

The people of Belarus endured a period of artificial disunity during the last century. Following the signing of a peace treaty in Riga on March 18th, 1921, between Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine on one side and Poland on the other, half of the republic's territory was ceded to its western neighbour. It was only in the autumn of 1939 that historical justice was restored. Pavel Trubchik, Deputy Director for Scientific Work at the Institute of History of Belarus' National Academy of Sciences, has shared insights on the significance of that event.

Consolidation effect

The reunification of Byelorussian territories in 1939 is one of the crucial milestones in the formation of our statehood

By Aleksandr Nesterov

Belarusians were not asked

— The events of September 1939 made the existence of modern Belarus — a sovereign and self-sufficient nation within the borders we recognise today — possible. Undoubtedly, the reunification of Byelorussian lands is one of the crucial milestones in the formation of Belarusian statehood, the key components of which include territory, language, and culture. But what happened back in 1921? Byelorussia, its territory and its people were artificially divided. Half of its land, home to over three million people, the majority of whom were ethnical Byelorussians, was ceded to another state. It is worth noting that representatives of Byelorussia were not invited to Riga in 1921, where the peace treaty was drafted.

Thus, the western territories remained under the jurisdiction of another state for nearly 20 years. The situation for the majority of the population was quite dire. The Polish government implemented a discriminatory economic, social, and national policy. For instance, there were about 400 Byelorussian schools on the territory of Western Byelorussia in 1921, whereas not a single one remained by 1939. Industry barely developed, with the exception of agricultural production. Meanwhile, the Polish authorities pursued a course aimed at extracting resources from Byelorussian lands. The wages of the inhabitants of Western Byelorussia were lower compared to those in the rest of Poland, and access to medical care was virtually non-existent. The social sector saw little to no development. It is no coincidence that the years 1921 to 1939 witnessed significant waves of migration of the population from Western Byelorussia to Western Europe and the USA. These are not mere allegations but irrefutable facts backed by archival materials.

— If we assert today that the reunification of Byelorussia in 1939 was an act of historical justice, does that accurately reflect the reality?

— Without a doubt. When the Red Army entered Western Byelorussia on September 17th, 1939, it encountered virtually no resistance; there were only isolated

Aleksandr Nesterov. Consolidation effect



The President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko,

"If the Red Army had not moved its troops to the west, towards Brest and Grodno, at that time, Germans may not have stopped at that western border. They could have come to the gates of Minsk. I dare say today that if in 1939, two years prior to the fascist invasion of the Soviet Union, Germans had been close to Minsk, the Great Victory of 1945 would not have been possible. A mere stride to Moscow — and the Soviet Union would have ceased to exist."

Extract from a speech at the Symbol of Unity forum of patriotic forces, on September 17th, 2021

pockets of opposition from the Polish army. The population warmly welcomed the Soviet troops almost everywhere, and by September 25th, the entire western territory of the republic was liberated and ultimately became part of the BSSR (Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic).

Facts without insinuations

— What is the historical significance of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed between the USSR and Germany on August 23rd, 1939, which subsequently made the liberation of Western Byelorussia possible?

— Today, we can confidently state that the Soviet leadership was primarily focused on safeguarding the interests of their country. Previous attempts to establish an anti-Hitler coalition had proven unsuccessful. Neither France nor England, who verbally acknowledged the need to resist Nazi Germany, took any meaningful action. That is why that agreement was signed. The USSR had one goal — to delay the onset of military hostilities. There was no intent to

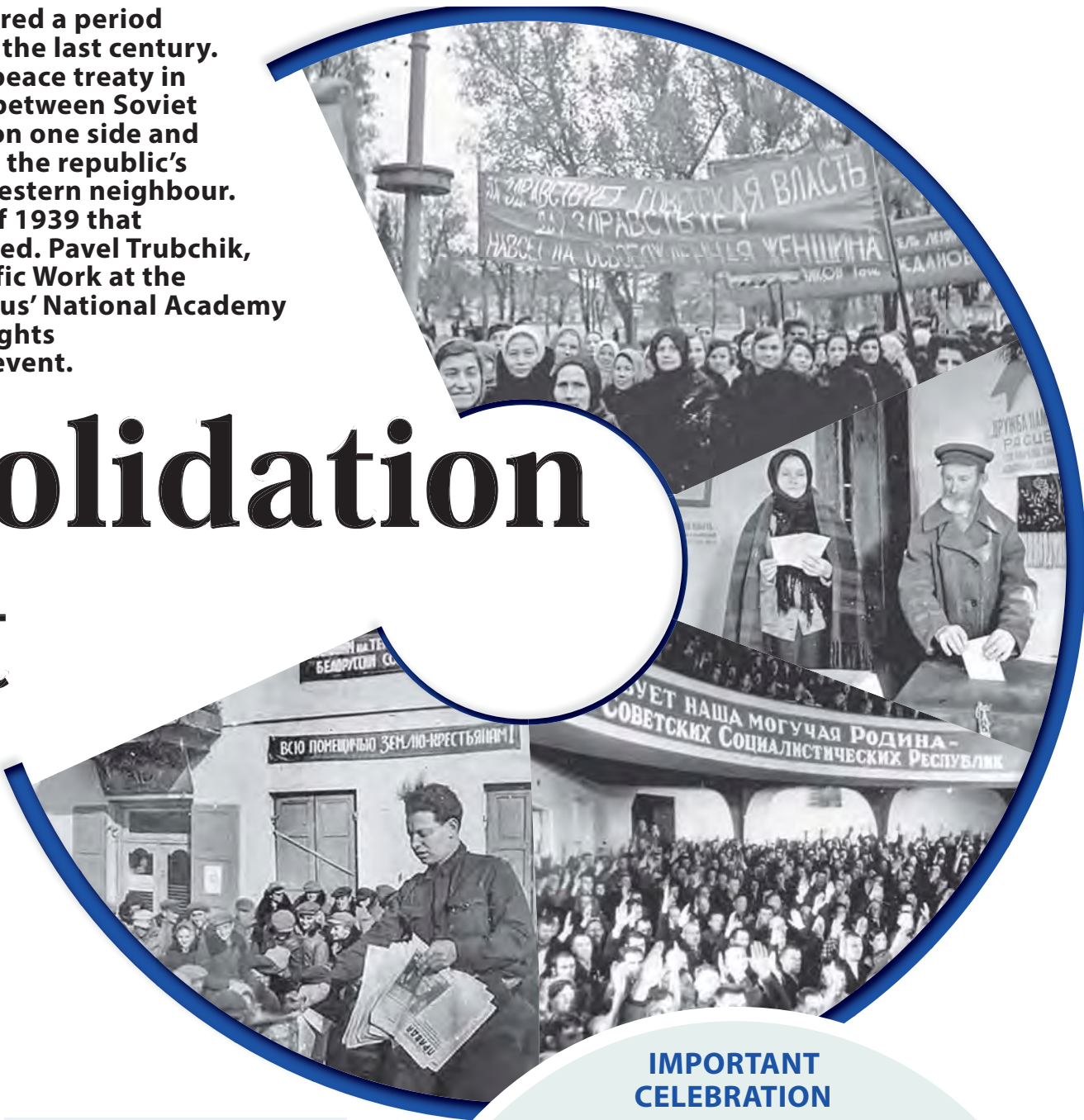
enter into an alliance with Germany. Moreover, at that time, Germany had agreements with numerous other states regarding co-operation, economic assistance, and so on. And what of it? For our republic, the pact had a positive impact, as it facilitated the reunification of Western Byelorussia with the BSSR.

In the public domain

— One of the objectives of the National Unity Day celebration is to preserve historical truth and convey it to new generations of Belarusians. What work is the Institute of History of Belarus' National Academy of Sciences undertaking in this regard?

— Our institute devotes significant attention to the topic of Belarusian statehood formation. In addition to arranging and participating in various events dedicated to the interwar period of the first half of the last century, we engage in research and preparation of thematic publications, as well as collections of documents. In particular, between 2018 and 2020, we published a five-volume series titled History of Belarusian Statehood, the third volume of which examines and characterises the stages, forms, directions, and peculiarities

of the development of Belarusian national statehood within the context of global geopolitical transformations from 1917 to 1939. We also released a collection of scholarly works titled The Riga Peace of 1921 and Belarus (in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the treaty). Society now shows heightened interest in the circumstances surrounding the signing of the Riga peace treaty and the overall period of Western Byelorussia's inclusion within the Polish state. These publications are available in the public domain, in libraries. We are currently collaborating with colleagues from various universities to prepare a multi-volume edition titled History of Belarus. This is going to be a fundamental comprehensive work that, taking into account new approaches and new sources, will address key topics crucial for a thorough understanding of the processes of land settlement in Belarus from prehistoric times (the pre-state period), the formation and development of the Belarusian people and their statehood from the 9th to the 21st centuries, as well as innovative questions, which have previously been overlooked or unpublished for various reasons. The events of 1939 will also receive extensive coverage.



IMPORTANT CELEBRATION

In 1939, the People's Assembly of Western Byelorussia declared September 17th as the day of liberation for working people of Western Byelorussia from the oppression of the bourgeoisie and landowners. This day was celebrated widely in 1940 across the BSSR in this very context. After the end of the 1941-1945 Great Patriotic War, the memorable date was mentioned at a union-wide level for the last time in 1949. Subsequently, the Soviet leadership issued a directive to temper the celebrations to avoid offending the Polish People's Republic, which by that time had become an important political, economic, and military ally of the USSR.