepared by Minsk schools in cooperation with the History Workshop and local witnesses catalyzed the organization’s drive to professionally collect Minsk Ghetto witness testimonies (2017).⁴⁶ Completing the cycle, information from these witness testimonies was subsequently integrated into History Workshop Minsk Ghetto educational resources for young people.

However, international cooperation has been more problematic in other examples such as the re-design of the Maly Trastsianets memorial complex in the 2010s.⁴⁷ Issues here included difficult public access to the reformed sites, lack of explanatory materials at the sites themselves as well as continuing failures to acknowledge Jewish victims.⁴⁸ Within this context then, the purpose of the interviews conducted in May/June 2020 would be to understand how heritage experts who cooperate with schoolteachers in Belarus negotiate the tripartite situation of a politically dominant institutional cultural memory of the SWW; a restrictive educational syllabus as well as the potentials for action offered by ‘a situation of opportunity’ prior to the August 2020 elections, in order to promote education about, engagement with and learning about the Holocaust. These interviews would also be about investigating what opportunities, challenges and needs exist in relation to Holocaust education in Belarus, and how experts working internationally could/can effectively support practitioners working regionally to preserve and disseminate knowledge about Holocaust history.

The interviews

Three semi-structured interviews with expert practitioners were planned and recorded using best practice methodological guidance,⁴⁹ informed consent and a self-reflexive understanding of the interview relationship. Namely, that the interview and the production of the final transcript are the result of a collaboration between interviewer and interviewee, where self-conscious effort is needed to understand each other’s position

and mitigate power imbalances in the sharing of knowledge. In this relationship, the interviewer creates the framework of the questions, analyzes the transcripts and writes-up the findings; whilst the interviewee shares their unique, lived experiential knowledge, has the power to edit or redact sections of the transcript before analysis, and can review their representation, pre-publication for accuracy and fairness. To further mitigate political risks and acting on ethical peer review guidance, participants were given an interview information sheet, which included, if required, contact details for the World Health Organization's office in Belarus, for accessibility to mental health support resources. Admittedly, how useful these support structures would be in Belarus is questionable, so it was particularly important that participants knew that they could fully withdraw at any point pre-publication.

All three expert practitioners were interviewed between May and June 2020 via an online platform owing to Covid-19 restrictions. The shortest interview was 48-minutes, and the longest interview was 97-minutes. No interviewees were schoolteachers and as a result their Holocaust education work was more informal and often synergised with public engagement activity. This notion of learning about the Holocaust as a type of informal education would emerge as an important cross-interview theme. All interviewees were English-speakers (the majority language in Belarus is Russian) and held senior positions in museums/NGOs in Belarus which represented Jewish history or facets of Holocaust history. That all my interviewees spoke English suggests a bias towards a more internationally engaged participant group. Future research in this area could productively uncover personal accounts from non-Anglophone Russian and/or Belarusian speaking Holocaust educators, curators and public engagement specialists, facilitating a richer collection of interviews documenting grassroots activism. Moreover, a study with a greater attenuation to language would allow for more rigorous analysis in terms of verbal codes such as dialect, intonation and speech velocity.⁵⁰

The interview guide comprised three sections. First, participants were asked to provide information about their background in Holocaust education (including their understanding of the term 'Holocaust' and whether their current Holocaust education work is paid/voluntary). Second, participants were asked about their Holocaust education practice (their motivation, the groups that they reach, their pedagogical approach, the activities that they use and whether they discuss the Holocaust in singular or comparative terms). The final section was focused on the status of Holocaust education in Belarus (Is the Holocaust incorporated into the school curriculum in Belarus? What are the advantages of educating about the Holocaust in Belarus? What are the disadvantages of educating about the Holocaust in Belarus? What resources do you have? Do you work with any of the following: schools in Belarus? Museums or Education Centres in Belarus? International organizations or education networks? How can the international community better support Holocaust education in Belarus?). Following the interview, some participants requested redaction of sensitive personal or organizational information. Interview summaries and analyses should be approached with awareness of this redaction process.

Reflecting on this interview guide, it is important to note that questions did remain focused on 'education' as it seemed equally problematic from an investigative perspective to assume that little education about the Holocaust happens in Belarus because of the

government's strict control of the school curriculum. Learning happens in many settings, formal and informal (including heritage settings and NGO activities), and it felt important to try and capture this pedagogic texture. It also felt essential to get 'grassroots' perspectives on what practitioners working in Belarus view as the primary issues, challenges and opportunities surrounding co-operating with schools, teachers and engaging with young people and wider communities in relation to the Holocaust and its histories. Equally, readers should bear in mind that these interviews were conducted in 2020 and focused on understanding how the 'Holocaust' is comprehended. A question about interviewees understanding of the wider term 'genocide,' a term defined in this article according to the United Nations Genocide Convention (1948),⁵¹ and a term which has become very politically charged in Belarus since the 2022 'Year of Historical Memory',⁵² was not the focus of this study. Instead, the purpose of the interviews was to excavate diverse approaches to Holocaust education and heritage in Belarus.

In terms of the research material generated, the recordings and interview transcripts shared affinities with oral history sources. For as Alessandro Portelli has written the 'unique and precious' element of oral sources is how they can potentially give rich insights into the speaker's subjectivity and how they make sense of their world.⁵³ Moreover, whilst most Western readers might be more familiar with the testimony-based literature of Belarusian State University graduate Svetlana Alexievich,⁵⁴ there is also a specific post-Soviet oral history practice in Belarus, often conducted with international partners (for example, the activities of the History Workshop, Minsk). This practice which is often focused on documenting the minutia of the everyday lives of Belarusians has according to Aliaksandr Smalianchuk (who led the international oral history project, 'The Twentieth Century in the Memory of Belarusians', 2006–2011), resulted in histories suggesting, '... a real alternative to the official historical policy, still based on the Soviet ideological clichés.'⁵⁵

Building on these international and regional research traditions, it is hoped that the experiences revealed by this article's expert interviews with practitioners will illuminate lesser-known perspectives on Holocaust education in Belarus as well as point towards areas of what oral historian Luisa Passerini might call the 'unsaid', 'implied' and 'silenced'.⁵⁶ For as Marples has commented: 'In Belarus, there is an alternative viewpoint – perhaps more than one – but it is rarely heard.'⁵⁷

Interview I

This interview was with the senior leader of an international NGO in Belarus which focuses on Holocaust history, education and remembrance (recorded May 2020).⁵⁸ Significantly, this organization has been involved in the creation of educational resources that had been accepted by the State Commission in Belarus. This leader's understanding of the 'Holocaust' was that, '... it's about policy of the extermination of the Jews, approximately 6 million Jews' during the Third Reich.⁵⁹ This leader also stressed that it is important for teachers and students to understand how the Nazis practiced 'different forms of persecution' for different social groups.⁶⁰ This leader was partly motivated by international reconciliation. The scope of their work included engaging youths and teachers from Belarus and internationally, especially in relation to topics linked to a major Nazi ghetto and concentration camp located within Belarus. Their work was

often focused on Belarusian students from a major urban center, although their engagement did reach youths from across Belarus.

Activities that this leader conducted with teachers and young people included site excursions and workshops based on an archive of interviews, photography, film, and biographies. Workshops could include analyzing photographs and biographies, making posters, engaging in educational games, online tests, or meeting Holocaust survivors. This leader's experience of working with Belarusian and international groups also facilitated insights. They tended to find that German school groups arrived with more developed critical thinking, background historical knowledge and were allocated more time to learn during a visit to a historical site. By contrast, Belarusian groups were often less prepared and were often allocated less time for their site visit by teachers. Consequently, a teacher's interest in Holocaust history as well as the amount of time that they can timetable in relation to this topic is significant in encouraging or discouraging the quality of student engagement.

Other challenges identified included the lack of a complete list of names of Holocaust victims in Belarus as well as the small size of its Jewish community, which hinders the preservation of Jewish heritage in Belarus. In terms of future developments in Holocaust education in Belarus, this senior leader wanted to see more preparation and site visit time for student groups as well as, 'more information in schoolbooks, in curriculum, in museums' about the specific history of the Holocaust.⁶¹ Although they benefitted from connections with Holocaust research, remembrance and education organizations in Jerusalem, Moscow and Paris, they felt that the international community could further support Holocaust education in Belarus by alleviating the country's 'separation from the world' by representing Belarus's Holocaust history more fully in research, education and commemoration resources produced by different nations and distributed globally.⁶²

Interview II

This interview was with the senior leader of a Jewish heritage organization in Belarus (recorded June 2020). This organization deals with local museums across Belarus and has connections with a major Holocaust research, remembrance, and education organization in Israel. In terms of their institution's understanding of the term 'Holocaust', this senior leader saw it as referring to, '... the systematic mass extermination of the population in terms of its ethnicity, skin color, origin, political views, whatever they feel that they are attached to.'⁶³ When pressed for further clarification, they commented, '... when we speak about the Holocaust, we speak mainly about the Second World War times and the Jewish people.'⁶⁴ Significantly, they did not perceive their work as 'education' as they are not a lecturer or a professor. They saw themselves as collaborating with school children from across the country as well as descendants of Jewish families who live/ used to live in the region to promote an understanding of Jewish history, Jewish lives, and the Holocaust.

Their engagement activities with descendants and young people included organizing talks and lectures as well as marking unmarked killing sites. For example, at the time of the interview, they were developing an app to help Belarusian and international visitors locate Jewish heritage sites such as synagogues, educational institutes and Holocaust-era mass graves. In terms of schools' engagement, this leader stressed that activities, such as

encouraging young people to participate in government-led school essay competitions, must involve an intertwined understanding of Jewish history in Belarus, Jewish lives, and Holocaust history. They noted that this is particularly important given the topic's under-representation in school textbooks. Comparable to Interviewee I, this senior leader stressed the importance of teachers. They specifically noted that the 'private initiative of a teacher' is crucial in promoting student engagement in Jewish or Holocaust history.⁶⁵

Key challenges identified included: the complex bureaucracy surrounding cultural heritage which can make installing memorials a long, slow process. This senior leader also pointed to difficulties in relation to marking memorials as specifically Jewish (an issue noted earlier). They also observed that preserving Holocaust heritage in Belarus is now increasingly challenging as the few survivors who do remain are ageing and need support. Whilst this presents challenges, they did comment on the uplifting aspects of an intergenerational community of care and memory in relation to these Holocaust survivors and their experiences:

And nowadays, these people just need care, and company and love, and that's what the Jewish community does for them. They take care of them very much. You were speaking about taking the kids to the Holocaust memorial and yeah, I have to say that it's one of the advantages when you come to a place that seems completely abandoned, somewhere in the forest, in the area you worked with the school and when you come there and you see that there are flowers and the area is clean, and everything is neat. And that's one of the advantages that we see that your work was not in vain, and you see the result. That's what I call the result, when you see people do remember. We need to keep the memory.⁶⁶

Looking to the future, this senior leader proposed that Belarus needs 'an official center that deals with the Holocaust topic issues.'⁶⁷ This center would need to cooperate closely with schools, produce support materials, whilst the staff would need international training from Holocaust education specialists working in countries like Israel. When asked how the international community could support Holocaust education in Belarus, they replied: 'Well, we do need good programmes, we do need people, and we do need funds.'⁶⁸

Interview III

This interview was with the senior leader of a SWW heritage organization in Belarus (recorded June 2020). They viewed Jewish resistance as an important Holocaust history to be communicated, and they also had international connections with Holocaust education practitioners in Russia, Israel, the UK, and the USA. They understood the 'Holocaust' as: '... the destruction of the Jews, both Belarusian and European Jews, that took place here in Belarus which destroyed not only the people but the whole culture, Jewish culture, which was part of our Belarusian culture.'⁶⁹

As Holocaust education is not an official state policy, this senior leader viewed Holocaust education in Belarus as primarily a grassroots initiative. Comparable to Interviewee II, they did not perceive themselves as a teacher of Holocaust history, rather they saw themselves as practicing an approach to engaging people with the history of the Holocaust through a connection to place (the historical site) and individual life stories:

For me, this story about the Holocaust, and about the history of the war in general ... can be understood, not fully not completely, but to a greater extent only through individual stories of people who took part in it, and only from the prism of their life experience.⁷⁰

This senior leader works with schoolchildren and teachers, university students as well as survivors and their descendants from both Belarus and abroad. Their activities with young people have included history classes and conservation at former killing sites (e.g. memorial ceremonies, tree planting). They have also advised teachers on how to teach about the Holocaust and provided them with some sample materials, although teachers introduce the topic, 'on their own initiative'⁷¹ not because of the curriculum. They noted that despite this some Belarusian Education Development Institutes have included the Holocaust in their teacher training. The senior leader's broader engagement work has also included curating an exhibition based on Jewish lives (this included elements of material reconstruction as well as the curation of photographs and artefacts). They have also worked on projects creating memorial statues and have convened commemorative events with survivors and descendants.

They felt that the main challenge to Holocaust education in Belarus is that engagement with this history is largely voluntary, both by teachers in schools and by heritage staff in local museums. They thought that this situation could be alleviated by more funding for teacher training, exhibitions, and heritage staff. They also noted that there is a need for a new school textbook on Holocaust history in Belarus. From their perspective, there is most probably enough expertise among a dedicated group of teachers in Belarus to write this textbook. However, once again, funding is a challenge. For this senior leader, Holocaust education in Belarus would benefit from the establishment of an official institution, employing historical experts and producing educational materials on the Holocaust that can be approved by the Ministry of Education and used in Belarusian schools. They felt that the international community could support Holocaust education in Belarus through offering more opportunities for joint projects. They would also like to see Belarus become a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which would make Belarusian government officials more aware of Holocaust-era issues.

Interview analysis

Analysis of interview transcripts identifies six recurring themes. First, all interviewees defined the 'Holocaust' as the Nazi persecution and mass murder of the Jews during the SWW. Excepting one interviewee who needed prompting for more detail, none of the interviewees sought to expand the term 'Holocaust' to include other Nazi victims or victims of other historical atrocities/genocides globally. The interviewee who was the exception initially defined the term 'Holocaust' more generally as, 'the systematic mass extermination of the population in terms of its ethnicity, skin colour, origin, political views,'⁷² before clarifying that in their institution's context, this understanding was mainly applied to the Jews during the SWW. However, for this interviewee the term 'Holocaust' could also be applied to other historical instances of mass murder such as the Armenian genocide. Debates about the definitional limits of the term 'Holocaust' aside,⁷³ what is significant within the Belarusian context is that none of the

interviewees directly conflated the specific term ‘Holocaust’ (here associated by interviewees with the fate of the Jews under Nazism and its collaborators) with wider Soviet and/or Belarusian Nazi victims.

The Soviet and post-Soviet disposition in Belarus towards a lack of specific memorial recognition of Jewish victims of the Nazis and their collaborators tended to be the site of implied critique in the interviews. Interviewees did identify long-standing challenges around dealing with the Jewish legacies of the Nazi-era in Belarus such as social amnesia regarding Holocaust history; the need to mark Jewish graves/ massacre sites; the need to identify all Jewish victims and the slowness of bureaucratic structures in making change. For example, quotes from interviews included: ‘... we do huge work in finding the places which are still not marked’; ‘... it’s very hard to go through bureaucracy when we want to install a monument’; ‘So, that’s one of the problems that the Jewish community faces. We have to prove, we have to fight, so to say, for the inscriptions on the memorial’; ‘And it was a shock to me, I was really shocked, and asked myself how could it happen that it was totally not known, that the memories about it were wiped out, that nobody spoke here about it.’⁷⁴

Second, two interviewees noted that they did not perceive their activity as ‘education’ or their role as ‘teachers,’ even though they frequently collaborated with schools or hosted visits by school groups. Thus, these interviewees were often on the front line of the transfer of expertise between what in the UK might be referred to as heritage-based public engagement practices and more formal school curricular and/or extracurricular education. Although not directly named as such by interviewees, given the importance of extra-curricular and/or beyond school activity, the seemingly more informal term ‘public engagement’ might better indicate the varied activities that interviewees used to communicate about, consult with, or encourage participatory practices with young people and others beyond their institution in order to promote learning about the history of the Holocaust.⁷⁵ The purpose of this engagement was often to encourage memorialization of Holocaust victims; share knowledge about regional Holocaust histories and/or support family history initiatives by domestic and international audiences.

Given the increasing importance of the recognition of public engagement as a profession in countries like the UK (although one still often marred by short-term contracts/casualization), it was significant that an interviewee noted the largely voluntary nature of Holocaust education/engagement practice and the importance of the need for funding and training about Holocaust history in Belarus’s regional museums. For example, one interviewee noted, ‘... practically every regional and district centre has a museum, regional museum, which deals with local history. And very few of the museums’ present Jewish history and Holocaust in their exhibitions.’⁷⁶ Responding to this, the online workshop discussed later was reorientated from having a focus on education to public engagement, museums education and heritage practice.

Third, and possibly allied to the fact that interviewees often worked with schoolteachers and pupils, was the often-stated desire that Holocaust history be featured more heavily in school textbooks and the Belarusian curriculum, accompanied by appropriate educational resources. This was often allied to a vocal recognition of the inadequacies of the Belarusian curriculum in relation to the specific needs of Holocaust education. For example, quotes from the interviews included: ‘... unfortunately studying Holocaust is not included in the official governmental programme’; ‘there are no books, there are

no teaching aids in Belarus, or there were none until recently'; 'Holocaust education is not paid. Holocaust education is not legitimate in terms of it's not a policy of the Ministry of Education or any educational establishment. Holocaust Education in Belarus is a grassroots initiative.'⁷⁷

Regarding this area one of the interviewees offered a more direct ideological analysis of the challenges presented to Holocaust education within the context of the official curriculum's focus on the Belarusian national discourse of GPW history. Quotes from their interview included: 'But the problem of Belarusian educational sphere is that it's not still much changed from Soviet times'; 'And the problem of this [educational] process, first, that they have an ideological dimension, that they more centred on Belarusians' victory, heroism and so on'; 'This official discourse works on children that they are not thinking about victims but about heroes, and later go ... to make photo with a weapon.'⁷⁸ This final comment gestures towards the societal hardwiring of military patriotism that results from a curriculum and institutional memory culture that is more focused on national identification than empathetic engagement. It is arguable that this observation has chilling resonance regionally given the aggressive use of GPW propaganda by the Russian government and military in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.⁷⁹ It is also significant to note in terms of the interviews more broadly that none of the speakers critiqued Lukashenka or the Belarusian government openly. This was an area of 'silence.'

These observations coalesced with the fourth theme, namely that because of the limited presence of Holocaust history in the Belarusian school curriculum, schoolteachers and their personal initiative was essential in both bringing this history to students' attention and engaging with heritage organizations/NGOs. A teacher's demonstration of personal initiative was particularly significant given an interviewee's observation that, '... education here is quite purified, I don't know how to say, independent teachers not much survive.'⁸⁰ Interestingly, in neighboring state Lithuania, which is a democracy but continues to have its own struggles in relation to Holocaust education, 'the motivations of individual teachers' has also been perceived by Beresniová as a key factor in successful pedagogic interventions.⁸¹

Fifth, all interviewees highlighted the importance of the historical site in shaping their engagement with school students or Jewish descendants. Whether for learning, memorialization or conservation, the Belarusian historical topography of the Holocaust which reveals traces of partisan resistance in the forests as well as evidence of Nazi violence in the ghettos, mass graves and camps is a powerful catalyst for education and public engagement.⁸² Indeed, culturally this activity may share historical affinities with Russian schools activity in the Soviet-era where caring for war monuments ('shefstvo') was a feature of learning about the GPW.⁸³ Finally, the sixth interview theme was the extent to which despite Belarus's political marginalization internationally, all interviewees were able to engage and sometimes received training from Holocaust research, remembrance and education organizations globally (e.g. Germany, Israel, Russia). However, challenges were observed around this. One interviewee observed: 'Sometimes officials are afraid of foreign things.'⁸⁴ Interviewees noted that international organizations could help their cause by increasing opportunities for training, staff exchanges and the creation of jointly funded projects. It was based on these potential benefits of international dialogue that this research progressed to the creation of an online event which brought together Belarusians and British actors involved in NGOs or museums

dealing with Holocaust-era histories to discuss public engagement, education, and heritage practice.

Online workshop: engaging the public with the history of the Holocaust: perspectives from Belarus and Britain

This online workshop (11 June 2021) provided an opportunity for heritage experts involved in NGOs or museums dealing with Holocaust-era histories in Belarus to discuss practice-based public engagement, education, and heritage issues with British counterparts. Two international NGOs operating in Belarus were represented, a charity and a charitable association. Three British organizations were represented: a national museum body with expertise in the history of conflict (classified as an independent statutory corporate body); an archive with expertise in the Holocaust (classified as a non-profit making company) and a regional exhibition and education institute focused on the Holocaust (classified as a charity and a company limited by guarantee). Each organization gave a presentation about a project promoting engagement with the history of the Holocaust. An international academic expert on the region was also present and contributed to discussions. Time was given to discussing best practices, shared hopes, and challenges. Participants consented to the anonymization of their data in all future storage and use in publications.

The anonymous shared electronic notepad (Padlet) used by participants highlighted the hopes, challenges and opportunities for best practice identified during discussions. In terms of hopes, two participants noted their desire that there would be more opportunities for British/Belarusian partnerships in relation to future Holocaust research, remembrance, and education. Two participants wrote of how they were inspired by, in the words of the first delegate: 'Interdisciplinary engagement: Both in Belarus and Britain';⁸⁵ whilst the second participant stated that they were: 'Inspired by projects bringing creative artists and practitioners together to explore new ways of thinking about subjects many believe there is nothing more to learn about.'⁸⁶ What these comments reveal is that even during a period of international diplomatic controversy owing to the flight diversion and arrest of Roman Protasevich (23 May 2021),⁸⁷ the idea of sharing knowledge, ideas and resources across borders is tacitly embedded in the planning and approach of Holocaust heritage practitioners, both in the UK and Belarus. Additionally, this identification of best practice shows that when given the opportunity, heritage practitioners in Belarus are just as open to experimenting with creative, interdisciplinary heritage approaches as their UK counterparts. Outside of this workshop, this has certainly been evidenced by the efforts of the BJCH, who have since 2020, continued to explore the potential of online platforms and virtual reality reconstructions of Belarusian synagogues.⁸⁸

Challenges also surfaced. The first noted on the pad was the resourcing, space and curatorial expertise required to conserve and preserve historical objects that relate to Belarus's Holocaust-era past. For example, at the time of the online event, original archaeological artefacts from a Jewish partisan camp were stored on a balcony. The second challenge was political. This revealed itself to be a recurring theme during the afternoon and was reflected in participant comments. For example, during discussions, one participant expressed anxiety and uncertainty about the likelihood of being

able to continue their Holocaust engagement/education practice in the wake of continuing political repression following the August 2020 elections.⁸⁹ This found a sad echo in one of the ‘Challenge’ sections on the electronic notepad: ‘To continue commemoration and teaching about the Holocaust in the present situation.’⁹⁰ Another notepad contributor pointed to the dangers of the politicization of history in Belarus: ‘The Belarus context was a critical reminder of the volatile political uses of the Holocaust, and memory, in the creation of national heritage practices.’⁹¹ Interestingly, beyond the scope of this workshop, the political use of SWW memory, has not just been evidenced by the Belarusian state but also by anti-government protesters who have labeled the regime ‘fascist’, while a group of IT hackers referred to themselves as ‘cyber-partisans’.⁹²

The final notepad comment on the political challenges of engaging the public in Holocaust history in Belarus, brought the case of Belarus into wider comparison with broader trends in Europe. The workshop participant disturbingly and sparingly described the dangers of the: ‘Massive influence of illiberal democracies (and autocracies) of the region (East Central Europe) on independent critical Holocaust research, education, and publishing (This is taking place not only in Belarus, Poland, Hungary, etc. too). The systemic mechanism of the “chilling effect” will have a lasting impact.’⁹³ Here reference may have been being made to international developments such as the law on ‘attacks on the honor of the Polish Nation and State’, which occurred under the government of the radical right Law and Justice Party and was first passed by Poland’s Sejm in 2018. This Law has been criticized by Holocaust researchers including Yad Vashem’s Yehuda Bauer, Dan Michman, Havi Dreifuss and David Silberklang for discouraging historical investigations into instances of Polish anti-Semitism and/or collaboration with Nazi Germany.⁹⁴

Beyond the closure of this workshop, this comment also has resonance within the context of the wave of legislation that followed the announcement of Belarus’s ‘Year of Historical Memory’ on 1 January 2022. The official state narrative of the GPW has assumed a criminal, disciplinary function through the ‘Law on the Genocide of the Belarusian People during the Great Patriotic War’.⁹⁵ This Law has set-up ‘criminal liability’ for individuals, who deny in public what the state calls the ‘Genocide of the Belarusian people’ by ‘Nazi criminals and their accomplices.’⁹⁶ In this Law, ‘Belarusian people’ is understood as ‘Soviet citizens’ resident on the territory of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus between 1941 and 1951.⁹⁷

Simultaneously, the ‘Law against Nazism Rehabilitation’,⁹⁸ has a repressive function vis-à-vis social dissent since August 2020. Following independence from the USSR, the Belarusian state had reinstated the white-red-white flag and coat of arms of the short-lived, pre-Soviet Belarusian People’s Republic (1918). This insignia was also used by Belarusian Nazi collaborators during the SWW. This fact was instrumentalized by Lukashenka and his supporters to discredit this symbolism and re-instate an amended version of Belarus’s Soviet style flag in 1995.⁹⁹ Subsequently, the white-red-white flag has been reappropriated at anti-Lukashenka protests in and beyond August 2020.¹⁰⁰ While the history of Nazi collaboration must be addressed openly and with an awareness of retrospective justice for the victims, the 2022 Law on Nazism Rehabilitation can be interpreted as a way of criminalizing protest symbolism and stigmatizing protesters with the stain of the Nazi past.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

In *At Memory's Edge*, James E. Young used the term to describe the generational transitioning of the collective memory of the Holocaust from those who experienced it (the survivors) to subsequent age groups of artists and cultural creatives who learnt about the atrocious events of the Holocaust through its representation.¹⁰² Whilst this sense of a generational precipice is also in operation in the Belarusian context (Fedor, Lewis and Zhurzhenko see it as marking the transition between what Jan Assman (2008) would call 'communicative' and 'cultural' memory);¹⁰³ the idea of being 'at engagement's edge' invoked here, is rooted far more strongly in a temporal cultural-political shift from 'a situation of opportunity' to 'the chilling effect'.

For barriers to engagement are hardening rather than loosening in Belarus's case. This is because of government repressions following the August 2020 elections. These elections are an important framing timeline for this article: the semi-structured interviews were recorded before the 2020 elections and the workshop was run after the 2020 elections. This affected the relatively optimistic tone of many of the interviews, as well as the more pessimistic mood of the workshop. In terms of political sanctions following the 2020 elections, in September, the British government in cooperation with Canada imposed a travel ban and asset freeze on Lukashenka, his son and six other individuals. Earlier measures taken by the UK government included working with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to commission an independent investigation into the 2020 elections, as well as the pledging of £1.5 million of financial support to community groups, independent media and human rights groups in Belarus over two years.¹⁰⁴

Although concerned with community issues, the workshop analyzed in this article was not knowingly funded by this financial aid, a monetary package furthermore, which was not discussed by workshop participants. Instead it was anxieties about political repression that surfaced during discussions.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, in an unplanned twist of fate, the workshop ended up being held just a short time after the flight diversion and arrest of *Nexta* editor-in-chief, Protasevich (23 May 2021).¹⁰⁶ This led to further sanctions, such as travel bans and asset freezes against individuals and entities in Belarus by the US, EU, Canada and the UK later in June 2021.¹⁰⁷ Ultimately, this context of internal political repression and the need for global sanctions in retaliation has made international collaboration more challenging and problematic as the Belarusian government has rolled back from 'soft Belarusianisation' and become increasingly diplomatically isolated from and hostile towards Western organizations.¹⁰⁸

Heritage, public engagement and education work in relation to Holocaust history in Belarus has also been affected by Belarus's domestic politics. For example, on 22 April 2021, *The Forward*, an online news outlet primarily aimed at an American Jewish audience, reported that Tamara Vershitskaya, curator of the Museum of Jewish Resistance, Novogrudok and her assistant had been fired.¹⁰⁹ This important museum was founded in July 2007 and has an exhibition which is situated in a barrack where ghetto prisoners lived during the SWW. Integrating Jewish history into the institutional memory of the 'partisan republic', the museum tells the story of those Jews in Novogrudok who were massacred by the Nazis; the tunnel escape made by ghetto inhabitants (including Jack Kagan, a survivor who settled in Britain post-war); the rescue actions of the infamous

Bielski Jewish partisan group in the neighboring forests as well as the Bielski partisans links to Soviet and Polish resistance groups.¹¹⁰

Vershitskaya gave tours of this museum on Sundays and a group of anti-government protesters began to attend each week to listen to the history of their region's resistance to the Nazi occupation. Vershitskaya has said that she continued to give the tours because she strongly believed, '... that the Museum is out of politics, that the Museum is open to everybody and that it must demonstrate this position.'¹¹¹ In January 2021, Belarusian police intervened and detained Vershitskaya and a number of members of the tour group, one of whom served a ten-day prison sentence for engaging in a solitary unauthorized picket. A week after this, Vershitskaya received the news that her contract at the Museum would not be extended.¹¹²

Beyond this story's initial striking force as a violation of basic freedoms that are often taken for granted in Western democracies, its importance is two-fold. First, within the context of Belarusian memory politics, it shows the confluence and conflict of a number of dynamics in public life: The legacy of the encouragement of museums established before but encouraged by 'soft Belarusianisation' to explore 'non-political' single-issue subjects related to Belarusian culture and history; the willingness of social protesters to mobilize the resistance narrative of 'partisans'; as well as the Belarusian state's increasing use of force to coerce protesters and control GPW memory and its public understandings. Second, the aporia identified by Vershitskaya that 'the Museum is out of politics' points to the contradictory ethical tightrope that international observers and participants must negotiate. Namely, reaching out to an ethical human responsibility beyond politics to recognize victims of the Nazi Holocaust who perished on what is now the modern-day territory of Belarus, whilst also being alert to the fact that these processes of historical recognition and heritage support are situated within coerced 'silences' of the (institutionalized memory) politics of the present. This is further intensified by an escalating international sanctions regime fueled by political repression at home and since 2022, accommodation with Russia's war with Ukraine abroad. Indeed, many of those heritage practitioners who can educate about the Holocaust have now left Belarus.

Amidst this volatile and fragile situation, Western academics should not forget those diverse and quietly courageous voices from Belarus who are committed to the public discussion of the difficult and controversial aspects of the Nazi and Holocaust-era past. Academics beyond Belarus's borders can draw attention to Belarus's complex histories and heritage needs; be empathetic towards the struggles of the country's Holocaust heritage practitioners internally and Belarusian political exiles globally and plan heritage and education support structures for future possibilities.

Notes

1. Geertz, "Thick description," 26–7.
2. Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 225.
3. For a critical analysis of Matsuzato, see Ioffe, *Understanding*, 154.
4. Wilson, *Belarus*. Rice in Kubosova, "Rice Condemns"; Tsikhanouskaya, "Foreword", xvii.
5. For 'Holocaust education' definition, see Beresniova, *Holocaust Education in Lithuania*, xix.
6. Fracapane and Haß, *Holocaust Education*; Browning and Lehti, "The West," 15–32.
7. Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance*, 97–8.

8. Beresniova, *Holocaust Education in Lithuania*, xxi.
9. Konkka, “Millions,” 56.
10. *Ibid.*, 57. Using GPW institutional memory, Russian propaganda in the early 2020s equates efforts to defend Ukrainian independence and democracy with extreme forms of anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism, reminiscent of the fight against German Nazism and its collaborators during World War II (Fedor, Lewis and Zhurzhenko, “Introduction,” 15). Belarus has accommodated Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (2022) and the Belarusian government has used the memory of collaboration to demonise its opponents, albeit differently to Russia, often with a domestic rather than foreign policy focus. See this article’s online workshop section.
11. Hall, “End of Adaptive,” 12–13.
12. *Ibid.*, 18–19.
13. Shadurski, “Where,” 193; “Human Rights,” *Viasna*.
14. Exeler, *Ghosts*, 251.
15. *Ibid.*, 250.
16. Fogu and Kansteiner, “The Politics,” 288.
17. Fedor, Lewis and Zhurzhenko, “Introduction,” 20–1.
18. Marples, “History, Memory,” 438 and 444; Baranova, “Conceptualizations,” 251–4; Wilson, *Belarus*, 115–6.
19. Exeler, *Ghosts*, 246, 249.
20. Marples, “History, Memory,” 445; Marples and Laputska, “Maly Traścianiec,” 12.
21. Marples, “History, Memory,” 445–6. The Yama Memorial (1947) marks a Jewish massacre site.
22. Marples, “History, Memory,” 441; Marples, “Catastrophe and Denial,” 282–4.
23. Zadora, “History of the War,” 183.
24. Zadora, “History Teaching,” 4.
25. Zadora, “History of the War,” 185–6; Zadora, “History Teaching,” 11.
26. Szymánska, “Teaching,” 206–12.
27. *Ibid.*, 208.
28. *Ibid.*, 208.
29. *Ibid.*, 208.
30. Komacz (ed.), *World’s Modern History 1918–1945*, 31.
31. Stashkevich (ed.), *The History of Belarus 1917–1945*, 154–7.
32. Trashchanok (ed.), *World History from the 19th to the early 21st Century*, 11.
33. Nowik (ed.), *The History of Belarus from the 19th to the early 21st Century*, 158, 160.
34. Zadora, “History of the War,” 187. Focusing specifically on Holocaust representation, Zadora’s article (2017) claims that there are only four textbooks which mention the history of the Nazi’s assault on the Jews: Evguenii Novik, *History of Belarus, 1917–1945*. 10th Grade (Minsk: Popular Education, 2009); Sidartsou and Ouladimir, *History of Belarus*. 9th grade (Minsk: Public Education, 2005); Petar Petrykau, *History of Belarus*. 11th grade (Minsk: Popular Education, 2002); Alexandre Kovalenia, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People (in the context of the Second World War)*, 11th grade. (Minsk: State University, 2004). Apart from the Sidartsou and Ouladimir textbook (which is most likely an earlier edition of the M. Stashkevich edited textbook in this bibliography), the texts identified by Zadora are different to the ones surveyed by Szymánska. This illustrates different sample categories (e.g., Szymanska Jewish and Holocaust history; Zadora Holocaust and SWW history); the difficulty of accessing Belarusian textbooks as well as the challenges of analyzing textbook subject matter which is often gestured towards as a minor sub-theme using multiple descriptors.
35. *Ibid.*, 186.
36. Kovalenia, *The Great Patriotic War*.
37. Zadora, “History of the War,” 187.
38. *Ibid.*, 187.
39. Wilson, *Belarus*, 262–74.

40. Ibid., 271.
41. Waligórska, “Remembering.”
42. Vapne, “Interviews.”
43. Waligórska, “Remembering,” 331.
44. Kashtalian, “The Educational,” 309–10.
45. Ibid., 311–2. Kashtalian also authored the oral history, *The Repressive Factors*.
46. Ibid., 315–7.
47. Waligórska, “Remembering,” 332–44; Marples and Laputska, “Maly Traścianiec,” 14–18.
48. Marples and Laputska, “Maly Traścianiec,” 14–18.
49. Brinkman and Kvale, *Doing*; Ahlin, “Semi-structured”; Yow, *Recording*.
50. Portelli, “Peculiarities,” 98.
51. United Nations, “The Genocide Convention.”
52. See online workshop section.
53. Portelli, “Peculiarities,” 99.
54. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly*; Alexievich, *Second-hand*; Vice, “Holocaust testimony”, 1–19.
55. Smalianchuk, “Oral history,” 234.
56. Passerini, “Memory,” 195.
57. Marples, “History and Memory,” 448. For examples of suppression, see Andrei Kudzineka’s film, *Okkupatsiaa Misterii (Mysterium Occupation, 2003)* and columns in opposition paper *Narodnaia Volia* (2010) (Lewis, “Partisan Republic,” 390).
58. Interview Transcript I.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Interview Transcript II.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. Interview Transcript III.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
72. Interview Transcript II.
73. Gerd Korman noted that it was not until 1957–1959 that the Nazi mass murder of the Jews was widely referred to in the West as the ‘Holocaust’. Since then, there have been global reappropriations of the term for other historical atrocities as well as debates as to whether it should include wider victims of Nazi crimes. See Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance*, X, 12, 49.
74. Quotes from the interview transcripts.
75. ‘Public engagement’ activities are understood here as a typology of information flows (‘public communication’, ‘public consultation’ and ‘public participation’). See Rowe and Frewer, “A typology,” 253–6. The extent to which the term ‘public engagement’ is bound up or distinct from political structures such as democracy would be an interesting area of diachronic linguistic and cultural research.
76. Quote from interview transcript.
77. Quotes from interview transcripts.
78. Quotes from interview transcript.
79. Fedor, Lewis and Zhurzhenko, “Introduction,” 15.
80. Quote from interview transcript.
81. Beresniova, *Holocaust Education in Lithuania*, xxiv.
82. See interview transcripts.
83. Konkka, “Millions,” 50.

84. Quote from interview transcript.
85. Electronic notepad, 9 June 2021.
86. Ibid.
87. Hall, “End,” 21.
88. Vapne, “Interviews.”
89. Hall, “End,” 18–19.
90. Electronic notepad, 9 June 2021.
91. Ibid.
92. Chernyshova, “The Soviet,” 33–49.
93. Electronic notepad, 9 June 2021.
94. Bauer, “Creating,” 222–3.
95. Marples and Laputska, “The ‘Genocide,’” 16–32.
96. Ibid., 16–32.
97. Ibid., 16–32.
98. Ibid., 16–32.
99. Ioffe, *Understanding*, 61–2.
100. Marples and Laputska, “The ‘Genocide,’” 16–32; Wilson, *Belarus*, n.p.
101. For an exploration of the concept of ‘stigma’, albeit in the different context of post-1945 West Germany, see Moses, *German Intellectuals*.
102. Young, *At Memory’s*, 1–11.
103. Fedor, Lewis and Zhurzhenko, “Introduction,” 3.
104. GOV.UK. “Belarus: UK sanctions.”
105. See funding.
106. Hall, “End,” 21.
107. GOV.UK. “UK imposes sanctions.”
108. Hall, “End,” 13, 21.
109. Klein, “In Belarus.”
110. EHRI, “Museum of Jewish Resistance in Novogrudok.” For Jewish partisan resistance, see Gerasimova, Selemenev and Kagan, eds. *We Stood*; Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*; Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*; Tec, *Defiance*; Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans*.
111. Vershitskaya quoted in Klein, “In Belarus.” Vershitskaya has moved to the Minsk Office of UK charity, The Together Plan.
112. Klein, “In Belarus.”

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by funding from the University of Derby’s Quality Related allocation of Global Challenges Research Funding (GCRF).

Notes on contributor

Dr. Larissa Allwork is Associate Professor in History & Impact at the University of Derby. Email: L.Allwork@derby.ac.uk

ORCID

Larissa Allwork  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2301-7668>

Bibliography

Semi-structured interview transcripts & participant feedback

- Electronic notepad from online workshop, 9 June 2021.
 Survey of participants from online workshop, 9 June 2021.
 Interview Transcript I, 26 May 2020.
 Interview Transcript II, 12 June 2020.
 Interview Transcript III, 26 June 2020.

Belarusian Educational Textbooks

- Trashchanok, Y. (Ed). *World History from the 19th to the Early 21st Century. 11th Grade Student Textbook for Secondary Schools with the Curriculum Taught in Belarusian*. Minsk, 2009.
 Kosmacz, G. (Ed). *World's Modern History 1918–1945. 9th Grade Student Textbook for Secondary Schools with a 12-Year Curriculum Taught in Belarusian*. Second Edition. Minsk, 2006.
 Kovalenia, Alexandre. *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People (in the Context of the Second World War). 11th Grade*. Minsk: State University, 2004.
 Nowik, J. (Ed). *The History of Belarus from the 19th to the Early 21st Century. 11th Grade Student Textbook for Secondary Schools with the Curriculum Taught in Belarusian*. Minsk, 2009.
 Stashkevich, M. (Ed.) *The History of Belarus 1917–1945. 9th Grade Student Textbook for Secondary Schools with a 12-Year Curriculum Taught in Belarusian*. Second edition. Minsk, 2006.

Books and journal articles

- Ahlin, Eileen M. “Semi-structured Interviews with Expert Practitioners: Their Validity and Significant Contribution to Translational Research.” In *Sage Research Methods Cases Part 2*. Sage Publications Ltd, 2019. doi:10.4135/9781526466037.
- Alexievich, Svetlana. *The Unwomanly Face of War*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1985/2017.
- Alexievich, Svetlana. *Second-hand Time*. Trans. Bela Sheyavich. London, UK: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2013/2016.
- Allwork, Larissa. *Holocaust Remembrance Between the National and the Transnational*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Baranova, Olga. “Conceptualizations of the Holocaust in Soviet and Post-Soviet Ukraine and Belarus: Public Debates and Historiography.” *East European Politics, Societies and Cultures* 34, no. 1 (2019): 241–60. doi:10.1177/0888325419831349.
- Bauer, Yehuda. “Creating a ‘Usable’ Past: On Holocaust Denial and Distortion.” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2020): 209–27. doi:10.1080/23739770.2020.1805916.
- Beresniova, Christine. *Holocaust Education in Lithuania*. Lanham; Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017.
- Brinkman, Svend, and Steiner Kvale. *Doing Interviews: Second Edition*. London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi; Singapore: Sage Publications, 2018.
- Browning, Christopher S., and Marko Lehti. “The West: Contested, Narrated and Clustered.” In *The Struggle for the West*, edited by Christopher S. Browning, and Marko Lehti, 15–32. Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Chernyshova, Natalya. “The Soviet Roots of the 2020 Protests: The Unlikely History of Belarusian Civic Nationalism.” In *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Elena Korostelva, Irina Petrova, and Anastasiia Kudlenko, 33–49. Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2023.
- Exeler, Franziska. *Ghosts of War*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2022.
- Fedor, Julie, Simon Lewis, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko. “Introduction: War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.” In *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, edited by Julie Fedor, Simon Lewis, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, 1–40. Cham: Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Fogu, Claudio, and Wulf Kansteiner. “The Politics of Memory and the Poetics of History.” In *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, edited by Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu, 284–311. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Fracapane, Karel, and Matthias Haß, eds. *Holocaust Education in a Global Context*. Paris: UNESCO, 2014.

- Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, edited by Clifford Geertz, 3–30. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Gerasimova, Inna, Viacheslav Selemeney, and Jack Kagan, eds. *We Stood Shoulder to Shoulder*. Bury St. Edmunds: Arima, 2010.
- Hall, Stephen. "The End of Adaptive Authoritarianism in Belarus?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 1 (2023): 1–27. doi:[10.1080/09668136.2022.2093332](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2093332).
- Ioffe, Grigory. *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008/2014.
- Kagan, Jack, and Dov Cohen. *Surviving the Holocaust with the Russian Jewish Partisans*. London; Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998.
- Kashtalian, Iryna. *The Repressive Factors of the USSR's Internal Policy and Everyday Life*. Göttingen: Harrassowitz Verlag & Wiesbaden, 2016.
- Kashtalian, Iryna. "The Educational Use of Videoed Memoirs and Material on the History of the Minsk Ghetto and the Maly Trostenets Extermination Site." In *Interactions*, edited by Werner Dreier, Angelika Laumer, and Moritz Wein, 305–20. Berlin: EVZ Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future, 2018.
- Konkka, Olga. "'Millions of Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, People of All Ethnicities': Teaching and Remembering the Holocaust in Russian Schools." *Holocaust Studies* 29, no. 1 (2023): 39–65. doi:[10.1080/17504902.2021.1992198](https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2021.1992198).
- Lewis, Simon. "The 'Partisan Republic': Colonial Myths and Memory Wars in Belarus." In *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, edited by Julie Fedor, Simon Lewis, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, 371–95. Cham: Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Marples, David R. "Elections and Nation-building in Belarus: A Comment on Ioffe." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 48, no. 1 (2007): 59–67. doi:[10.2747/1538-7216.48.1.59](https://doi.org/10.2747/1538-7216.48.1.59).
- Marples, David R. "History, Memory and the Second World War in Belarus." *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 58, no. 3 (2012): 437–48. doi:[10.1111/j.1467-8497.2012.01646.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2012.01646.x).
- Marples, David R. "Catastrophe and Denial in Belarus." *Current History* 119, no. 819 (2020): 282–4. doi:[10.1525/curh.2020.119.819.282](https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2020.119.819.282).
- Marples, David R., and Veranika Laputska. "Maly Traścianiec in the Context of Current Narratives on the Holocaust in the Republic of Belarus." *Europe-Asia Studies* (2021). doi:[10.1080/09668136.2021.1954600](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1954600).
- Marples, David R., and Veranika Laputska. "The 'Genocide of Belarusians' and the Survival of Lukashenka's Regime." In *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Elena Korostelva, Irina Petrova, and Anastasiia Kudlenko, 16–32. Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2023.
- Moses, Dirk. *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Passerini, Luisa. "Memory." *History Workshop Journal* 15 (1983): 195–6. doi:[10.1093/hwi/15.1.195](https://doi.org/10.1093/hwi/15.1.195).
- Portelli, Alessandro. "The Peculiarities of Oral History." *History Workshop Journal* 12, no. 1 (October 1981): 96–107. doi:[10.1093/hwj/12.1.96](https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/12.1.96).
- Porter, Jack, and Yehuda Merin, eds. *Jewish Partisans of the Soviet Union During World War II*. Brookline MA: Academic Studies Press, 2021.
- Rowe, Gene, and Lynn J. Frewer. "A Typology of Public Engagement Mechanisms." *Science, Technology, Human Values* 30, no. 2 (2005): 251–90. doi:[10.1177/0162243904271724](https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243904271724).
- Shadurski, Victor. "Where Does Belarus Go From Here?" In *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Elena Korostelva, Irina Petrova, and Anastasiia Kudlenko, 193–206. Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2023.
- Smalianchuk, Aliaksandr. "Oral History in Belarus: Present State and Development Trends." *Acta Baltico-Slavica* 42 (2018): 233–52. doi:[10.11649/abs.2018.013](https://doi.org/10.11649/abs.2018.013).
- Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands*. New York: Basic Books, 2010/2012.
- Szymánska, Marta. "Teaching About Jewish History in School Textbooks Published in Belarus in 2000–2010." In *Good Practices in the Preservation and Promotion of Jewish Heritage: A Guide Based on Polish and Belarusian Experiences*, edited by A. Bielawska, A. Maksimowska, and A. Sidarovich, 206–12. Warsaw: Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2012.

- Tec, Nechama. *Defiance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Tsikhonouskaya, Sviatlana. "Foreword." In *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Elena Korostelva, Irina Petrova, and Anastasiia Kudlenko, xvii. Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2023.
- Vice, Sue. "Holocaust Testimony or 'Soviet Epic': Svetlana Alexievich's Polyphonic Texts." *Holocaust Studies* (2022): 1–19. doi:10.1080/17504902.2022.2116542.
- Waligórska, Magdalena. "Jewish Heritage and the New Belarusian National Identity Project." *East European Politics, Societies and Cultures* 20, no. 10 (2015): 1–28. doi:10.1177/0888325415577861.
- Waligórska, Magdalena. "Remembering the Holocaust on the Fault Lines of East and West-European Memorial Cultures: The new Memorial Complex in Trasianets, Belarus." *Holocaust Studies* 24, no. 3 (2018): 329–53. doi:10.1080/17504902.2017.1411000.
- Waligórska, Magdalena, and Ina Sorkina. "The Second Life of Jewish Belongings – Jewish Personal Objects and Their Afterlives in the Polish and Belarusian Post-Holocaust Shtetls." *Holocaust Studies* 29, no. 3 (2022): 341–62. doi:10.1080/17504902.2022.2047292.
- Walke, Anika. *Pioneers and Partisans*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Wilson, Andrew. *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2021.
- Young, James E. *At Memory's Edge*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Yow, Valerie Raleigh. *Recording Oral History, Third Edition*. Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.
- Zadora, Anna. "History of the War and Wars of History: Teaching the Second World War and the Holocaust in Post-Soviet Belarus." *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 2017): 178–92. doi:10.1080/17526272.2016.1194362.
- Zadora, Anna. "History Teaching in Belarus: Between Europe and Russia." *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 15, no. 1 (Autumn/Winter 2017): 1–16.
- Media articles and websites (print and online)**
- EHRI. "Museum of Jewish Resistance in Novogrudok." 2021. Accessed 23 June 2021. <https://portal.ehri-project.eu/institutions/by-006171>.
- GOV.UK. "Belarus: UK sanctions 8 members of regime, including Alexander Lukashenko." GOV.UK, 29 September, 2020. Accessed 30 August 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/belarus-uk-sanctions-eight-members-of-regime-including-alexander-lukashenko>
- GOV.UK. "UK imposes sanctions on Belarus following forced landing of Ryanair flight." GOV.UK, 21 June, 2021. Accessed 30 August 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-imposes-sanctions-on-belarus-following-forced-landing-of-ryanair-flight>.
- Klein, David Ian. "In Belarus, firing of Jewish Museum curator linked to anti-government protests." *The Forward*, 22 April, 2021. Accessed 23 August 2021. <https://forward.com/news/468209/belarus-jewish-museum-fired-protests-lukashenko/>.
- Kubosova, Lucia. "Rice Condemns Belarus." *EUobserver*. 21 April, 2005. Accessed 10 February 2021. <https://euobserver.com/foreign/18907>.
- United Nations. "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide." The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Accessed 30 August 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-prevention-and-punishment-crime-genocide>.
- Vapne, Lisa. "Interviews. Maya Katznelson." K. 20 October, 2022. Accessed 9 August 2023. <https://k-larevue.com/en/maya-katznelson-there-is-a-need-for-a-national-jewish-museum-in-belarus/#:~:text=I%20don't%20want%20people,museum%2C%20linked%20to%20educational%20projects>.
- Viasna. "Human Rights Situation in Belarus: August 2020." *Viasna*. 2 September, 2020. Accessed 4 August 2023. <https://spring96.org/en/news/99352>.