
Kurapaty is the name of a place in the outskirts of Minsk (capital of Belarus) where NKVD officers killed, between 1937 and 1941, several thousand of Belarusian and other civilians.

The burials in Kurapaty were discovered in 1988 and made public. A government commission leaded by Nina Mazai, Deputy Chairperson of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR (Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic), was created and a criminal investigation was launched by the Public Prosecutor’s Office of the BSSR. Archeological excavations were carried out during several days (July 6-15). The conclusions were published in January 1989: they indicated that the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) officers killed no less than 30,000 civilians from 1937 until summer 1941. They also indicated that no documents and materials were found in the archives of Ministry of Justice, KGB, Ministry of Interior Affairs and the Prosecutor’s Office in BSSR. In 1994, a so-called civil commission of investigation on mass crimes in Kurapaty asked the Presidential administration to carry out a new investigation. According to this commission, the perpetrators were German officers and the victims were mostly European Jews. Other excavations were carried out in October 1997 and in May 1998 under the control of the Military Prosecutor’s Office: the results of these excavations were partly published and, mostly confirmed the first ones. But the interpretation of the Kurapaty mass killings is still debatable in the country.

A. Context

The mass killings in Kurapaty are part of the large-scale repression conducted under the Stalinist regime during the 1930’s. The repression against the Soviet Belarusian people began at the end of the 1920’s. The withdrawal of German troops from Belarus at the end of 1918 was followed by the Russo-Polish military conflict (1919-1920). This conflict resulted in the partition of Belarus into the Belarusian SSR within the Soviet Union (since 1922) and West Belarus that was placed under Polish rule, according to the Treaty of Riga.

Under the Soviet regime, some Belarusian national leaders attempted to revive the national culture and economy but they were interrupted at the end of 1929. They were charged with organizing a Belarusian national democratic movement and conducting counter-revolutionary sabotage aimed at the withdrawal of Belarus from the Soviet Union. On the basis of these accusations, a part of the Belarusian intelligentsia was liquidated. While in 1930 the victims had been mainly members of the older generation, whose ideology had been formed during the pre-revolutionary years, in 1933 repression was directed mainly against Belarusians who were graduates of Soviet educational institutes (Kabysh, 1958: 78, 80-81).

In the early 1930s, Soviet Communist party and OGPU officials directed campaigns of mass repression against what were considered hostile social classes, especially small-holding rural inhabitants. During collectivization and de-kulakisation, mass repression was employed as part of a class war to establish Soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat. After 1934, officials justified repression in defense of the state. With class no longer a primary criterion, the repression encompassed an increasingly broad range of social and the ethnic groups (Shearer, 2003: 113).

The process of mass repression was set in motion by the December 1934 assassination of Sergei Kirov, Leningrad Communist Party chief. Even if Stalin’s precise role is still not known in this assassination, he used Kirov’s murder to attack various opponents of the regime. Beginning in the summer of 1936, and more conclusively during the spring of 1937, Stalin extended these repressive measures to eliminate any real or potential opposition to his rule. By 1937, the lethal triumvirate of political opposition, social disorder and ethnic subversion had raised fear among the Stalinist elite of a broadly based anti-Soviet « fifth column » linked to foreign agents and spies (Khlevniuk, 1998).
response, on July 31, 1937, Stalin and his co-leaders sanctioned the NKVD Order no. 00447 which specified by region the number of people to be sentenced either to death or eight to ten years in the Gulag camps (McDermott, 2005: 1065). The kulaks and other anti-Soviet elements were classified into two categories: the first category of repressed was subject to death by shooting; the second category was subject to labor camps (Werth, 2006: 18). The order set upper quotas per territory and category. For example Belarusian SSR was estimated to have 2.000 (1st cat.) + 10.000 (2nd cat.) = 12.000 anti-Soviet elements. It was specifically stressed that quotas were estimates and could not be exceeded without personal approval of Yezhov, head of the All-Soviet Union NKVD in 1936-1938. But in practice this approval was easy to obtain, and eventually these initial quotas were exceeded by orders of magnitude.

The fact that Belarus had a common frontier with the Western world led to further expansion of the arbitrary actions of NKVD frontier troops and of special detachments of the huge garrisons in Belarus. Thousands were murdered on charges of espionage for Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Germany (Kabysh, 1958: 81). In fact, in the summer of 1937, the NKVD launched national sweeps of specific ethnic categories. The so-called Polish Operation, ratified by the Politburo on August 7, 1937 and known under the Order no. 00485 was the most important one: it resulted in the arrest of approximately 140.000 people in the entire Soviet Union, a staggering 111.000 of whom were executed (McDermott, 2005: 1065). These mass operations, which also concerned Germans, Finns, Balts and numerous others, were directed against those perceived to be real or potential spies and agents of foreign anti-Soviet intelligence agencies. According to the data collected by Petrov and Roginskii, 17.772 people were shot in Belarusian SSR under this operation (Petrov, Roginskii, 2003: 168). These authors also consider that it would be wrong to equate Poles with the « Polish » operation since other national groups were killed. In the period of September to November 1938, the biggest group concerned by the arrests was that of the Poles (21.258) but other groups were also repressed such as the Belarusians (5.716 people) a large part of whom were shot (Petrov, Roginskii, 2003: 170).

Although national operations developed in 1938, the « anti-kulak » operation under the Order no. 00447 was being run down in the USSR except for the western and southern border areas in which there was an intensification of the killings. In late June 1938, A.A. Andreev, Secretary of the Central Committee of the PCUS, reported to Stalin that the border areas of the Belarusian SSR still contained from 8 to 10 percent non-collectivized farmers and that families of arrested Poles had links across the frontier or acted on the orders of Polish intelligence (McLoughlin, 2003: 128). For the BSSR, a quota of 18.500 sentences was approved on July 17, 1938 (McLoughlin, 2003: 132).

Although mass arrests and executions abated after November 1938, repression continued in the USSR throughout World War II, and up to Stalin's death. On September 17, 1939, two-and-a-half weeks after Germany attacked Poland and occupied a considerable part of its territory, West Belarus found itself annexed to the Soviet Union as a result of the secret protocol signed in August 1939 between Berlin and Moscow. The installation of the Soviet regime in West Belarus was accompanied by deportations and executions.

**B. Instigators and perpetrators**

According to various scholars, Stalin was the prime instigator of the Terror as he provided direct input in the decision making process of the mass repression. The Peoples’ Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), predecessor to the Committee for State Security (KGB), was in charge of the so-called operations of mass repression. In 1934, the OGPU (Unified State Political Directorate) was transformed into the GUGB (Chief Directorate of State Security), which was subordinated into the new All-Union NKVD; this marked the beginning of the Soviet state security’s most powerful and autocratic period. All key aspects of internal and state security were now subordinated into one body under one leader – at first G.G. Yagoda, then, from September 27, 1936, N.I. Yezhov, and finally, from November 25, 1938, Lavrentii Beria.

In Belarus, B. D. Berman was the People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs from March 1937 to May 1938. His leadership corresponded to the most repressive period in Belarus. According to archive materials, during a NKVD meeting in January 1938, B.D. Berman mentioned the number of 60.000
people repressed in Belarus (Internet site of the Belarusian KGB). In the framework of the elites' purge process, Berman was arrested in September 1938 and sentenced to death in February 1939. A.A. Nasedkin succeeded Berman at the head of the Belarusian NKVD but was also victim of the purge as he was arrested in December 1938 and executed in January 1940. Afterwards, L.F. Canava leaded the Belarusian NKVD until 1941 when he became in charge of the so-called Western Front. In 1943, he was appointed commissar of the Belarusian State security.

Mass operations were the internal cipher used by the GUGB units of the NKVD to denote major and ubiquitous offensives against certain groups in society. The requisite operational orders, prefixed by double naught to denote « top secret », were issued between July 1937 and November 1938. The victims were convicted in absentia and in camera by extra-judicial organs – the troiki sentenced indigenous « enemies » (Operation no. 00447), the two-man dvoki (NKVD Commissar Yezhov and Main State Prosecutor Vyshinskii, or their deputies) those arrested along « national » lines. This strict division of labor in implementing state terror was also adhered at the highest echelons of power (McLoughlin, 2003: 119).

Operation no. 00447 was a joint Party-NKVD undertaking that « came from below » to a certain extent and definitely went beyond the Stalin-Yezhov axis behind the planning of « foreigner » mass operations. In most cases, the Politburo accepted the repression totals and the troika composition (NKVD commander, state prosecutor, local Party secretary) suggested by the provincial centers (McLoughlin, 2003: 123-124). A characteristic of all mass operations was flexibility: first, the numbers – the so-called limit – to be convicted in the « anti-kulak » operation could be easily increased; second, it was left entirely to the GUGB officers whether the prisoner was to be shot or sent to the camps; third, the time-limits set for the completion of single operations were extended time and again; fourth, operations against foreigners were not subject to limit and the convicted were usually executed; finally, simplified investigation procedures were adopted to convict suspects (McLoughlin, 2003: 25).

From November to December 1937 the terror entered its most arbitrary phase. GUGB units, non subject to reaching arrest norms and a « casework minimum », sketched out their operational schedule by simply writing on pre-printed forms how many persons from each sociological group were to be seized and sentenced (MacLoughlin, 2003: 127).

Victims of mass operation were executed at night, either in prisons, in the cellars of GUGB headquarters or in a secluded area, usually a forest. At the nocturnal executions, NKVD officers using the standard Nagan pistol shot prisoners in the back of the head or neck, and, sometimes in the temple (McLoughlin, 2003: 131). According to the 1988 excavations in Kurapaty, the people in all burials were killed by being shot in the head (mostly in the back of the head, the occipital area) with Soviet Nagan-type revolvers: « the Commission has come to the conclusion that in 1937-1941 in the forest massif of Kurapaty, mass shootings of Soviet citizens were conducted by agencies of the NKVD ». According to the archives on rehabilitation process in the 1950s-1960s, the Commission estimated that more than 40 members of the NKVD were involved in the Kurapaty mass killings. The Commission provided names and biographies of former NKVD leaders but mentioned that most of them had been purged in 1937-1939 with several receiving death sentences (Sovietskaïa Belorussia, January 22, 1989).

C. Victims

According to the 1988 excavations, the experts concluded that all the victims were civilian, that they had been prepared for a long journey and that they had left their homes not long before their death. Experts assumed that these people were shot without trial and they had not undergone prolonged imprisonment. In several burials, the victims were from different walks of life and came from various regions of Belarus (possibly, some were from the Baltic lands). Judging from the footwear, the remains of clothing, and the personal effects, the majority of those buried belonged to the lower social strata (workers, peasants, minor officials, rural intelligentsia) (Kurapaty, 1994: 138-139). Most victims were males, aged 20-60 and among them the majority were found to be age 40-49 (Marple, 1994: 515). They were also women among the victims.
Among the 7 excavations the experts made, one grave was of persons from the Western regions of the USSR. Possibly these were representatives of the intelligentsia from Western Belarus or the Baltic States. The following testifies to this: foreign brand marks on footwear and other items (including Polish ones), the large number of pairs of spectacles, pencils, Catholic Medallions with the image of the Madonna, high-quality factory-made footwear, a relatively high number of metal dental crowns, dental prostheses, leather clothing, etc. (Kurapaty, 1994: 128).

The investigatory commission established that there were 510 « assumed burial places » in an area of about 30 hectares. Bones extracted from the graves visited by the commission belonged to « not less than 356 persons ». Since each grave was determined to contain the remains of 50-60 people, then at least 30.000 victims had been buried in the Kurapaty Forest, but it was not possible to establish a more precise figure (Sovetskaïa Belorussia, January 22, 1989). Zianon Pazniak, a Belarusian historian and political activist who revealed the Kurapaty mass killings to the public in 1988, gives figures that are much higher than this. In a summer 1989 interview, he remarked that approximately 250.000 people had been executed in the Kurapaty region (Marples, 1994: 516). After the 1997-1998 excavations, the Procurator General's Office revised downward the number of estimated victims to about 7.000 (Belapan, November 7, 1998).

D. Witnesses

The first round of testimonies from witnesses was collected by Zianon Pazniak and Evgenii Smigalov in the 1970s but as Pazniak said later « to go public, to tell everyone about this, was impossible » (Kurapaty, 1994: 81-82). In the context of the glasnost (a Russian word for “transparency”) initiated by Gorbachev in the mid-1980s in the USSR, these witnesses were made public in June 1988 when they reported for the first time the discovery of the burial site in the newspaper of the Union of Belarusian Writers named Litaratura i Mastactva. At the beginning of the 1970s, old people from a village called Zialony Lug, told them that, two kilometers to the north of the village, in the forest between the Ring Road and the Zaslavie Road from 1937 to 1941, every day and every night they used to shoot people who were brought there on trucks. On the hills there stood an old stand of conifers, surrounded by broadleaf trees and thickets. Some 10-15 hectares of the coniferous stand had been surrounded by a fence, more than 3 meters high, made of closely fitting, overlapping, wooden planks, with barbed wire on top. Outside the fence were guards and dogs. The people were brought there along a gravel road called « the road of death » (Kurapaty, 1994: 78-81).

In 1987-1988, Zianon Pazniak and Evgenii Smigalov questioned old people and witnesses. These witnesses stated that the executions had initially occurred three times per day (at dawn, at 2 p.m. and at dusk). Later, there were executions almost around the clock. The corpses had been hurled into deep holes dug beforehand and piled in perpendicular layers with some 25 centimeters of sand between the layers. Sometimes pine trees had been planted on the graves. A fence, more than three meters high and enclosing ten to fifteen hectares had appeared in the second half of 1937 (Kurapaty, 1994: 82). The road to the forts had eventually become flattened as a result of constant passage of cars (« black marias ») to the execution site. Not only had witnesses heard groaning after the shots, but one witness, M.V. Karpovich, who had been a soldier and who in several occasions saw the killings, pointed out that the victims had been shot from the side so that more than one person could be killed at a time. He told that the executioners wore NKVD uniforms. They fired their rifles from the side into the head of the end person so that bullet went through two people (Kurapaty, 1994: 83).

During the 1988 investigation, the commission heard testimony from 55 witnesses, which led them to deduce that the executions had taken place from 1937 until summer 1941. They acknowledged the existence of a fence in the forest from 1937-1938, but reported that the « Fascists » had cut down the forest and destroyed the fence. The commission apparently learned little about the identity of either victims, the perpetrators of the crimes or the motives for the executions (Marples, 1994: 516).

E. Memories
According to the testimonies, the 1937 executions had been known to and occasionally witnessed by the local population in the villages surrounding the burial site. If these executions existed in individuals’ memories, they did not concern public memories.

At the end of World War II, soldiers were sent during the night to exhume the bodies and, presumably, to take them away for disposal. Human remains were found in the area when the highway was built in 1957. The adjacent woods, called Kurapaty in reference to the name of the white flowers which cover them in spring, were a favorite spot for picnicking, taking walks and playing games of chess but had one notable feature: they are dotted with a number of depressions measuring anything from two meters by three to six meters by eight or more (Kurapaty, 1994: 88). These are the places where the ground has subsided over the decomposed bodies. Some graves may have disappeared as late as April 1988 when trenches were dug through the forest for the laying of a gas pipeline.

In June 1988, several weeks after the first excavations and several days after the existence of the mass graves was revealed to the public, Kurapaty became a site of memory.

Two demonstrations were organized in Minsk to commemorate victims of Stalinist repression. One event was sponsored by the city government and took place at the Opera Theater in the center of Minsk. The other was organized by the informal youth group Talaka at Kurapaty (Mihalisko, 1988b). Several thousand people were reported to have attended the commemoration. An improvised plaster monument to the dead of Kurapaty by an amateur sculptor placed at the site during the commemoration disappeared. Some Belarusian patriotic youth associations already organized on November 1, 1987, an anti-Stalin rally where some two hundred people gathered in an attempt to revive the Belarusian custom of Dziady (All Souls), the commemoration of the dead on the first Sunday of November. These events occurred in the framework of a policy of transparency, called glasnost, which aimed to liberalize the freedom of press and freedom of speech. The idea of commemorating victims of Stalinist repression arose among young people, dissidents and Soviet intelligentsia (Smith, 1996).

Partly as a result of their dissatisfaction with the official inquiry, the Belarusian intelligentsia including Pazniak formed Komitet-58, named after the article in the Soviet criminal code under which many of Stalin’s victims were convicted. In October 1988, in a meeting sponsored jointly by nationalist youth groups and Komitet-58, some 400 people created Martyrolog of Belarus, an organization devoted to commemorating the victims of Stalinism in the Belarusian SSR. They concomitantly established a committee to form an opposition group: the Belarusian Popular Front, which Pazniak himself headed and which was to lead the fight against the Communist nomenclature during the last years of the USSR and after its collapse. Some youth associations with active support from Martyrolog of Belarus organized another Dziady demonstration in Minsk (Moscow cemetery) on October 30, 1988. The rally was dispersed with tear gas and water cannons. Pazniak and some of his fellow demonstrators managed to march to the vicinity of Kurapaty. He read a declaration in favor of building a permanent memorial to those who had been executed in the woods by the NKVD from 1937 to 1941. After a short time, this gathering was also broken up by troops (Mihalisko, 1988c).

In January 1989, after the government investigatory Commission on Kurapaty gave its conclusions, the Belarusian Council of Ministers adopted a resolution asking for measures in order to establish a memorial in Kurapaty (Kurapaty, 2002: 68-69). On a rock inside the forest, a slab was fixed with the following inscription: « According to the Resolution of the BSSR Council of Ministers from January 18, 1989 a memorial will be erected in remembrance of the victims of mass repression in 1937-1941 ». In the beginning of 1990s, flowers were laid down during official holidays. But the government took no further steps to honor the victims or their burial place.

On October 29, 1989, crowds of people of all ages took part in the traditional Belarusian ceremony of honoring one’s ancestors. They gathered at the gates of the Eastern Cemetery in Minsk, and proceeded to the mass graves of Kurapaty where the crowd had increased to 50,000 participants. A « Cross of Pain » was erected at the entrance of the mass gravesite (Stankievich, 1989). Made with wood by the Belarusian Union of Artists, it was 5 meters high and was transported by arms’ participants during the several kilometers march. A crown of barbed wire was fixed on the top of the cross where the years of mass killings were written: « 1937-1941 » (Kurapaty, 2002: 62).
Representatives of the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant clergy consecrated the Cross of Pain.

After 1989, several crosses were posted in the forest by civic and religious organizations and by citizens in remembrance of a relative killed during the Stalinist repression.

Belarus became independent in August 1991 when the USSR collapsed. The political, social and economic transformations led the question of Kurapaty collective memory aside from official preoccupations. In 1993, Kurapaty was mentioned on the State register of historical and cultural values in Belarus as a historical monument of international importance. During the 1990s, rallies and meetings were still organized at Kurapaty, each November on Dziady, by political and civic opposition groups.

In January 1994, when United States President Bill Clinton came to Belarus with a "thank you" visit after Belarus agreed to ship nuclear weapons back to Russia, he visited the Kurapaty forest. He presented a small granite monument "To Belarusians from the American people", perhaps the first post-Soviet cultural artifact from the United States on Belarusian soil. The monument was damaged several times by unidentified vandals and re-erected in January 2002 (Charter 97, January 15, 2002).

After Alexander Lukashenko came to power as the Belarusian president in July 1994, Kurapaty is still a site of civic memory but ceases to be part of an official memory. There was no official memorial established by the Belarusian authorities. A new wave of civic memories began in September 2001 when, under a resolution signed by the Belarusian president, the expansion of the Minsk beltway began. The Civic initiative « For saving Kurapaty memorial » was created by historians, archeologists, journalists, civic activists for protesting against the expansion of the beltway which would destroy a significant part of the Kurapaty burial ground, and for creating a Memorial in Kurapaty. For several weeks, Belarusian opposition groups and non-governmental organizations had been protesting. The representatives of youth organizations under the initiative « Youth for saving of Kurapaty » guarded round the clock at the Kurapaty site.

After two weeks of protest, the Belarusian authorities sent riot police and bulldozers to tear down a tent camp set up near Kurapaty by youth opposition groups. Police detained some 30 protesters, which got jail sentences and fines. Small protest rallies by opposition activists took place at Kurapaty in the following days, but the road-reconstruction work proceeded under police protection (RFE/RL Newsline, November 13, 2001). On June 3, activists marked the end of a 250-day vigil at the site with a gathering in the Kurapaty forest outside Minsk. About 30 opposition activists delivered a petition to the Belarus government, demanding that the Kurapaty site be given adequate protection.

After these protests, the Belarusian authorities expressed several times their unwillingness to engage themselves in the Kurapaty memorial construction. On December 2001, deputies of the House of Representatives (lower Chamber of the Parliament) voted against the inclusion into the budget-2002 of a provision, envisaging the financial support of the Kurapaty memorial construction. Speaker Vadim Popov reported that although “constructing the memorial complex at Kurapaty could be a good idea, it must not be funded at the expense of the State” (Charter 97, December 17, 2001). In May 2003, Tadeush Strujetsky, the head of the Department for science and national art at the Ministry of Culture, said at a press conference dedicated to the International museum day, that the state doesn't intend to memorialize Kurapaty mass executions site in the next few years.

In October 2004, the Jewish community of Belarus installed a monument in memory of the Jews and other nationals who were murdered in the Kurapaty forest. The brown granite stone has two inscriptions in Yiddish and in Belarusian: "To our fellow-believers—Jews, Christians and the Muslims—the victims of Stalinism from the Belarusian Jews."

Kurapaty site regularly witnesses acts of vandalism. This was notably the case in November 2005 when the Clinton’s bench (a monument “To Belarusians from the American people”), a memorial plate “To victims of the Stalin regime” had disappeared, and many crosses and other memorial signed defiled (Charter 97, December 8, 2005). In December 2005, other acts of vandalism occurred. A case was initiated on charges relating violation of the Article 341 of the Belarusian Criminal Code (defilement of buildings and willful damage). But, according to some lawyers, law-enforcing agencies had given too mild legal treatment to the acts of vandalism which could have been assess under the
Articles 130 (incitement of racial, national or religious enmity or discord) and 344 (intentional destruction or damage to historical or cultural monuments. On November 20, 2005, the United States and the European Union made a joint statement related to vandalism at Kurapaty in which they mentioned that "vandalizing these memorials dishonors the memory of those victims, and disrespects the Belarusian people as a whole". On December 1, ambassadors of the countries of the European Union, accredited in Belarus, visited the memorial area in Kurapaty to show respect and pay homage to the victims of repression.

F. General and Legal Interpretations of the Facts

The "German lead"

Even if the agencies of the NKVD were mentioned as the perpetrators of the mass shootings in Kurapaty by the government commission in a public report in 1989, an alternative interpretation appeared under the appellation of the "German lead". This interpretation suggests that the German occupation forces rather than the NKVD had carried out the executions, and the victims were Hamburg Jews rather than Soviet Belarusian and other civilians. This interpretation fits with a similar interpretation made earlier with regard to the massacre of Polish officers in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk in spring 1940. Only in 1990 did the Soviet authorities acknowledged responsibility for these executions.

In June 1991, a group of citizens leaded by Valentin Korzun, formed by former partisans, Heroes of the Soviet Union, created a public commission on investigation crimes committed in Kurapaty. This commission sent to the Prosecutor's Office some materials collected by them to prove that the belongings found in Kurapaty were those of victims of the German occupation forces and not the NKVD (Marples, 1994: 521). In February 1992, the Belarusian Prosecutor's Office conducted new investigations, which proved the 1989 official results (Kurapaty, 2002: 39). In October 1992, the public Commission published its own conclusions in which it affirmed that German occupation forces carried out the executions. Several arguments were mentioned: some witnesses remembered black vehicles as were used by the Germans, not the NKVD, and dated the executions to summer 1941 into mid-1942. An examination of the 311 skulls found to date has revealed 22 with bullet holes, 5 with 3 holes each, but no holes in 89 of them. This has been cited as consistent with German execution methods: 15-20 people were taken to edges of pits and sprayed with gunfire. The investigation has declared that the jewelry found on the victims was unavailable in the Soviet Union, and that the victims were European Jews (Marples, 1994: 519).

In 1994, the public Commission sent a letter to the Presidential Administration asking for a new inquiry. A third investigation was conducted by the Prosecutor's Office that confirmed, again, the 1989 results. Moreover, German experts gave evidence that the burial methods used in Kurapaty didn’t feet with the Nazi ones. Kurapaty and nearby villages were not mentioned in the Yad-Vashem and in the German archives (Kurapaty, 2002: 40).

In 1997, the public Commission asked again the Belarusian president to open a new investigation on Kurapaty. This investigation was conducted by the military Prosecutor’s Office and led to new excavations in the site of Kurapaty, which took place in October 1997 and in May 1998. These excavations proved that 94 percent of the bullets found in the burials were from Soviet Nagan-type revolvers. The investigators found also some bullets from German Browning and Walter type revolvers, which, in their opinion, showed evidence of the "German lead". On October 23, 1998, Oleg Bojelko, Belarusian Procurator General, hold a press conference in which he mentioned that his department so far has not established who were buried in the mass grave at Kurapaty near Minsk (Belapan, November 7, 1998). In his opinion, the 1988 and the 1995 investigations were not conducted in an impartial manner. In April 1999, the investigation was closed but no official results were made public. Although, in December 2001, in a response to the civic initiative « For saving Kurapaty memorial », a letter from the Procurator's Office stated that « the previous as well as the complementary investigations confirmed that NKVD organs took people from prisons, drove them to Kurapaty and killed them » (Kurapaty, 2002: 80). But the Procurator’s letter didn’t fully turn down the “German lead”. Regarding the fact that some belongings found in Kurapaty were from Germany, Poland, Austria and Check Republic, the letter commented: « each part of the political fight
interprets these pieces of evidence by their own way: for ones, they confirmed the version that’s Germans who drove people from Europe to Kurapaty and who killed them. For others, they confirmed that among the victims, they were people from Western part of Belarus, which was annexed in 1939. To confirm or to refute theses versions with objective pieces of evidence is not possible » (Kurapaty, 2002: 81). Theses sentences indicate that there could be different interpretations on the Kurapaty executions and that there is no official interpretation given to them.

**An Act of Genocide**

The word genocide to qualify the Stalinist crimes appeared openly for the first time in Belarus during the demonstration organized by unofficial youth organizations on November 1, 1987. Participants referred to the mass repressions against Belarusians in the 1930s as « genocide ». In the Soviet propaganda, the term genocide was used to condemn the crimes committed during World War II by the Nazis, and, more generally, those perpetrated by the so-called fascists and capitalists, considered the major enemies of the country (Goujon, 1999: 353). Nevertheless, genocide was not a popular term in the Soviet political vocabulary: the Soviet leaders preferred to emphasize war crimes and the patriotic fervor of the Soviet people than to stress the tragedy of the Jewish people. When the term genocide appeared in 1987, it contradicted the Soviet definition, and provoked objection and astonishment as revealed in a paper published in the Belarusian Communist Party’s newspaper, Sovetskaïa Belarussia:

« Suddenly, […] the word genocide in relation to the repression of 1930s in Belarus sounded like a treacherous shot. What was that? Was it a feeble misuse of a garish word or a deliberate use of the term? […] Even given the contradictory personality of Stalin, to admit that he deliberately pursued the policy aimed at the extermination of his own people is, in my view, a monstrous and inadmissible error » (Maisenya, 1997: 10-11).

According to Pazniak who published the first paper on Kurapaty in June 1988, Kurapaty is a symbol of what he called the Stalinist genocide. Pazniak's first argument refers to the planning of the repression and the execution of innocent people. The second aspect concerns the numbers of victims: « the repression first impacted the intellectuals, the political leaders, and the military officers, then the peasants and the workers » (Pazniak, 1992: 16-17). Pazniak insists on what he considers an injustice: « we have passed from a selective system to a non-selective one and therefore total repression », he adds. For Pazniak, if all social groups were touched, and if the Belarusians were the primary victims, the use of the word genocide is not only possible but also adequate. This conception reproduces, partly, the analyses published in the 1950s by the non-Russian Diasporas living in exile in Europe or North America.

The first publication dedicated to the question of genocide of the Belarusian nation made its appearance in 1950 in Toronto under the title "I Accuse The Kremlin Of The Genocide Of My Nation" (Abramcyk, 1950). Mikola Abramcyk, then president of the Council of the Belarusian Popular Republic created in 1917, otherwise known as the government in exile, introduced its brochure with a numerical appraisal. He estimates that more that three million people were "victims of communist terrorism" in "Belarus under the Russian occupation". Published in 1958, another book seeks to portray an exhaustive picture of genocide in the USSR, and tries to prove that "genocide is the inevitable concomitant of Soviet communism" (Deker, Lebed, 1958: 16). The chapter dedicated to the Belarusians concludes with these words: « the Soviet regime, throughout the entire period of its rule in Byelorussia, has carried out a persistent campaign of genocide against the Belarusian people, on the most varied pretexts » (Deker, Lebed, 1958: 87).

Following the discovery of Kurapaty burials in Belarus, the term genocide was used in various publications of the Belarusian Diaspora. A reprint from the Byelorussian Review published by the Byelorussian-American Association called « Byelorussia: Genocide of a Nation » and dated from Winter 1989 contained a paper untitled « Kurapaty – Byelorussian Holocaust » which testifies the will of the Belarusian community abroad to make the Kurapaty mass killings comparable to the Jewish genocide during World War II (Turevich, 1989). Such statements are also included in the 1993 Zaprudnik’s book which used the terms genocide and ethnocide to qualify Soviet politics and which indicates: « to the list of such names as Buchenwald and Auschwitz was added one more in 1988: Kurapaty » (Zaprudnik, 1993: 87).
In the 2000s, the mass killings in Kurapaty are still depicted as genocide by a part of the Belarusian intellectual elite. The initiative « For saving Kurapaty memorial » created in September 2001 assumes to be among its main goals the creation of a Memorial in Kurapaty which would be the monument for the victims of Bolshevism repression and « the expression of the criticism of genocide policy, performed by the totalitarian Soviet regime » (Kurapaty, 2002: 113).

**Judicial Proceedings**

On June 14, 1988, several days after the discovery of the Kurapaty site was made public in Belarus, a criminal inquiry was opened. In 1989, the Public Prosecutor’s Office announced the closure of the investigation arguing that the NKVD leaders of the BSSR and the other persons responsible for the crimes committed in Kurapaty either had been sentenced to death during the purge or had already died (Hlukhova, 2003: 16-17).

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