Cultural Representation of the Khatyn Massacre in Belarus
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Introduction

She has never seen such things even in films. Burnt villages are familiar to her; those empty villages from which people had gone into the forest or from where they had been forcibly driven out to death, to torments, to the long way to Germany. In such villages, however, either in documentary newsreels or in artistic imitations, there is only a trace of war and destruction. Here, everything is well-kept… and no one needs it all.¹

This is from the novel The Ominous Star (1991) dealing with the Chernobyl tragedy. It was written by Belarusian author Ivan Shamiakin. Here is depicted a village whose inhabitants have been forced to leave in the aftermath of the nuclear disaster. The situation is compared to the villages damaged in World War II. Even after more than a half-century, the memory of the harsh war remains alive and continues to be reproduced through school education, literature, and cinema. This paper will analyze public and private (individula) memories of the Khatyn massacre, which are to be represented in the Khatyn War Memorial and Ales Adamovich’s novel The Khatyn Story.

On 22 March 1943, a Belarusian village named Khatyn was demolished by a Nazi battalion. German soldiers locked up the villagers in buildings and burnt them alive. Almost all the inhabitants, a hundred and forty-nine people in total, died a brutal death in the burning flames. The territory of Belarus (with the entire western part of the Soviet Union) fell under Nazi occupation soon after the surprise attack by Nazi Germany and was released only in the last period of the war. But the partisan movement was very active in occupied Belarus and many ordinary people supported resistance activities in secret. The village of Khatyn was burnt because its inhabitants were suspected to be in cooperation with the partisans.

The Khatyn massacre was not a single incident. More than six hundred Belarusian villages perished with their inhabitants during the occupation period. Khatyn was selected as a representation of all the Nazi atrocities (all the war tragedies) in Belarus. It is supposed that a quarter of the population (two million people) died in the war period. Although the number of war victims in the entire Soviet Union was, of course, huge (twenty-six million people), it would still be fair to suppose that

Belarusians had to go through the harshest war experience. The name of Khatyn became famous due to the Khatyn War Memorial (unveiled in 1969) and Ales Adamovich’s novel *The Khatyn Story* (Хатынская повесть, 1971). Although Adamovich’s other works, especially the nonfiction *Out of the Fire* (Я з вогненнай вёскі, 1975), and Elem Klimov’s film *Come and See* (Іди і смотри, 1985), based on *The Khatyn Story*, are equally important, this paper does not deal with them. Khatyn came to symbolize the great sacrifices which the Belarusians made for the victory of the SSSR in the war. Images of the massacred village were actively propagated for the social integration of the Belarusian Republic in the late Soviet period. Meanwhile, at the end of the 1980s, thousands of unknown bodies were found in Kuropaty, a suburb near Minsk. It was revealed that these thousands of people were executed by the Soviet secret police in the 1930s before the Nazi invasion. Accordingly, the name of Kuropaty has become a symbolic place evoking anti-Russian sentiment while, in contrast, Khatyn often awakes nostalgia for the Soviet past. In recent years, moreover, a surprising fact has been disclosed that not German soldiers, but mainly Ukrainian and Russian collaborators committed the massacre in Khatyn. This also shook the public memory of the war in Belarus. In this case, it is important to focus on the formation period of typical memories at the end of the 1960s.

**The Khatyn Massacre in Monuments**

In 1969, the Khatyn War Memorial was unveiled in the place where the village had previously existed. The memorialization process of the war in the public space became active in the second half of the 1960s under the Brezhnev regime. In the same period, major places of commemoration were established such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow (1967), the Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) memorial with the great statue of *Motherland* (1967), the memorial complex of Brest Fortress (1971), and so on. Victory Day on 9 May, which commemorates the surrender of Nazi Germany, has become a nonworking holiday since the twentieth anniversary in 1965.

The memorial complex of Khatyn contains impressive monuments which

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represent tragedies undergone at different levels of the nation.\textsuperscript{5} Around the entrance to the village, one sees the statue of The Unconquered Man with his dead son in his arms. This is the figure of Josif Kaminsky, the only adult survivor-eyewitness in the village. The original street plan of Khatyn remains. Instead of each burnt house, there stands an obelisk with a bell ringing every thirty seconds. A plate on each monument shows the names of the inhabitants of the house having perished on that ominous day. The monument called the Tree of Life indicates the names of four hundred and thirty-three villages which were destroyed but fortunately reconstructed with some new dwellers after the war. The Cemetery of Villages, in contrast, commemorates those a hundred and eighty-five places where people suffered a similar fate to Khatyn, that is, villages that have disappeared without trace. The war disaster on the national dimension is represented by the Eternal Fire with three white birches. The trees symbolize the three-quarters of Belarusians who remained alive and the fire commemorates the quarter of the people who did not survive the war. In this way, the memorial complex presents different levels of collective memory. So it could promote national solidarity within the frame of the Soviet Union.

\textsuperscript{5} See the official site of the memorial: http://www.khatyn.by/en/.
Khatyn and Ales Adamovich

Ales Adamovich was known as an eminent Belarusian and Soviet writer. In his teens, he participated in partisan activities during World War II and most of his works are classified as war literature. He was writing his novel *The Khatyn Story* from 1966 to 1971, almost the same years during which the Khatyn Memorial was undergoing construction. The protagonist-narrator of the novel, Florian Gaishun, has witnessed Nazi atrocities similar to the Khatyn massacre during the time of his partisan activities. He meets his comrades-in-arms for the first time in twenty-five years after the war. It is notable that they decided to travel together to the Khatyn Memorial which had just opened at the time of the novel. On a bus all the way to Khatyn, Florian recalls his harsh experiences of war time. The narrator’s mind moves back and forth in the labyrinth of
his memory. Accordingly, the novel has not a single linear, but a multilayered structure.\(^6\)

1. The present time, in which former partisans go on an excursion to Khatyn, serves as the outer framework of the novel.
2. Recollections of war time, including the narrator’s experience of a Khatyn-like massacre, which composes the main storyline of the novel.
3. Memory of the post-war period until the narrator loses his sight (university, travel through Europe, and marriage).
4. The narrator’s conversations with Boris Bokii in recent times. They often argue whether human beings still have a future after such inhuman deeds as the Holocaust and the Khatyn and Son My (in Vietnam) massacres have been committed.
5. Oral histories and historical documents concerning atrocities committed by the Nazi army in Belarus, which do not enter the frame of Florian’s memory.

**Loss of the Senses and Divergence in Memory**

It is noteworthy that Florian loses his eyesight because of an injury suffered in combat. So most of his visual memory is limited to war-time events. Thus, when the narrator meets his partisan-fellows for the first time in twenty-five years after the war, he is unable to see them and can evoke only their faces and figures as they fought together in the past. All visual images for Florian remain unchanged over a quarter of a century. As a result, his present self has lost direct continuity with his past self. The narrator sometimes views his past from the side as if he is watching a film. For example, he recalls an impressive scene in a forest glade where he saw a rain of jumping red grasshoppers which suddenly turned into a firestorm of bombing. This half-fantastic imagery repeatedly occurs in his mind like a kind of traumatic recollection. Florian’s blindness is, interestingly enough, compared to “a black screen” on which his visual memory is projected (29-30).

In another place, he intentionally narrates his story in the third person although the entire narration is rendered in the first person. Young Flora (Florian’s nickname in his teens) wanders in the forest with a partisan girl and suddenly finds a German soldier with a machine gun hiding behind a gravestone. Flora cleverly tricks the soldier and they escape from the dangerous ambush. Here, the adult Florian feels as if

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\(^6\) Texts are cited from Адамович А.М. Хатынская повесть // Собрание сочинений в 4 томах. Т.3. Минск, 1982. С.5-198.
he owes his life not to himself, but to another person, the young Flora (49). As a result of his life-threatening experiences, the narrator loses continuity between past and present in his personality.

We can observe a similar situation for young Flora in the narrator’s remembrances. He temporarily loses his sense of hearing due to a contusion suffered in his first battle. Separated from his partisan-fellows, he returns to his home village and finds all the houses burnt down. Although unconsciously understanding that his family has already been killed, he cannot accept their deaths for a long time. Flora will never listen to (literally turning a deaf ear to) his companion, the partisan girl who tells this harsh fact. “He was lurking behind his deafness which could not keep the truth completely at bay nor postpone the moment when no hope remained.” (67) The continuity between the past (where his family are alive) and present (where they are dead) breaks down. It is symbolic that Flora recovers his sense of hearing only after he is finally forced to face reality (70). On the other hand, it is impossible for Florian in the present time to regain his eyesight. It means that he still cannot combine his own traumatic memory and the present state of things into a continuous timeline.

**Arbitrary Connections in Memory**

Florian’s narrative of the past does not go straight in temporal order. It is often interrupted and leaps from one time period to another, from one recollection to another. For a short time after the war, he has his eyesight (not yet blind) and often associates what he has seen with a part of his memory. The famous Greek sculpture of Laocoön, for example, the statue of agonized people being strangled by monstrous sea snakes, reminds him of a partisan comrade who died under cruel torture by Nazi soldiers.

Once, when I was already a student, I saw in a book a group of people being bound and entwined by snakes—Laocoön. (My memory all the time goes away from the barn; even memory can’t stay there long). Thick ropes of snakes about human arms and legs which are strained in cold horror, faces and heads thrown back…. The desk at which I sat leaned over, the windows became warped, and I could hardly stifle a feeling of nausea till I got to a garbage can. It was funny for my classmates that Gaishun (Florian) had such a reaction to the art. I saw simply what I had already seen once, but only not in reproduction. This was at the very beginning of my partisan activities. German and Vlasov soldiers captured our scout, and we later went to take back his body thrown down in a graveyard. . . . His arms and neck were twined with fearful blue
ropes from his own insides. The state of his dead body showed that he by himself tore them off in blind horror and pain. (122)

Laocoön and His Sons  The Tomb of Philippe Pot

It is notable that no one besides Florian can understand this association between Laocoön and the killed partisan. The brutal death of his partisan-fellow serves for Florian as a one-time-only event, which is arbitrarily connected with the statue of Laocoön. It presents a remarkable contrast to monuments of collective memory such as the Khatyn War Memorial which represent multiple tragic incidents. It is suggestive that what Florian associated in his memory is not an artistic “reproduction,” but his once-only living experience.

This relatively small scene of recollection is incorporated into the most traumatic part of the entire narrative memory of Florian. Nazi soldiers captured him near the village of Perekhod, which was destined to perish in flames. As was often the case with many Khatyn-like massacres, all habitants (together with Flora) were forced to enter a building of a barn which would be set alight and burnt down. The nearer the core of the traumatic experience approaches in Florian’s memory, the more often his narrative deviates from the main storyline and runs zigzag, jumping into small recollections of another time. The narrator says: “My memory all the time goes away from the barn; even memory can’t stay there long.” In this way, Florian in the present time suddenly turns his memory from the incident in Perekhod to the scene of Laocoön.

Due to a capricious decision of the enemy officer, young Flora is brought out from the barn and survives the massacre having witnessed all the cruelties with his own eyes. He stands near the commander of the Nazi battalion who, strangely enough, cherishes a small monkey in the face of innocent victims being burnt alive. The commander’s face is invisible behind the body of the restless monkey, and Flora feels a
strong desire to look at the enemy’s hidden expression. Here, the adult Florian interrupts his memory again and moves to another recollection concerning a similar situation in the Louvre Museum.

I don’t know what I wanted to do then, or what I could do. Maybe I was dragged to him (the enemy’s commander) by an unbearable need to cast a glance and vengefully memorize it. And to look at what the restless monkey had veiled with his long tail, which looked like neither hiding nor tempting him to have a glimpse.

According to some, my feeling was doubled in my memory with my visit to the Louvre Museum in Paris where, viewing the medieval Romanesque gravestones, I looked into faces of old nuns who carried a dead knight. . . . I was irresistibly driven to bend down and peep into the black hoods. It seems that I would see toothless satisfied grimaces of laughter. (136)

The concealed face of the Nazi commander is connected with nuns’ faces veiled in black hoods. This arbitrary association also functions only in the personal memory of Florian. An interesting point is that the narrator makes a mistake in his recollection. The gravestone Florian has viewed in the Louvre is known as The Tomb of Phillipe Pot. The figures carrying the dead body of the knight are actually not old women, but monks. But the fact remains that the narrator associates “nuns”’ invisible faces with the war-time memory driven by strong emotion. Florian’s memory appears to be cut off in unbroken places and connected with unrelated details. But the seemingly zigzagging mixture of recollections proves a continuous narrative in a personal one-time-only experience.

**Conclusion: Against Collective Memory**

Adamovich’s novel focuses on personal memories which might have fallen out from collective memories such as war monuments. At the very center of the narration concerning the massacre in Perekhod suddenly appear oral histories and documents on the Nazi army’s atrocities in Belarus. These texts do not enter the frame of Florian’s individual narrative memory. All the other parts of the novel are literary creation by Adamovich although based on the author’s real experiences. So it means that fictional depictions of the narrator’s private memory are linked to multiple nonfictional accounts of personal memories. This literary method of linkage works differently from the way in which many war tragedies are represented in monuments as a medium of public
memory. Oral histories told by surviving inhabitants are identical in general outline, whereas they impressively differ from each other in concrete details. Adamovich appreciates these particulars as once-only living memories which should have a private meaning for each person.

In this regard, a story told by Nadezhda Negliui, an inhabitant of the destroyed village of Levishche, appears suggestive. She cannot recall how her children were killed during the massacre while she clearly remembers that she escaped from a burning house with iron pots in her hands (132). Memory of the most traumatic experience tends to be replaced by trivial recollection although the latter relates to the former. Moreover, according to her account, an SS commander had a small monkey on his shoulder. She even remembers that the animal wore short pants. The reader is driven to associate this trivial account with the fictional narrative of the small monkey veiling with its tail the face of the Nazi commander.

At the end of the novel, Florian together with his ex-comrades arrives at the Khatyn Memorial. Here, the narrator draws a comparison between the monuments and personal memories of living people. He keeps a certain distance from objective figures, and explanation is mostly given by a young female guide (the number of suffering villages, a quarter of the population lost, the Nazi’s extinction policy, etc.). Although he is unable to view the statue of *The Unconquered Man*, he suggests that this father’s hands must have been shot. He knows that almost all the surviving parents who attempted to defend their children have scars on their palms and fingers. He even asks the question of “whether sighted people see it” (197).

The number of victims estimated to be millions of people in official statistics is impressive enough. Each concrete person, however, hidden behind the abstract figures must have had his or her unique experience with seemingly arbitrary details. Adamovich’s literary project aimed to protest against or rather correct defects in the public “stone” memory which flourished in the Brezhnev era so much so that they might have ignored multiple “living” memories. After the publication of *The Khatyn Story*, Adamovich together with his colleague-writers began collecting oral histories from ordinary people in earnest and completed two important works: *Out of the Fire* (Я з вогненнай вёскі, 1975) on the Khatyn-like atrocities in Belarus and *The Blockade Book* (Блокадная книга, 1977-81) on the Siege of Leningrad. It can be said that Adamovich with his literary works left a significant alternative to the culture of war memory in Belarus and other former Soviet countries.