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### Pinpointing Holocaust Sites in Belarus

Leonid Smilovitsky <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Researcher, Diaspora Research Institute ,  
Tel Aviv University

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LEONID SMILOVITSKY

## Pinpointing Holocaust Sites in Belarus

Marat Botvinnik, *Pamiatniki genotsida evreev Belorussi* (Monuments to the Genocide of the Jews of Belorussia) (Minsk: Belaruskaja navuka, 2000), 326pp. ISBN 085-08-0416-5

The memory of the Holocaust has been preserved in archival documents, memoirs by ghetto survivors, personal writings of partisans and locals, informative material compiled by the USSR Extraordinary Commission for investigating the crimes committed by the Nazi occupiers (active between 1942 and 1945), and witness testimonies from the 1950–70 era of trials of Nazi war criminals in the Soviet Union. It is from these principal sources that historians obtain their material for research. Now there is an additional source adding significantly to this body of material – monuments to the genocide victims which, in the postwar years, mushroomed in localities where Jews once lived. During the Nazi occupation, Jews were shot and buried in their peripheral towns *en masse*. For a long time these monuments stood for all to see, with nobody, apparently, expecting them to amount to anything of interest. Yet they have become a vital source of information, teaching historians an object lesson. Marat Botvinnik's book shows that the time for this hitherto unexplored source has come at last.

The monograph contains lists of commemorative structures (monuments, obelisks, stelas), memorials and memorial signs located in what is today Belarus relating to the period 1945–99. It contains seven chapters, corresponding to the number of administrative regions: Minsk, Moghilev, Brest, Vitebsk, Gomel, Grodno and one devoted to the city of Minsk. Each section consists of four parts: 'Monuments of the genocide', 'Concentration ghetto-camps', '*Kaddish* [memorial prayer] to the Jews of the region', and a list of monuments with information on the burial grounds and number of victims in the region. The book ends with a geographical index of 487 localities (towns, townships, villages), including farmsteads and copses where Jews were gunned down.

In a brief preface, the author describes in general terms the German policy of genocide practised in the republic. Three *Einsatz* groups set up in Soviet territory at the beginning of the war (each attached to one of the fighting

battalions) followed the advancing German troops and carried out punitive operations against civilians and later against partisans. In Belarus, *Einsatz* group B was in command, comprising the 7-A and 7-B *Sonderkommands*. Communists, Soviet functionaries and Jews were to be killed first. Jews who had not fled were confined to ghettos (over 300 in number) and subjected to selection. People who had escaped death during the operations of summer and autumn 1941 were forced to work and then gradually exterminated. They were mostly men – intellectuals, prominent professionals and public figures who enjoyed considerable prestige and could be expected to organize resistance. Then came the helpless – the elderly, women and children – demoralized and enfeebled by hunger and disease. The last to be put to death were the professionals and skilled workers whose labour was for the time being exploited for the needs of the fighting armies. All the Jews, including members of the *Judenrat* and the ghetto auxiliary police, were exterminated. With the turn of the tide on the battlefields in 1943–44, the Germans made an attempt to wipe out the traces of the widespread extermination of the population. Common graves were opened and dead bodies unearthed and burned. After the war, the Soviet leadership tried to hush the echo of the Holocaust: its consequences were hardly mentioned and any attempts to perpetuate the memory of the dead Jews were either cut short or depersonalized.

Marat Botvinnik's book is the first attempt at amassing comprehensive data on the monuments to the genocide victims throughout Belarus. The research follows the geographical principle: each region, along with information about it, is presented in alphabetical order. There are articles about the monuments, memorials and memorial signs; data about each grave are presented and their sources indicated. The information and lists of ghetto inmates are summed up in tables. The importance of this research cannot be overstated. No other effort has been made within the territory of the entire former Soviet Union to collect and systematize data on the sites of mass murder of Jews. Since 1989 most of the many Jewish organizations, community centres and Jewish communities which mushroomed in post-Soviet territory (there are over 150 of these in Belarus) have engaged mainly in charitable and cultural/educational activities and have not gone beyond tidying up occasional cemeteries and sites of mass execution or helping materially to restore old obelisks or construct new ones.

It is paradoxical indeed when people have no knowledge of the main sites of genocide in the region in which they live. The only place where relevant information could be obtained were the departments of the executive committees of regional soviets dealing with the protection of historical and cultural monuments. However, it had never been easy to establish whether or not Jews were buried in a particular place. The information available was

fragmentary and controversial. It takes the know-how of a historian and the dedication of a scholar to cope with such a task. An analysis of the material could not have been made without first determining the reasons for change in the Jewish demography between 1939 and 1959 (via general censuses), explaining the sources of the post-war anti-Semitic policy in the Soviet Union and its local expression in Belarus, and learning and telling of the grassroots efforts by neighbours and relatives of the murdered victims, whose attempts to perpetuate the memory of their dear ones came up against such firm obstacles on the part of the local and central authorities.

To what extent has the author achieved his aim? Dr Botvinnik undertook this work despite his lack of specialization in the history of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1930s the USSR, Belarus included, has had no specialist in modern Jewish history. Therefore, Dr Botvinnik obtained the knowledge he needed directly from available sources, which took him well beyond the limits of his initial endeavour – to research the monuments of genocide as such. His work then became an attempt to present a general picture of the extermination of the Jewish population in the occupied territory of the republic. He got carried away, however, by the material and in some cases actually recounted the course of events, whereas an analysis of the phenomenon would have sufficed.

Worthy of note are the sources used by the author. The primary source is the *Svod pamiatnikov istorii i kul'tury Belorusskoi SSR* (A Guide to the Monuments of History and Culture of the BSSR), published separately for each of the republic's six regions over the period 1984–88. A major part of the data was drawn from *Pamiat'. Istoriko-dokumental'naia khronika gorodov i raionov Belorussi* (Memory, A Historical-Documentary Chronicle of the Towns and Regions of Belorussia), an encyclopedic series of many volumes. It consists of historical, documented chronicles of the republic's regions and towns. The first volume appeared in 1985; today there are 62, and 140 volumes are planned. The central period in these volumes is that of the Soviet–Nazi war; special sections are devoted to the occupation, with lists of partisans and underground fighters, victims of mass genocide. Dr Botvinnik cites extensively from the main works of the Belarusian war historians published in 1963–99,<sup>2</sup> from a collection of documents on the Jewish genocide – the first ever in the republic – compiled by the head of the Partisan Movement Department in the Belarusian State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War,<sup>3</sup> from documentary research on life in Minsk during the years of occupation, by G. Knat'ko, department head at the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus,<sup>4</sup> and other sources.<sup>5</sup>

The author used only foreign sources that were translated into Russian. These include a collection of documents and annotated material by V. Levin and K. Meltser from Baltimore and Itzhak Arad from Jerusalem,<sup>6</sup> a teaching

aid at the Open University of Israel by Professor Dan Mikhman, Director of the Holocaust Institute at Bar-Ilan University,<sup>7</sup> an article by D. Romanovsky and A. Zeltser of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem,<sup>8</sup> and the memoirs of former ghetto inmates I. Segal and A. Rubenchik.<sup>9</sup> Regrettably, the author did not use the main works of his foreign colleagues.<sup>10</sup>

The description of the genocide is not supplemented with data on the size of the Jewish population on the eve of the war,<sup>11</sup> the number of those deported before the Nazi invasion,<sup>12</sup> or the number of those who fled or were evacuated.<sup>13</sup> Without these figures, it is impossible to appreciate the scale of the Holocaust. In some passages, the absence of comparative analysis creates the impression that the author does not question the archival data. The reason for this is perhaps that he has no other information and wants to present as full a picture as possible of the genocide. Nowadays, problems of this kind can easily be resolved by the Internet,<sup>14</sup> but historians in Belarus are limited by their lack of funds (the cost of Internet services in Belarus is among the highest in the former Soviet Union and East-Central Europe).<sup>15</sup>

Credit must certainly go to the author for determining the ethnicity of victims of the Nazi genocide. After the war, most Jewish cemeteries and mass burial grounds were in a sorry state. They were neglected, the graves overgrown by grass, obelisks lying down, fences missing, tombstones uprooted for use in households. On the standard monuments, which the local authorities in some cases agreed to put up, the word 'Jews' was substituted by 'peaceful civilians' or 'Soviet citizens'. In cases where Jews wanting to perpetuate the memory of their relatives acted on their own, the authorities refused to place their monuments under state protection and went out of their way to persuade these people to avoid using the words 'Jew' or 'ghetto' or Yiddish inscriptions and, certainly, Hebrew on the monuments. This was reflected in the overwhelming majority of reference books, scientific manuscripts, textbooks and memorial information published in Belarus before 1989.

Revealing the truth in this matter was the author's main objective. For almost ten years Dr Botvinnik collected information on what really happened. He travelled throughout the regions of the republic, talked with locals and ghetto survivors, recorded live reminiscences of the events, and sent inquiries to local and regional organs of power. His archival search was also successful. In addition to the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus and the State Archives of the Minsk, Moghilev, Brest, Gomel and Grodno regions and their branches in smaller localities, the author studied documents in the Russian Federation State Archives and the Yad Vashem Memorial Institute. This information revealed who these 'Soviet citizens' and 'victims of fascism' really were, and how many. The number of Jews murdered in the town of Nesvizh, Minsk Region, during the 27 July 1941 operation was for a long

time believed to be 700. Actually, there were many more. On 23 October 1941 as many as 1,500 Nesvizh Jews were marched out of the ghetto to the section of the park adjoining the castle and shot. In 1965 they were re-interred in the cemetery as 'Soviet citizens', according to the inscription. The last 1,200 Nesvizh Jews were killed on 22 July 1942 in the Gai *urochishche* in Molev Forest, close to the road to Snov. The memorial sign on this spot also refers to the dead as 'peaceful civilians'. Some 2,000 people, who proved to be Jews, were killed in Lenin Village, Zhitkovichi District, Brest Region. Among them were seven young Jewish underground fighters shot dead in July 1941. In 1987 a stela was erected on their grave bearing the inscription 'To the Komsomol Heroes'. Earlier, in 1981, a stela was put up in Lenin Village on the grave of five family members of Red Army men murdered in November 1941. Dr Botvinnik has established that the families of Gorodetsky and Flat were Jewish. There are many other instances of this kind.

Regrettably, the author does not present the total number of Jewish victims of genocide in each region. Summing up the data cited in the monograph, we have the following figures: Minsk Region – 94,923 people; Moghilev region – 79,164; Brest Region – 213,619; Vitebsk Region – 111,924; Gomel Region – 51,787; Grodno Region – 185,395. That is a total of 736,812 people not including the City of Minsk. Incomplete data give the figure for the number of Jews killed in the City of Minsk alone as 100,000, which, according to Dr Botvinnik's research, brings the total number of Holocaust victims in what is today Belarus (without the Bialystok Region) to 836,812 (736,812 + 100,000). But this is not the final figure. The monograph also mentions common graves of Jews and prisoners-of-war in which many thousands lie buried. In the Brest Region: Koldychevo Village, Baranovichi District – 22,000 Jews and prisoners of war; in Posenichy Village, Pinsk District – 17,443; in Slobodka Village, Pruzhany District – 3,000 Jews, prisoners-of-war and underground fighters. In the Vitebsk Region: in Matievo Village, Tolochin District – 5,000. In the Moghilev Region: in Staroye Pashkovo Village, Moghilev District – 10,000; in Slobodka Village, Bobruisk District – 10,000; in Prudok Village, Krichev District – 1,200; in Pechkovichi Village, Mstislavl District, the number of dead is not cited; it is only mentioned that Jews, partisans, communists and 'other enemies of the Reich' are buried there. How many Jews perished in Soviet prisoner-of-war camps? The largest of these (containing tens of thousands) were in Minsk, Borisov, Polotsk, Vitebsk and Bobruisk. To these should be added the Jews who, in an attempt to escape death in the occupied territory, concealed their nationality and hid in the forests. Over 10,000 Jews joined partisans in the republic and many chose to be known as non-Jews. Thus, the number of Jews who perished in the territory of Belarus in the Holocaust years is close to 900,000. To what extent is this calculation objective and reliable? Perhaps it is not for nothing that the author, who so scrupulously calculated



the number of Jews killed in every town, village and even farmstead, has refrained from presenting the ultimate figures.

The monograph clearly tends towards the quantitative: numbers of graves, victims and memorial signs. All this is of unquestionable value, but the author stops at that point. There are no descriptions of the monuments. Nothing is said as to how many were erected at the initiative of local people and funded by donations, or how many were funded by the state and erected in conjunction with the red-letter days – the 20th, 25th, 30th, 35th, 40th and 50th anniversaries of the victory over Germany. How many obelisks were erected without official permission? How many were there with inscriptions in Yiddish or Hebrew, displaying the Star of David, the *menorah* or other Jewish symbols? Such information would go a long way towards disclosing the anti-Semitic policy in the Soviet Union.

Following Belarus's attainment of independence in 1991, the attitude towards Jewish graves changed. Unjustified bans were lifted and symbols allowed to be used for ritualistic purposes. Natives of Belarus residing in various countries, mainly Israel and the USA, began to visit the graves of their relatives. It was they who, 50 years after the end of the war, made the first efforts to perpetuate the memory of Holocaust victims. Under a compromise reached with the authorities, obelisks, stelas and memorial slabs were erected in Jewish cemeteries, while monuments to non-Jewish victims of genocide were erected in public places – streets, squares, public gardens and open spaces where official ceremonies were usually held. In 1992 natives of Belarus living in Israel unveiled a monument in Iyve; in 1993 a memorial was built in Luninets, financed by Iser and Sara Kruglins from the USA; in 1994 – in Baranovichy and Stolin; in 1995 – in Rechitsa, etc. The local Alliance of Belarussian Jewish Organizations and Communities and the Judaic Religious Association of the Republic of Belarus are now more active in this respect as well.

In the late 1990s a fundamentally new element appeared. In addition to the date of the shootings and number of dead and their nationality, the perpetrators, i.e. the collaborators, now began to be mentioned on monuments funded mainly by foreign donors. Specifically, in 1997 this was done by Israeli donors in Radun (2,130 killed); in 1998 by Chicago donors in Slutsk (8,000);<sup>16</sup> and in 1999 in Druya, Braslavsky District (700).<sup>17</sup>

Special mention should be made of the dedicated individuals who, since 1990, have come on their own to Belarus in search of burial grounds in order to put up memorial signs funded by their own resources. In 1997 Moisei Tsimkind from Rehovot (Israel) had placed in Pliss, Molodechno District a rock set on a concrete slab shaped into a six-pointed star, on the site where 410 Jews were murdered. Itzhak Yuzhuk from Rishon-le-Zion (Israel) went to Belarus six times between 1990 and 1999 to perpetuate the memory of his relatives and

neighbours from the Pogost-Zgorodsky township and some villages in the Pinsk District, spending some \$10,000 on this. These are not exceptions.

It is regrettable that when describing events Dr Botvinnik could not refrain from such emotional assessments as ‘fascist barbarians’, ‘police cutthroats’, ‘heinous crimes’, ‘lair of the fascist beast’, ‘Nazi monsters’, and ‘no end to the savagery’, which is inadmissible in scholarship. He blames the compilers of the Memory and Guide to Monuments series published before 1989 for failing to mention not only the genocide but Jews in general. One should keep in mind, however, that no Soviet censor would have allowed such things to pass. Very often the so-called ‘inner censor’ would step in: the authors themselves would delete material which might evoke displeasure and harsh criticism. Information on the Jews was taboo. The monograph on the monuments of the genocide against Jews in Belarus over the period 1941–44 is a reflection of the general situation concerning the Jewish sphere, as well as the scholarly literature on the history of the Second World War in Belarus today.

Dr Botvinnik’s work will undoubtedly be acclaimed as a useful contribution to the study of Holocaust history in Eastern Europe. The book has unquestionable educational and moral value and it should be used extensively as a teaching aid. Painting a general picture of the tragedy of the Belarusian Jews, the book also makes it possible to learn about many actual graves. It is a valuable aid not only for individuals, Jewish organizations and communities, students of local lore and history, but also for local organs of power, which can now learn of the fate that befell their fellow men in the years of the German occupation. Finally, the data cited in the monograph provide indisputable evidence for today’s Holocaust ‘deniers’ of the confrontation with Nazism.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Marat Botvinnik (b. 1928) graduated from the History Department of the Belorussian State University (1951), worked in public education (PhD 1970) at the Institute of the History of the Arts, Ethnography and Folklore of the BSSR, Academy of Sciences (from 1977), researched the history of culture and formation of Belarus in medieval times, and is the author of books on Belarusian scholars.
- 2 *Prestupleniya nemetsko-fashistskikh okkupantov v Belorussii, 1941–1944* (The Crimes of the German-Fascist Invaders in Belorussia) (Minsk: Gosizdat BSSR, 1963); *Natsistskaia politika genotsida i vyzhzhennoi zemli v Belorussii, 1941–1944. Dokumenty i materialy* (The Nazi Policy of Genocide and Scorched Earth in Belorussia, 1941–1944: Documents and Materials) (Minsk 1984); *Nyametska-fashystsky genotsyd na Belarusi, 1941–1944* (German-Fascist Genocide in

- Belarus, 1941–1944) (Minsk 1995); *Mesta prinuditel'nogo uderzhaniiia grazhdanskogo naseleniia na vremenno okkupirovannoi territorii Belorussii v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny* (Places Where Civilians Were Forced to Stay in the Temporarily Occupied Territory of Belorussia during the Great Patriotic War: Reference Book) (Minsk: Committee for Archives and Registry of the Republic of Belarus, 1998); A. M. Litsvin (ed.), *Belarus u gady Vyalikai Aichynnai Vaine. Problemy gistoryagrafii i krynitsaznaustva* (Belarus during the Great Patriotic War: Problems of Historiography and Source Study) (Minsk 1999).
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  - 5 *Sudebnyi protsess po delu o zlodeiianiiakh, sovershennykh nemetsko-fashistskimi zakhvatnikami v Belorusskoi SSR. 15-29 janvar' 1946* (Trial in the Case of the Atrocities Committed by the German-Fascist Invaders in the Belorussian SSR, 15-29 January 1946) (Minsk 1947); *Prestupnye tseli – prestupnye sredstva. Dokumenty po okkupantstkoj poliitike Fashistskoi Germanii v territorii SSSR, 1941–1944* (Criminal Aims, Criminal Means: Documents on the Occupation Policy of Fascist Germany on USSR Territory, 1941–1944) (Moscow 1985); M. Savonyako, *Nemetsko-fashistskiye lageria na territorii Belorussii v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny, 1941–1944* (German-Fascist Camps in Belorussia during the Great Patriotic War, 1941–1944), dissertation for Candidate of Sciences (History) degree (Minsk 1993); G. Vinnitsa, *Slovo pamiatii* (Word of Memory) (Orsha 1997); E. Rosenblat and I. Elenskaia, *Pinskiye evrei, 1939–1944* (The Jews of Pinsk, 1939–1944) (Brest 1997); B. P. Sherman, *Baranovichskoe getto. Koldychevskii lager' smerti* (The Baranovich Ghetto and the Koldychevo Death Camp) (Baranovich 1997).
  - 6 V. Levin and D. Meltser, *Chornaia kniga s krasnymi stranitsami. Tragediia i gerioizm evreev Belorussii. Materialy i dokumenty* (The Black Book with Red Pages: The Tragedy and Heroism of Belorussian Jews. Materials and Documents) (Baltimore 1996); I. Arad (ed.), *Unichtozhenie evreev Sovetskogo Soiuza v gody nemetskoj okkupatsii, 1941–1944. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (The Extermination of the Jews of the Soviet Union during the German Occupation, 1941–1944: Collected Documents and Materials) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1992); *Neizvestnaia chornaia kniga. Svidetel'stva ochevidtsev o katastrofe sovetskikh evreev* (The Unknown Black Book: Eyewitness Accounts of the Holocaust of Soviet Jews) (Moscow–Jerusalem 1993).
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  - 12 'Jewish Refugees from Poland in Belorussia, 1939–1940', documents introduced and annotated by E. Ioffe and V. Selemenev, *Jews in Eastern Europe*, No. 1 (32), 1997, 45–60.
  - 13 V. Dubson, 'On the Problem of the Evacuation of Soviet Jews in 1941', *Jews in Eastern Europe*, No. 3 (40), 1999, 37–56.
  - 14 Volf Rubinchykh, 'Internet, yaurei i Belarus' (The Internet, Jews and Belarus), *ARCHE* (Belarusian-language historical and literary journal) (Minsk), No. 3, 2000, 50–64.
  - 15 *Argumenty i fakty* (Moscow), No. 3, 2000.
  - 16 *Haverim* (Minsk), No. 8, 1998.
  - 17 *Berega* (Minsk), No. 5, 1999.