

# Goodbye, Motherland! Photo-Essay

Andrei Liankevich

War has never been anything close to me in the emotional sense. It was a story about how “every fourth person in Belarus was killed.” But I have never felt it personally: for me the war evoked no sorrow, no pain. I have always asked myself: why do people talk so much about the war? In the end, I found the answer to this question, and it was as distinctive as any personal experience could be. For me, it was the answer to the question: who are you? By blood. In your heart. Who am I?

My father Leopold’s ancestors were Polish. His father’s name was Błażej. The surname Lienkievicz, written on my grandparents’ graves, originates from a Lithuanian word meaning “Polish.” The origins of my mother’s ancestors are Belarusian (my grandmother, Sofia Tarasauna) and Russian (my grandfather, Grygoryi Ivanavich). My various family members experienced the war in ways that were different, and at the same time, similar. Poles from Western Belarus were not taken into the army—my father explains—because of distrust. My father’s cousin was the only one from the Polish part of the family who worked as a forced laborer for the Germans during the war; after the war, he decided to stay in Poland. After the Iron Curtain had fallen, we visited my uncle Anton in Poland. He lived in better conditions than we did. On our way to Poland, we waited for three days at the Polish–Belarusian border in Brest—the city where the German–Soviet war is eternally beginning all over again, and every evening you can hear explosions and Levitan’s voice spreading over the city-turned-museum.<sup>1</sup> My father

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<sup>1</sup> Yurii Borisovich Levitan’s voice was famous throughout the Soviet Union. An iconic radio personality who was on air through the war, he announced both the German assault on the Soviet Union in 1941 and the German surrender to Allied forces in Berlin on 8 May 1945.

served here, at the place where World War II began for the Soviet Union. On our trip, we stayed for three days at the place where he had spent three years of his life.

My great-grandfather Ivan was an Orthodox priest and an “enemy of the people.” My grandfather’s family lost everything after my great-grandfather was taken. They even had to search for birds’ eggs in the forest. But strangely, nobody in my family died as a result of the German invasion. My aunt Sonia, my grandfather’s sister, even survived the Siege of Leningrad.

This is how I started my trip into the world of war, a world I both understand and hate, as much as I hate the weapons used to fight wars. Belarusian history conventionally starts and finishes with the war: “We won. The good partisans beat the bad fascists.” I agree with the independent historians who say that the war in Belarus had much more in common with a civil war than a world war. There was the Polish Home Army (the *Armia Krajowa*), the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, the Lithuanian Forest Brothers (*Lietuvos Laisvės Armija*), fascists, and policemen, and among them all, ordinary people. Almost the whole history of Belarus can be compressed into those four years, years of war. There is only ever “After,” even in 1991, 1994, 1996... Fifty per cent of the street names in Minsk are still related to World War II, I mean the “Great Patriotic War.” Thirty per cent are named after war heroes. The military parade still takes place in Minsk every year on 9 May despite the economic crisis and the damage the tanks do to the city streets.

I started my trip with the feeling that not everything about the war could be so unequivocally good or bad. It could only be complicated and ambiguous. Yes, it’s true. There were many Jews in the partisan corps; they were eliminated by fascists, sometimes by locals. It wasn’t only jerks and careerists who joined the police; there were also those who wanted to take revenge for victimized relatives. The partisans weren’t saints either. The photos are only an attempt to talk about the war, about the modern attitude towards it. Answers, like experiences, are very personal.

ANDREI LIANKEVICH, born in 1981 in Western Belarus, is a renowned Belarusian photographer. He teaches in the media department of the European Humanities University in Vilnius, and was organizer of the annual World Press Photo exhibition in Minsk in 2012 and 2013. He is the author of a photograph of an elderly woman carrying a Soviet flag in front of the People's Palace on October Square. The image went viral after it was used as the cover for *Svetlana Alexievich's* book *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. The essay is part of his visual research project on the remembrance of World War II in Belarusian society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In other projects Liankevich has highlighted rural cultures and local traces of paganism in Belarus.

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