

# Overcoming Hegemonic Martyrdom: The Afterlife of Khatyn in Belarusian Memory

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the contested memory of civilian victims of the Second World War in Belarus, from the late Soviet period to the present day, focusing on the site of Khatyn, a Belarusian village whose residents were burned to death in March 1943. In the official Soviet interpretation, victimhood had redemptive meaning attached to it: according to the state, those murdered at Khatyn and other burned villages died for the freedom of the USSR. Literature, however, contested the state's monolithic memorialization. Works by authors such as Ales' Adamovich foregrounded meaningless suffering and traumatized memory, and thereby gave voice to individual experiences that were at odds with the state's triumphalism. The discursive conflict between different narratives within Soviet Belarusian society laid the foundations for further contestation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since 1991, Khatyn has been reevaluated and subjected to further criticism, whilst it has also been a major legitimizing instrument for the authoritarian regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. The article ends with an analysis of a recent Czech novella, Jáchym Topol's Chladnou zemí, which shows how Khatyn can be remembered without being restricted to the realm of the nation. It is argued that Topol's transnational treatment of wartime victimhood may contain a key to Belarus overcoming the lingering legacy of Soviet-era martyrdom.*

Recent years have seen the rise to prominence of the politics of victimhood in Eastern Europe. Burning issues that were suppressed under communism, such as the Polish-Ukrainian conflict of 1943–44 in Volhynia, anti-Semitic pogroms in Jedwabne (1941) and Kielce