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DOI:10.17951/sb.2020.14.203-214
Studia Białorutenistyczne 14/2020 LITERARY STUDIES
ISSN: 1898-0457 e-ISSN: 2449-8270
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Place of the Works of Uladzimir Karatkievič in the Discourse on the Identity of Belarusians

Miejsce twórczości Uładzimira Karatkieviča w dyskursie o tożsamości Białorusinów

Месца творчасці Уладзіміра Караткевіча ў дыскурсе пра ідэнтычнасць беларусаў

Abstract

The main goal of U. Karatkievič's literary output was always to revive and reinforce the sense of national identity in Belarusians. In earlier times, there had been no writer in Belarusian literature who would devote his whole output to the history of his nation. In his works, Karatkievič described their successes and failures and showed their attempts to gain independence and form the foundations of the Belarusian national identity to his reader. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was not easy to promote and disseminate the true history of Belarus, the beauty of the Belarusian language and the Belarusian national identity in the USSR. Karatkievič was often stigmatised and punished for his activity in this respect. This paper presents the impact of the writer's output on the formation of Belarusian national identity. Karatkievič's struggle with the stagnation or even backwardness of the Brezhnev era clearly manifested itself in his protest and fight for respect for the Belarusian language, the history of his homeland and the protection of nature and monuments of an immaterial culture. The writer saw the inseparable unity between those apparently different problems. Caused by such factors as the deliberate distortion of historical memory, social oblivion leads to the denationalisation and blurring of national self-awareness. Manipulating the past and enforcing the oblivion of various inconvenient historical events destroys the identity of societies. This is what Uladzimir Karatkievič wanted to oppose and did oppose with his works.

* Financing: Funded from the budget of the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures and the Institute of History of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, from the funds of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for activities promoting science (contract no. 615/P–DUN/2019) and under the 'Support for Academic Journals' programme (contract no. 331/WCN/2019/1).
Publisher: Wydawnictwo UMCS

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Keywords: Karatkievič, Belarusian literature, national identity, history of Belarus

Abstrakt

Głównym celem twórczości U. Karatkeviča pozostawała zawsze próba ożywienia i wzmocnienia poczucia tożsamości narodowej Białorusinów. W literaturze białoruskiej nie było wcześniej pisarza, który całą swoja twórczość poświęcił dziejom własnego narodu. Pisarz opisywał w swoich utworach wzloty i upadki Białorusinów, pokazywał ich próby uzyskania niepodległości, kształtował w swoim czytelniku podstawy białoruskiej tożsamości narodowej. W latach 50. i 60. XX w. w ZSRR nie było łatwo promować i propagować prawdziwą historię Białorusi, piękno języka białoruskiego i białoruską tożsamość narodową. Za swoje działania w tej dziedzinie Karatkevič był często piętnowany i karany. Artykuł przedstawia wpływ twórczości pisarza na kształtowanie białoruskiej tożsamości narodowej. Zmagania Karatkieviča z zastojem, a wręcz wstecznością ery Breżniewa najwyraźniej wyczuwalne były w jego proteście i walce o szacunek dla języka białoruskiego, historii własnej ojczyzny oraz ochrony przyrody i zabytków kultury materialnej. Pisarz widział nierozerwalną jedność pomiędzy tymi na pierwszy rzut oka różniącymi się problemami. Niepamięć społeczna, której jedną z przyczyn jest celowe zaburzanie prawdy historycznej doprowadza do wynarodowienia i zatarcia narodowej samoświadomości. Manipulowanie przeszłością i przymuszanie do zapominania o różnych niewygodnych wydarzeniach historycznych unicestwia tożsamość społeczeństw. Temu właśnie przeciwstawić się chciał i przeciwstawiał się swoja twórczością Uładzimir Karatkievič.

Słowa kluczowe: Karatkevič, literatura białoruska, tożsamość narodowa, historia Białorusi

Анатацыя

Галоўнай мэтай творчасці У. Караткевіча заўсёды была спроба адраджэння і ўмацавання пачуцця нацыянальнай ідэнтычнасці беларусаў. У беларускай літаратуры не было раней пісьменніка, які б усю сваю творчасць прысвяціў гісторыі ўласнага народа. У сваіх творах пісьменнік апісваў узлёты і падзенні беларусаў, паказваў іх спробы атрымаць незалежнасць, фарміраваў у свайго чытача аснову беларускай нацыянальнай ідэнтычнасці. У 1950-я і 1960-я гады ў СССР было няпроста прасоўваць сапраўдную гісторыю Беларусі, прапагандаваць прыгажосць беларускай мовы і беларускую нацыянальную ідэнтычнасць. Караткевіча, які свядома дзейнічаў у гэтым накірунку, неаднаразова кляймілі і каралі. У артыкуле паказаны ўплыў творчасці пісьменніка на фарміраванне беларускай нацыянальнай ідэнтычнасці. Змаганне Караткевіча з застоем і заняпадам брэжнеўскай эпохі найбольш выразна выявілася ў яго рашучых пратэстах у абарону беларускай мовы, гісторыі Бацькаўшчыны, помнікаў прыроды і архітэктуры. Пісьменнік бычыў непарыўную сувязь паміж гэтымі, на першы погляд рознымі, праблемамі. Грамадская абыякавасць, адной з прычын якой з'яўляецца мэтанакіраванае фальшаванне гістарычнай памяці, прыводзіць да знікнення нацыянальнай самасвядомасці народа. Маніпуляцыя мінуўшчынай і прымусовае сціранне з памяці розных гістарычных падзей, невыгодных для пануючай

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ідэалогіі, знішчае нацыянальную ідэнтычнасць. Супраць гэтага і змагаўся сваёй творчасцю Уладзімір Караткевіч.

Ключавыя словы: Караткевіч, беларуская літаратура, нацыянальная самасвядомасць, гісторыя Беларусі

Research on identity has expanded its scope in the last few years, covering still newer areas of human sciences in their broad sense. In the modern world, identity is one of the main determinants of the existence of nations and social groups. However, far-fetched research on identity develops increasingly often in the direction that seems to be immensely distant from and, to have little in common with one another, at first glance. Today the topics of discussion often go beyond the scope of mere individual, social, communal, or national identity. Researchers are increasingly interested in issues of regional, ethnic, religious or Internet identity, with the latter being a sort of novelty in the field of research on the concept of self-awareness and self-identification.

However, despite such a broad scope of research on identity, the problem of national identity remains one of the most significant topics of political discourses in many states of contemporary Europe, both those 'unaradawiające się'[1] and those, 'unarodowione'[2] a long time ago. The determination of one's own identity is not a problem for nations who developed their collective historical memory a long time ago and have built their statehood within specific borders for centuries. The problem of national identity is much more significant for a group of 'young nations', such as Slovaks or Belarusians, who gained their statehood only in the 20th century and, with for better or for worse, still look for their historical identity and try to fill in the blank cards of the chronicle of their collective memory.

Among those 'young nations', Belarus occupies a special place. Both in the 19th and 20th century, the process of the formation of Belarusian national identity progressed very slowly, being interrupted by unfavourable political circumstances for long periods. We can mention many problems that prevented the full development of the Belarusian national idea, but their analysis goes beyond the scope of this paper. They have often been widely covered in a number of theses, dissertations, and journalistic texts. In Poland, Ryszard Radzik devoted much space to this topic in his monograph *Kim są Białorusini* (Who Belarusians Are]. He writes:

> Narodowym problemem Białorusinów było zawsze niedostateczne wykształcenie tożsamości kulturowej, brak wyróżników pozwalających na wyraźne odróżnienie ich od dwóch głównych słowiańskich sąsiadów, to znaczy Rosjan i Polaków, antagonizujących – jak to

[1] 'in the process of nationalisation'.

[2] 'nationalised'.

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> było w ogromnej większości przypadków innych procesów narodowych w Europie – ich stosunki z nimi[3] (Radzik, 2004, p. 28).

Analysing thoroughly the lack of a well-developed sense of national distinctness among Belarusians, the Polish sociologist concludes:

> Państwo radzieckie stworzyło społeczeństwo białoruskie w jego dzisiejszym kształcie. Nie sformowało narodu białoruskiego ani naród nie zbudował państwa (gdyż społeczeństwo w swej podstawowej masie nigdy nie zostało unarodowione). Państwo to [Białoruś] nie jest wynikiem realizacji narodowego celu-mitu, ideału walk narodowowyzwoleńczych, nagromadzenia się społecznej emocji. Świadomość historyczna jego mieszkańców rzadko wykracza poza okres radziecki […]. Brak też wciąż poczucia, że państwo (władza) to „my", także tradycji aktywności samorządowej i wyrastającego stąd autorytetu władz lokalnych. Republika Białoruska daleko bardziej jest traktowana przez swych obywateli w kategoriach roszczeniowo-socjalnych niż narodowych[4] (Radzik, 2004, p. 70).

R. Radzik reaches even more interesting conclusions in his work *Białorusini. Między Wschodem a Zachodem* (Belarusians. Between the East and the West) published in 2012. We can read there that:

> Białoruś odbierana jest często na Zachodzie jako przedłużenie Rosji, tak też na ogół widzą to Rosjanie, a nawet część Białorusinów. Nasz wschodni sąsiad nie jest – jak chcieliby niektórzy – pomostem łączącym Europę z Rosją […] (Białorusini są) bardziej zbiorem niż grupą, gdyż ich zdecydowana większość nie była na poziomie ludu świadoma nawet zasięgu geograficznego własnej zbiorowości, nie mówiąc już o jego przeszłości historycznej[5] (Radzik, 2012, pp. 7–8).

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[3] 'The national problem of Belarusians has always been the insufficient formation of cultural identity – the lack of characteristics distinguishing them clearly from their two main Slavic neighbours, i.e., Russians and Poles, who – as in a huge majority of cases of other national processes in Europe – antagonised their relations with them'.

[4] 'The Soviet state formed the Belarusian society in its current shape. It did not form the Belarusian nation, nor did the nation build a state (the society in its basic mass has never been nationalised). This state [Belarus] is not the result of the pursuit of the national goal-myth, the ideal of fights for national independence, the accumulation of social emotion. The historical awareness of its inhabitants rarely goes beyond the Soviet period ... Moreover, there is no feeling that the state (authority) is 'us' and there is no tradition of self-government activity and the resulting power of local authorities. The Belarusian Republic is clearly treated by its citizens in terms of social claims rather than national identity'.

[5] 'In the West, Belarus is often perceived as an extension of Russia; Russians, and even a part of Belarusians, have the same viewpoint. Our Eastern neighbours are not, as some might wish, a platform connecting Europe and Russia ... (Belarusians are) a collection rather than a group, because, at the level of ordinary people, a large majority of them are not even aware of the geographical reach of their community, not to mention its historical past'.

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Similar conclusions are also drawn by Anna Engelking in her extensive monograph *Kołchoźnicy. Antropologiczne studium tożsamości wsi białoruskiej przełomu XX i XXI wieku* (Kolkhozniks. An Anthropological Study of the Identity of the Belarusian Village at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries). According to her, the primary reason for the lack of a cohesive Belarusian national identity is the inability of the inhabitants of Belarus to realise the problem of 'who they are'.

Many external observers perceive Belarus as a state still full of contradictions that eludes clear-cut evaluations and the black-and-white scheme of the description of itself and its inhabitants.

Polemics, discussions, and debates on the self-awareness of contemporary Belarusians are very frequent and sometimes controversial nowadays. An interesting voice in the discussion is a book published in Warsaw in 2006, entitled: *Геапалітычнае месца Беларусі ў Эўропе і сьвеце* (Geopolitical Position of Belarus in Europe and the World). In the chapter *Ці ёсць у Беларусі беларусы? Пытаньне беларускай ідэнтычнасьці* (Are There Any Belarusians in Belarus? The Issue of Belarusian Identity), we can find articles by many well-known Belarusian philologists, who try to answer the above-mentioned question.

In his extensive text, Rygor Jofe proves that Belarus is an independent state today, but the Belarusian nation is still not fully nationalised yet and, therefore, the self-identification of Belarusians remains an open question. In the same chapter, Aleh Latyshonak reflects on the cultural and mental closeness of Belarusians and Russians, asking an important question: can a sense of certain community with Russians be an obstacle in the formation of Belarusians' own national identity? In his text devoted to Belarusian self-identification in the same volume, the American historian David Marples writes about a sort of 'fading' of Belarusian national identity. He puts down this problem to the lack of the need to cultivate one's historical memory in the Belarusian nation and the decreasing number of Belarusians with a command of Belarusian. The scholar draws our attention also to the closeness of the Belarusian and Russian nations, their historical relationships, and interdependencies. It is in this closeness that he sees the reason for the lack of distinct will among Belarusians to form their own separate Belarusian identity.

Particularly in the last decade, the problem of Belarusians' Belarusianness has often been discussed and authors of many publications still try to answer the basic question: What does national identity mean to Belarusians today? The importance of the problem manifests itself in the number of press articles and thematic publications describing the issue of self-identification among inhabitants of Belarus. Two most recent works on this subject deserve particular attention. One of them, entitled *Беларусы. От «тутэйших» к нации* (Belarusians. From the 'Locals' to the Nation), was published in Minsk at the beginning of 2010. Its author is Yulya Chernyavskaya – a culturologist living in Minsk, who thoroughly deals with the history of the nationalisation of the Belarusian society in her extensive study. In the context of the problem concerned, it is particularly worth mentioning the final part of the work,

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entitled *Белорус «на ростанях» (Особенности белорусской самоидентификации)* (Belarusian 'at the Crossroads' (Distinctive Features of Belarusian Identity)). One of the more recent works regarding the national identity of Belarusians is a book by Nelly Bekus published in Budapest at the beginning of April 2010, meaningfully entitled *Struggle over Identity*. The volume is a very extensive description of the issue of Belarusian national self-identification from a historical, political, and cultural perspective. The title, Struggle over Identity, is a pretext for answering the question of what prevents the elaboration of collective Belarusian identity.

The debate on the historical memory of Belarusians and their sense of national distinctness and, consequently, identity (or the lack of this sense) has been held in various magazines, periodicals, and web portals for the last few years. It involves opponents with various views, both from circles closely associated with the state authorities and from circles explicitly opposed to them. Fervent discussions on the condition of the current patriotism of Belarusians and on a collective Belarusian identity were conducted mainly in such magazines as *ARCHE*, *Фрагмэнты* or *Наша Ніва* and on a number of websites: (www.n-europe.eu, www.kamunikat.org, www.arche.bymedia.net, www.nn.by, www.nmnby.eu, www.svaboda.org). Authors of strictly scientific texts, opinions, views, journalistic articles and discussions published in the aforementioned periodicals and websites, including Igar Babkoŭ, Paval Usaŭ, Uladzimir Furs, Piotr Radkoŭski, Andrei Yekadumov and others, express varied opinions, but all of them believe to a larger or smaller extent that the formation of Belarusians' national identity is still an ongoing process that cannot be unequivocally evaluated or summarised with clear-cut conclusions. Scientists and journalists taking part in this broad discussion, ascertaining facts and trying to refer them to various historical and contemporary ideas of the development of Belarusians' self-awareness (the Resurrection idea, the Moscow-Liberal idea, the Creole idea, the Post-colonial idea, the theory of 'tutejszość'[6], or the theory of 'słabość'[7]) share one belief: It is necessary to keep on searching for opportunities to reinforce a sense of national distinctness in Belarusians, instilling in them the respect for their history, helping them develop their Belarusian historical memory, disseminatinge Belarusian culture and respecting their native language.

The demands expressed in most opinions of the Belarusian intellectual elite are not new. Similar demands have their history spanning more than a century and can be found in many works – not only in sociological, political or culturological texts but also in Belarusian fiction, including both classic authors (Maxim Bahdanovič, Yanka Kupala) and subsequent writers, the most outstanding one in this respect being the 20th century poet and writer Uladzimir Karatkievič.

Outstanding Belarusian authors have always understood that literature is one of the best methods of developing national identity, a primer for native language and

[6] 'Localness'.
[7] 'Weakness'.

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a handbook of national history. Thus, Belarusian fiction has often become more than a handbook on grammar and spelling – it has been a handbook on geography and history, a treasury of knowledge about folklore, ceremonies and forgotten events, and a primer of patriotism.

Karatkievič tried to understand the place of his nation among others and, like his great predecessors (F. Skaryna, K. Kalinoŭski, Y. Kupala, M. Bahdanovič), tried to revive among his compatriots the sense of one's own national identity that many of them had lost for many reasons.

An interesting opinion on that subject was given by the Belarusian artist Arlen Kaškurevič. Recollecting the impact that Karatkievič's output had on him, he says that in these works:

> […] я убачыў іншую Беларусь. Мы, аказваецца, не толькі ў лапцях ходзілі, а ў нас былі і адукаваныя арыстакратычныя роды, і дзівосныя замкі, і княскія паляванні. А як прыгожа гучала беларуская мова, на якую мы па маладосці гадоў не звярталі ніякай увагі. Я пасля Валодзю гаварыў, што, дзякуючы яму, прачнулася мая нацыянальная свядомасць, цікавасць да сваіх карнёў і я як мастак пачаў працаваць над беларускай тэмай[8] (Kaškurèvič, 2005, p. 462).

All multidimensional artistic activities of the writer were devoted solely to one primary goal – he wanted to prove to Belarusians at all costs that they are the same nation like all others, they have the same rights and should be proud of their historical past. In each of his works, Karatkievič proved that Belarusians had a rich, centuries-old and very interesting history and should not put up with being brought down merely to the level of serfs. In other words, Karatkievič's poetry and prose was aimed at stimulating the national and historical self-awareness of Belarusians; the author tried to show them the sources of their own national identity, thereby forcing them to exercise their rights, which was implemented partly and to a slight extent after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of the independent Belarusian state.

Karatkievič was ahead of his time. The writer always tried to look far ahead to the future with new ideas and opportunities, which he regarded as both attractive and very frightening. As an expert in the history of Eastern Europe, he knew that the path chosen by him would not be easy, and the topics of his writing would gain him many friends but enemies as well. In the Soviet Union, it was not easy to disseminate the ideas of the resurrection of the Belarusian nation and describe historical facts that official literature often erased from the memory of its recipients. The official Soviet ideology

[8] '[…] I saw quite different Belarus. It turns out that we did not only walk in bast shoes, but we also had educated aristocratic families, and amazing castles, and princely hunts. And how beautiful the Belarusian language sounded, which we did not pay any attention to in our youth. I later told Valodzya that, thanks to him, my national consciousness and interest in my roots had awakened and I, as an artist, began to work on the Belarusian theme'.

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was reluctant to acknowledge the historical truth about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and fights against the invader during national uprisings, among which Karatkievič's works laid the main emphasis on the January Uprising of 1863. As we know very well, the new post-war 'national' Soviet-Belarusian historiography marginalised or simply erased the memory of the times when Belarusians fought for independence. For decades, efforts were made to instil – not only in Belarusians – an official myth of the unity and brotherhood of the citizens of the USSR, with which all nations forming a part of the Soviet state were supposed to identify.

Although the writer realised how difficult it would be to put his own ideas into practice, he never gave up and, in spite of the severe punishment that he often had to serve for his disobedience, never betrayed his ideals as a Belarusian patriot.

Karatkievič's works are characterised by attempts to find inseparable bonds between the past and the present, which manifests itself in the profound understanding of historical processes and the creation of an artistic-historical chronicle of the life and fate of Belarusians on that basis. In his artistic searches, the writer reconstructed the past of his nation. Starting from legendary and folkloristic materials and expanding these with successive historical facts, he tried to present specific events that often became objects of literary analysis for the first time. The history of Belarus had never been described so vividly and vigorously until then. The earlier historical works of other authors were not able to formulate the cause-effect continuity that would help us understand the intricate meanders of the past. It is certain that only Karatkievič's works created the foundations of Belarusian historical literature, at the same time contributing to the formation of a new philosophy of understanding one's own history. Karatkievič understood history as a continuous linear process that allows us to integrate the past and the future and attributes the proper role and place to each of us in this process.

However, the Belarusianness of Karatkevič's literary output is visible not only due to the patriotism and great love for his homeland, for his beloved Polesie, for his familiar Dnieper. Their images appear in many of the writer's poems and prose works, among which we must particularly mention *Зямля пад белымі крыламі* (The Earth under the White Wings) (1966) – a collection of short stories being a sort of literary encyclopaedia of history and nature.

Although this book is addressed to children, it is one of the most beautiful literary monuments to Belarus. In texts from this volume, Karatkievič seems to continue and expand the topic that had been undertaken by Adam Kirkor as early as the 1880s and became the underlying idea of Yakub Kolas's poem *Мой родны кут* (My Native Home) (1923). In one of his essays, Anatol Verabej writes about *Зямля пад белымі крыламі*:

> Пісьменнік ахоплівае ў кнізе беларускую гісторыю ад самых старажытных часоў і да 70-х гадоў XX стагоддзя. Ён разважае пра прыроду свайго краю і нацыянальны характар беларуса, успамінае гістарычныя падзеі і факты, піша пра славутых грамадскіх культурных дзеячаў, пра гарады, пра помнікі гісторыі і культуры беларускага народа.

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> У гэтай кнізе няма голай рэгістрацыі лічбаў і фактаў. У ёй ёсць раскрыццё душы народа, які прайшоў праз усе выпрабаванні і цяжкасці і які жыве багатым паўнакроўным жыццём - радуецца, смяецца, смуткуе, перажывае...[9] (Verabej, 1997, p. 323).

The history of Belarus and the fate of the Belarusian nation were always top priorities for Karatkievič and, therefore, became the main topic of his works. The excellent knowledge of the history of his homeland, the skill of comprehending the spirit and character of historical events and a gift for their literary processing allowed the author to present a vivid picture of the life, customs, beliefs and feelings of persons living a few centuries ago. The figures of protagonists created by him are restless individuals: insurgents, peasants and prophets, intellectuals, noblemen and lords, cardinals, and beautiful women. All of them, both fictitious and authentic historical figures (Lew Sapieha, Queen Bona, Konstanty Kalinoŭski, Prince Radziwiłł or General Muravyov) were depicted very vividly by the writer. The fates of the protagonists in Karatkievič's works were connected by the writer inseparably with authentic historical events and the latter shape their moral attitudes and actions. In each work, behind the protagonists' images, we can see a specific historical epoch, the complex and very frequently tragic fate of White Rus', and attempts to revive the state and to gain desired freedom. Showing historical events and the spirit of past epochs in his works and returning to them frequently in various texts, the writer formulated his viewpoint on the historical process that can be understood as one of the main ideas of his literary output.

The writer realised that the unity of the Soviet nation imposed from above erased individual historical experiences from the memory of its members and nipped all attempts to show one's distinctness in the bud. For many reasons (historical and social ones), the unification of the Belarusian nation progressed very quickly. The pro-Russian attitude of a majority of the Belarusian society led to the quick and trouble-free rejection of its individuality and national character. It soon turned out that social historical memory could be easily wiped away. This materialised very efficiently in the case of Belarusians, who were told that the roots of their awareness dated back only to 1917. After all, revolutions often changed systems of dating, names of months, national symbols, beliefs, knowledge, traditions, and history, usually leading to a change of the entire cultural system. Revolutions wipe whole areas away from the memory of nations in order to implant new elements in their place. The state-controlled process of forgetting about the particularly interesting history of the Belarusian nation took place quickly and without major obstacles after the socialist revolution.

[9] 'In the book the writer covers the history of Belarus from the most ancient times to the 70s of the 20th century. He reflects on the nature of his land and the national character of Belarusians, recalls historical events and facts, writes about famous public and cultural figures, cities, historical and cultural monuments of the Belarusian people. There is no simple registration of numbers and facts in this book. It reveals the soul of people who have passed through all the trials and hardships and who live a rich intense life - rejoice, laugh, grieve, experience...'

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By displacing the true national history of Belarusians from social memory, the Soviet state propaganda obliterated the difference between truth and lies, between objective information and evaluation imposed from above. This propaganda was a way of manipulating and imposing the only right idea upon the individual and society and tried to nip every attempt to oppose this idea in the bud. The essence of propaganda is expressed by the famous opinion of the Minister of Education of the Third Reich Joseph Goebbels: 'Kłamstwo powtarzane tysiąc razy staje się prawdą'[10].

The literary restoration of memory undertaken by the Belarusian writer was difficult in a society that A. Engelking calls 'a society of kolkhozniks' in his aforementioned extensive work and that usually reduced its own self-awareness to 'tutejszość'[11]. A large part of the Belarusian society understood localness as being 'stąd'[12], 'z tej ziemi'[13] without determining themselves as part of a nation.

Karatkievič set a relatively different task for himself, but it quickly proved remarkably interesting both for the writer and the reader. Uncovering interesting chapters of Belarusian history for his compatriots, he restored its memory for them, showed its successive stages, described events and customs and presented the beauty of the Belarusian landscape and the history of his nation.

The writer's approach to historical events connected with the history of Belarus was innovative not only with regard to the manner of literary description but mainly because there had been no similar works on historical topics in Belarusian literature. Karatkievič uncovered the history of the nation for Belarusians, showing the times and the people ignored not only by literature but also by official historiography, he roused the Belarusian collective national memory and tried to fill in the 'white spots' of the national past. This was not always easy. As we know from the writer's memoirs, he often had to grapple with censorship – for instance, when he was told to change the main protagonist of the novel *Каласы пад сярпом тваім* (The Ears of Rye under Thy Sickle). There were attempts to persuade Karatkievič into choosing one of the peasants, e.g., Kahut, as the main protagonist of his dylogy. As the main character of the novel, the nobleman and intellectual Ales Zahorski did not fit into the prevailing party doctrine. There were also problems with the drama *Званы Віцебска* (The Bells of Vitebsk) (1977). In both cases, the writer managed to make small amendments that actually did not change anything, but they gained acceptance from the censors.

Karatkievič's struggle with the stagnation or even backwardness of the Brezhnev era clearly manifested itself in his protest and fight for respect for the Belarusian language, the history of his homeland and the protection of nature and monuments of an immaterial culture. The writer saw the inseparable unity between those apparently different problems. He would often say that when the human being discards patriotism,

[10] 'A lie repeated a thousand times becomes the truth'.
[11] 'localness'.
[12] 'from here'.
[13] 'from this land'

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he turns into a machine that does not care about what is dying: culture, language, the memory of history or the fatherland, to which he does not feel attached.

Karatkievič's poetry and prose differed from accepted standards and official 'partyjne'[14] recommendations. For this reason, contemporary critics said that the author focused on insignificant problems that did not deserve serious treatment. Uncovering the black cards of the history of Belarus, the presentation of touchy and ideologically incorrect subjects or showing the true history of the nation did not meet with broad literary and social support. The problems of the Belarusian language, the history of old Belarus, or Belarusians' identity problems were carefully hushed and generally inconvenient in those times. A writer who stepped out of line to oppose the commonly accepted rules and the prevailing doctrine had to reckon with being attacked.

By recalling the history of his nation in his literary works, Karatkievič wanted to oppose the social oblivion process and the officially imposed standards of presenting the history of Belarus. Paradoxically, as Marcin Kula rightly notices in his work, an attempt to remove the memory may reinforce it (Kula, 2004, p. 125). An example of this was – and, to a certain extent, still is – Belarus, with false memory (or often official oblivion) prevailing in some areas on the one hand, and unofficial memory being carefully maintained and passed down in certain social groups on the other hand.

Caused by such factors as the deliberate distortion of historical memory, social oblivion leads to the denationalisation and blurring of national self-awareness. Manipulating the past and enforcing the oblivion of various inconvenient historical events destroys the identity of societies. This is what Uladzimir Karatkievič wanted to oppose and did oppose with his works.

Breaking through to the consciousness of people, particularly the young ones, with historical literature and poetry with deeply patriotic and lyrical overtones has always been a very demanding task. Today, in the age of the Internet and rapid social changes, it is a particularly difficult challenge, but we must believe that, as it has been known for years, good and valuable literature can successfully stand up for itself. Uladzimir Karatkievič's works have been an example of such literature. This can be demonstrated by the fact that the volumes of the latest and fullest anthology of the Belarusian prophet writer (consisting of 25 books) being published successively since 2012 have disappeared from the shelves of bookshops at an express pace, and some of them are actually sold out.

Translated into English by Lingua Lab s.c.

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[14] 'party'.

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Article submission date: 14 October 2019