

ANTI-SEMITISM AS AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF SOVIET BELARUSIAN  
NATIONALISM AND PAN-EASTERN SLAVISM.

By Taras Kuzio

When Western scholars and journalists have written about post-Soviet developments, they have tended to present them in two ways. Firstly, they have used Soviet-era and Russian views of "nationalism" where this notion is only associated with non-Russians and is of an exclusive, ethnic variety. Secondly, Russian and Soviet nationalism in the non-Russian republics is ignored. The only "nationalism" written about in Ukraine and Belarus is therefore that of the "nationalist Rukh," "nationalist West Ukrainians," and the "nationalist Belarusian Popular Front."

This type of analysis provides a narrow, incorrect, and lopsided view of post-Soviet developments in republics such as Belarus (and Ukraine). Nationalism appears in a variety of guises and can be sometimes "good" and often "bad." In the case of Belarus and Ukraine, this standard framework defines only a pro-Western orientation as "nationalist." In itself, this is dubious as extreme-right nationalists and fascists in Western and Central Europe are anti-EU and anti-American, and by default therefore anti-NATO. Such hostility to the U.S., EU, and NATO is only found among Alyaksandr Lukashenka's supporters and his nationalist-communist allies in Russia.

Belarus is a good case study of why this definition of nationalism should be broadened to include other types. Lukashenka was elected president in July 1994 and re-elected in a dubious election in September 2001. His regime is described as "the last dictatorship in Europe" and has developed an ideology that is a curious combination of Soviet Belarusian territorial nationalism, Soviet internationalism, and pan-Eastern Slavism. Lukashenka's ally inside Belarus is the state-favored Russian Orthodox Church which has a long tradition of anti-Semitism and pan-Eastern Slavism. Lukashenka's ideology rejects Belarusian language and culture (as did pan-Slavists and Soviet internationalists) and has no place for Belarusian indigenous Orthodox and Catholic churches. Lukashenka's ideology is propagated by the state through television, education, and organized political activities -- just as in the USSR.

All three of the currents within Lukashenka's ideology are "nationalist" even though there is tension between them. For example, pan-Eastern Slavism has its origins in the pre-Soviet era and would agree to Russia's proposals for Belarus to join Russia

as provinces. Lukashenka has always rejected such an idea as "unacceptable to Belarus" and his rhetoric in defense of his country's sovereignty sometimes sounds as strong as that of his "nationalist" opponents. The main difference between them is that Lukashenka is pro-Russian, anti-Western, and anti-Polish, while national democrats are the exact opposite.

Where Lukashenka differs from his "nationalist" opponents is in his anti-Semitism. National democrats in Belarus (and Ukraine) have no record of anti-Semitism and indeed Ukrainian and Jewish prisoners of conscience were close allies in the Soviet Gulag. In contrast, Lukashenka's anti-Semitism draws on a deep legacy found in all three variants of his ruling ideology. Pan-Eastern Slavism has a long record of anti-Semitism, which at its extreme created the infamous "Black Hundred" pogromists. In the former USSR, "anti-Zionism" was merely camouflage for anti-Semitism. Soviet Belarus was a leading incubator of "anti-Zionist" propaganda.

Not surprisingly, anti-Semitism flourishes under the Lukashenka regime. Belarusian Popular Front leader Vintsuk Vyachorka complained: "The Lukashenka regime has revived the institution of state ideology, which is a mixture of communism, xenophobia, and pan-Slavic chauvinism. The practice of anti-Semitism has been restored in Belarus; the branches of the Russian National Unity (RNO), which were expelled from Russia, feel themselves at ease under the patronage of the regime." Cooperation between the fascist RNO and pro-Lukashenka political groups reflects the kind of company the Belarusian leader likes to keep.

In 2000 the World Association of Belarusian Jewry and the Belarusian Human Rights Center Vyasna appealed to the Israeli government to refuse to have any dealings with Lukashenka, whom they accused of being anti-Semitic. They alleged that Lukashenka had refused to set up Jewish schools, or help maintain Jewish cemeteries and monuments and create memorials to victims of the Nazi Holocaust. In July demonstrators in Minsk demanded the reconstruction of a synagogue -- built in 1879, closed in the 1930s, and then reopened in the 1990s -- that was destroyed last year. Yakov Gutman, head of the World Association of Belarusian Jewry, compared its destruction to that of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan also last year.

This anti-Semitism in Belarus is very different to neighboring Ukraine, where synagogues and cemeteries have been widely rebuilt, including in Kyiv and at the birthplace of the founder of the Hassidic movement in Uman. A monument to the Babyn Yar massacre of mainly Jews in Kyiv was opened by President Leonid Kravchuk in 1992. Not surprisingly, Lukashenka has rejected charges made this month by the Union of Jewish Public Organizations and Communities that "anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi actions have acquired a massive scale in Belarus" after vandals desecrated Jewish graves at two cemeteries in Minsk.

The long tradition of anti-Semitism in the Russian Orthodox Church sits snugly alongside Lukashenka's ideology. The new law on religion adopted in June gives the Russian Orthodox Church the status of the state church in Belarus, a move which has been condemned by Belarusian Uniates and Autocephalous Orthodox as well as Protestant churches as discriminatory. In 2000 the leader of the

Jewish community in Belarus sued the Minsk publishing house Orthodox Initiative "for fomenting ethnic hatred" after it had published "The War According to the Laws of Meanness" which collected together anti-Semitic articles from the Tsarist (including the infamous "Protocols of the Elders of Zion") and Soviet Belarusian media.

The introduction to this book calls upon Belarusians to reject both the West and the "Jew-Masons who have occupied Russia." Again, this is a favorite theme of Lukashenka who (like Russian nationalists and communists) remains convinced that Russian reforms have lost Russia its sovereignty. As early as 1997, Lukashenka offered Russia advice that it "should make an effort to employ our model of reform as soon as possible. We are showing Russia how an economy should be reformed, with a view to Russia's mistakes." In June 2002, Lukashenka admitted that he was in favor of Belarus going to Europe. But he refused to pay the same "price" that Russia had paid in this endeavor.

A Minsk district court rejected the libel suit filed by Jewish organizations against the publisher of the Orthodox Initiative book. "There is nothing surprising in this court's decision given the fact that the [Belarusian] president has publicly eulogized Hitler," Gutman said. Soviet and pan-Eastern Slavic nationalism and its close ally, anti-Semitism, officially flourish in Lukashenka's Belarus.

Dr. Taras Kuzio is a resident fellow of CREES, University of Toronto.