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## The Recent Belarusian Exodus Seen against the Background of Earlier Belarusian and Russian Emigrations

### ABSTRACT

In this article the recent exodus of members of the creative intelligentsia from Belarus is reviewed in loose comparison with that from Russia in the early 1980s, a period of oppressive stagnation. A further background presents the earlier emigrations from both countries due to revolution and the aftermath of war. The moving scene of destinations for displaced poets, prose writers, playwrights as well as some journalists, presents a picture of, on the one hand, generosity of the host countries and, on the other hand, the resourcefulness and enterprise of those who have escaped from the cruel boorishness of Lukašenka and from the ruthless destructiveness of Putin's war. This article was written in an age of world mass migration and the author attempts to describe the emigration of Belarusian poets, prose writers and other cultural figures in the early 2020s, taking the Third Wave of emigration from the Soviet Union in the early 1980s as a background for comparison. These two large and diverse groups share the common feature of the loss of high quality poets and writers – both countries are deprived of an important element in the literary process. Poland has proven to be very hospitable during the recent exodus, particularly the Bielaviezh region, Wrocław, Warsaw and Poznań, the first of which has opened its borders to such distinguished writers as: Niakliajeu (b. 1956), Arlou and his wife Aksak (both b. 1953), and another fierce opponent of Lukashenka's regime, Jeva Viezhnaviec (pen-name of Sviatlana Kurs b. 1972). The author uses the historical, literary and comparative methods in the article.

**Keywords:** Recent literary Emigrations, Belarus, Russia, dictatorships, Belarusian Literary Association in Poland "Białowieża".

*“Comparisons Are Odious”<sup>1</sup>*

The main aim of this article, written in an age of mass migration (known to some Germans by the old term *Völkerwanderung*) is to describe the emigration of Belarusian poets, prose writers and other cultural figures in the early 2020s, taking as a background for comparison the Third Wave of emigration from the Soviet Union in the early 1980s. The most obvious connection between the two countries is that both are at the present time ruled by ruthless dictators: Aliaksandr Lukašenka (b. 1954) in Belarus from 1994, and Vladimir Putin (b. 1952) since 1999. The Belarusian leader showed his claws immediately by killing off political opponents [for detail see Bennett, 2011, and Wilson, 2021: 168–300]. Putin, on the other hand, started more slowly against a background of widespread crime and corruption, only gradually revealing his geopolitical plans, notably by annexing the Crimea in 2014, and most recently by the ridiculously named “special operation” in Ukraine that began in February 2022. The latter event provoked an immense, though not specifically literary, exodus of disgusted citizens from Russia (estimated by some to be comparable in number to those who left after the 1917 Revolution).

That comparisons can be difficult, the writer discovered when trying to compare Belarusian and British verse parodies,<sup>2</sup> finding in the process that in most cases it was more of a juxtaposition than a meaningful comparison. Another difficulty (also faced by compilers of anthologies) is the openness (in this case fully warranted) to accusations of omissions, and far from least of the problems, the difficulty of describing a constantly moving situation.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, there will be a brief outline of emigrations from Russia, and then consideration of the writers from Belarus at various times,

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<sup>1</sup> This extremely well-known sentiment is thought to derive from one of Chaucer’s predecessors, John Lydgate (c. 1370–1457), and had certainly reached its modern form by the time of Shakespeare who allowed himself to put a pun in the mouth of Dogberry (“comparisons are odorous”) in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Act III Scene 5. Subsequent uses of it by other writers, including Oscar Wilde, are far too numerous to mention.

<sup>2</sup> A. McMillin, *Poetry and Parody in Belarus and Britain: Two Cultural Traditions*, Olsztyn 2021.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance: H. Kirschbaum, *Revolution der Geduld: Eine belarussische Bricolage*, Berlin 2022, pp. 7–8.

in most cases in the last three or four years, who have left their country to continue their work abroad. Thus, the main focus will be placed on the cultural figures who left Belarus recently, following the violent repression of protesters at fake elections in 2020–21, but although there has been a tremendous emigration from Russia after Putin's unprovoked and undeclared war against Ukraine, this article will begin with the major emigration of Russian writers of an earlier period, especially in the early 1980s; the latter was partially facilitated by an agreement with Israel to allow all who claimed to be Jews to resettle in that country. As a result, many of the most prominent young Russian writers of the 1960s left Brezhnev's stagnant Soviet Union for a new life in the USA, Europe and, in rather few cases, Israel, something that was hardly regretted by Soviet officialdom. Amongst them we can mention Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), Vasilii Aksenov (1932–2009), Vladimir Voinovich (1932–2018), Aleksandr Zinov'ev (1922–2006), Sasha Sokolov (b. 1943) and Georgii Vladimov (1931–2003). Doubtless, many writers experienced the indifference shown to Vladimov when he was interrogated by a KGB officer shortly before emigrating: the writer asked the officer whether he was concerned that a Russian writer was leaving the country, to which came the reply: "No-o! We have many writers..." [Shnitman-Makmillin, 2022: 633]. The few major writers listed above are, in fact, less than ten percent of all those literary figures who emigrated in the 1980s. [For detailed accounts of this so-called Third Wave of emigration,<sup>4</sup> see the enumerated texts in the footnotes].

Briefly, here are a few of the many Belarusian writers and others who left their country at earlier periods, most notably at the end of the Second World War. They include Vincuk Advažny (pen name of Jazep Hiermanovič, 1890–1978), Alieś Zmahar (pen name of Aliaksandr Jacevič (1903–1995), Ryhor Krušyna (pen name of Ryhor Kazak (1907–1979), Janka Juchnaviec (1921–2004), Siarhieĭ Jasień (better known as the scholar Janka Zaprudnik [1926–2022]) and Jurka Vičbič (1905–1975); in addition to these we must add three outstanding poets: Larysa Hienijuš (1910–1983)

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance: A. McMillin, *Exiled Russian Writers of the Third Wave and the Émigré Press*, "Modern Language Review" 1989, pp. 84, 406–413; A. McMillin, *The Effect of Exile on Modern Russian Writers: A Survey*, "Renaissance and Modern Studies" 1991, No. XXIV, pp. 19–27.

who fled to Prague, and Natallia Arsieŋnieva (1903–1997) and Masiej Siadnioŭ (1913–2001) who settled in the USA. [For more details of these and other writers who left Belarus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> see the enumerated texts in the footnotes].

Russian writers, composers and other cultural figures who left their country after 1917, including Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), Igor' Stravinskii (1882–1971) and Sergei Diaghilev (1907–1929), are far too many to enumerate, but it is worth mentioning that before the 21<sup>st</sup> century Belarusians were far less likely to emigrate than were Russians. It should, however, be remembered that attempts were made in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Tsarist authorities to persuade impoverished Belarusians to go to Siberia in search of prosperity; such blandishments were warned against by Aliaksandr K. Jelski (1834–1916) and others.

Lukašenka's crimes and Putin's invasion of Ukraine brought the recent emigrations from Belarus and Russia nearer chronologically, although, as has been mentioned, the numbers of emigrants from Russia have been immense and could have been even greater if all the middle-aged members of the intelligentsia who felt their present leadership intolerable, had possessed transferable skills and therefore had something to do, as well as somewhere to live once they had emigrated.

A striking common feature of those who have left Belarus in the 2020s and the Russian writers of the 1980s is their high quality as writers and poets. With their emigration, their countries were deprived of an important element in the literary process of both countries. But the Third Wave of Russian emigration was of young men, whilst the Belarusian exodus included fully established older writers (e.g. Arloŭ, Niakliajeŭ, Dubaviec and Bacharevič). It should be mentioned that for the purposes of this article, as, indeed, for all my other publications, for me, Belarusian authors and poets are only those that write in Belarusian, whatever the undoubted merits of distinguished Russophone writers like Svetlana Alexievich (b. 1948) and Dmitrii Strotsev (b. 1963), both of whom have no hesitation in calling themselves Belarusian. One exception to what some may see as an arbitrary principle, is that of playwrights whose work depends largely

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<sup>5</sup> See: A. McMillin, *Belarusian Literature of the Diaspora*, "Birmingham Slavonic Monographs" 2002, No. 34, pp. 1–337.

on where they work, as well as of the independent journalists in the absence of a free press in their own country; an example of both phenomena is Sasha Filipenko who will be discussed later. And, at the risk of a digression, one of Belarusian finest novelists Vasil' Bykaŭ (1924–2003), always a popular writer, despite being harassed by the authorities in his earliest years, only started translating his own books into Russian when he found that earlier versions of them had specifically removed Belarusian elements. In any case, the Soviet cultural authorities often tried to claim the man who has been called “the conscience of the Belarusian people” to be a Russian writer.

Three highly talented women poets appear to have taken advantage of prestigious invitations abroad to remain and settle there (before the exodus of 2020–21), continuing to write in Belarusian. They are: Valžyna Mort (b. 1981) who is now well established in North America, teaching women's studies at Cornell University; Voĺha Hapiejeva (b. 1982) currently a resident in Germany and Austria,; and more recently Hanna Komar (b. 1989) who is working on a doctorate in Britain and hopes to settle afterwards. Amongst Komar's books may be mentioned *My vierniemsia* [*We Shall Return*], a collection of fragmentary monologues from the bitter air of exile.<sup>6</sup>

Amongst the places where Belarusian emigrants have made their new homes there are: Poland (Białystok, Warsaw, Wrocław, Poznań, Gdynia and Gdansk), Holland, Lithuania (mainly Vilnia), the Czech Republic, Germany, the USA, the UK, Finland, and Switzerland; Ukraine, before Putin's war, was also a temporary refuge for some Belarusians (e.g. Sys and Plotka).

To begin with eastern Poland, often referred to as Bielavieža, the community there, until recently led by Sakrat Janovič (1936–2013) in Kryнки, and Jan Čykvin (1943–2022) in Białystok, was given a boost by the activities of the broadcaster, musician, and avant-garde poet Viktor Siamaška (b. 1980). In the period under review the community has been joined by the doyen of Belarusian historical novelists Uladimir Arloŭ (b. 1953) and his wife, the gentle yet mysteriously strong poet Valiancina Aksak (b. 1953), whose new home should give them more chance to respond to their many invitations to travel. Another distinguished new

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<sup>6</sup> H. Komar, *My vierniemsia*, Moscow, Ugar 2022.

arrival has been Jeva Viežnaviec (pen name of Švialana Kurs, b. 1972), a fierce critic of the Belarusian authorities and author of *Šliach drobnaj svolačy* [*The Path of Petty Swine*, 2008]. One obvious advantage of this region has been that Belarusian is still spoken and understood quite widely, something that clearly does not apply to other countries. The second Polish example is less clear: during May 2023, when the present writer was giving a guest lecture in Poznań, the distinguished poet and prose writer U. Niakliajeŭ (b. 1946) came up from Wrocław to see his longtime friend; I had last met him in Minsk when he was under house arrest following his candidature for the Belarusian presidency with the party “Havary praŭdu” that nearly cost him his life. The day after the lecture and our meeting he, apparently, returned to Wrocław, but is now, after a short stay in Gdansk, back in Wrocław with his wife “until the end of the year”<sup>7</sup>; this changeability of location is entirely characteristic of the mobile nature of émigré destinations.

Poznań also provides a reminder, if such be needed, that not only writers and other prominent cultural figures choose to leave Belarus. For instance, my host there, Aleksandr Raspopov (b. 1985) left Belarus in 2003 in order to study at Poznań University, an institution with which he has been associated ever since: his sister, Ewelina Iwaczyk (b. 1991) studied at Horadnia University and worked in various jobs before emigrating in 2018. One of his cousins, Maria Gusińska (b. 1994), left Belarus after graduating from high school in 2012, then she studied in Warsaw, moving to Amsterdam after her studies. A close friend of Raspopov from Horadnia, Alih Barcevič (b. 1985) also left Belarus in 2003, and has worked, amongst other jobs, as a journalist at the Bielsat TV station. Finally, a poet, playwright, academic and translator who made Poznań his home, Viktor Voranaŭ (b. 1983), who, in less stressful times, was foolishly challenged by the present writer for calling the hero of a British children’s classic, A.A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh – Vinia Pych*, not realizing that such a transmutation had existed since 1926. At the present time he appears to be pursuing his academic career, teaching Irish literature and Belarusian culture at Southwestern College at Chula, California.

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<sup>7</sup> Message from the poet on 16 July 2023.

The publisher Andrej Januškievič (b. 1976) had to move to Warsaw [cf. No. 4]; a talented poet, Nasta Kudasava (b. 1984) from Rahačoŭ has settled in Gdynia, and the brave and outspoken journalist and writer, Aliaksandr Čarnucha (b. 1988) emigrated in 2021 and now lives in Warsaw after a stay in Kraków; his riotously satirical first novel *Šviŋni* [*Pigs*, 2021] was brilliantly translated into Belarusian by Alieś Plotka (b. 1984). Last, but far from least, the gifted poet Andrej Chadanovič (b. 1973) currently lives in Gdansk where, it must be hoped, his vivid imagination will continue to flourish (emigration would seem a suitable subject for his limericks).

Lithuania, particularly Vilnia, a city close to the hearts of many in the Belarusian intelligentsia, has given a lot of support to Belarusians since the coming of Lukašenka, as, indeed, Russia had done before the rise of Putin. At the present time, several writers have moved to Vilnia from Belarus. The minor but politically active poet Siaržuk Sys (b. 1962) a cousin of the major poet Anatol' Sys (1959–2005) fled for his life to Ukraine, Poland, Germany and, at the time of writing, to Vilnia.<sup>8</sup> The poet and talented translator Alieś Plotka mentioned above is also a member of the emigration from Belarus, having left in 2018 and now living in Lithuania, after he stays in the Czech Republic and Ukraine. Siarhieĭ Kalienda (b. 1985), the editor and writer, also appears to live in Vilnia; his Belarusian books include *Pomnik atručanym liudziám* [*A Monument to Poisoned People*, 2009], and he uses the pen name Aleksandr Batsel' for those written in Russian. Finally, we can mention the provocative liberal commentator, publisher, and teacher Siarhieĭ Dubaviec (b. 1959), a prominent figure in the period between the end of the Soviet Union and the rise of Lukašenka; he founded the newspaper *Naša niva* in Vilnia where he has lived for nearly two decades, also working for other liberal media outside Belarus.

Switzerland, the country where Russia's most famous literary émigré Vladimir Nabokov, chose to end his days, has recently also attracted a few prominent Belarusian refugees, namely Sasha Filipenko (b. 1984), a writer, playwright and journalist, with his wife and family, and, for a time, a prominent novelist Alhierd Bacharevič (b. 1975) with his wife, the poet and translator Julija Cimaŋiejeva (b. 1982), who moved first to Graz in

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<sup>8</sup> Communication from his sister-in-law, Iryna Dubanieckaja, on 7 July 2023.

Austria, then to Chemnitz in Germany and to the Swiss town of Zug before planning to move to Hamburg in late August 2023. These travels were accompanied by a Parthian shot at the ruler of his beleaguered native country: *Pieratrus u muzie* [*Shakedown in the Museum*, 2021–2022] begun during the dreadful events of 2020 and completed in Graz. Like all the writings by Bacharevič, this collection of fifteen stories is vivid and often memorable. In his Introduction he insists that his book is not a diary and not a collection of witness statements, but literature, a fable, words which might never have happened, although he goes on to say that a record must be kept of what Belarus was, and in support of those who resist attempts to destroy its values. The second chapter, *Karniki* [*Members of Punitive Expeditions*] is a reminder of the regime that provoked it. The book is dedicated to political prisoners and to all who oppose this destruction.<sup>9</sup>

Filipenko, born in Minsk, of mixed Ukrainian-Russian origin, became one of Lukashenka's fiercest opponents, criticising not only the multiple imprisonments, but also the holiest of holies, the holding of the Ice Hockey Championships, as a result of which he had to flee the country with his family to Switzerland, with no possibility of going back, whilst the official Belarusian press, like *Sovetskaja Belorussia* and *Belarus' Segodnia* took pleasure in writing details of what "justice" he would receive if he returned. His books have won several prizes and, even what might be called popular acclaim: they were chosen in a 2021 holiday reading blog by the celebrated TV interviewer Oprah Winfrey, and a year earlier a translation of his book *Novaja volna* [*New Wave*] was published in the literary edition of the morally ambiguous *Esquire* magazine. His play *Tikhari* [Belarusian *Cychary* – plain-clothes security forces] is set in a post-apocalyptic 2030 and was originally intended for a theatre in St Petersburg as there was no chance of its being staged in Belarus; after the Russian theatre decided not to put it on, however, it was premiered in Vilnia in 2023. Filipenko is as good an example as any of plays not automatically belonging to any one country.

Germany, and particularly German PEN, has been hospitable to many writers, including Vasil Bykaŭ in Frankfurt at the turn of the century, and

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<sup>9</sup> А. Бахарэвіч, *Піратрус у музеі*, Мінск 2023, pp. 4–5.



recently Źmicier Višnioŭ (b. 1973) in Berlin after the official liquidation of his enterprising publishing house, Halijafy. Like the older writer, Višnioŭ has continued to write in exile and has tried to save recent submissions by giving them to other publishers outside Belarus. Many aspiring Belarusian authors will be hugely disappointed at yet another of Lukašenka's destructive actions.

The Czech Republic, which has offered refuge to some distinguished Belarusian émigrés in the past, including Larysa Hienijuš, has been idealized by two young poets: Aliėš Jemialianaŭ-Šylovič (b. 1987), *Parohi* (*Thresholds*) and Źmitrok Kuzmienka (b. 1980), *Českim budicieliam* [*To Czech Builders*] for its positive attitude to nation-building [see McMillin, 2023: 54]. Amongst recent exiles from Belarus, it appears to be the present adopted country of the writer and journalist Viktor Marcinovič (b. 1977).

In Soviet times (and perhaps after them), Finnish men would regularly come to nearby Leningrad on drinking sprees. To emigrate from Belarus to Helsinki, however, would seem to require of the emigrant unusually developed linguistic skills, such as would also apply to settlers in Hungary, although that country is currently unwelcoming to refugees from any country, including Belarus. On the other hand, the Russophone publicist, playwright and political activist, Andrej Ivanoŭ (b. 1984) appears to have settled in Helsinki and to be continuing his work there. Also, there at some time after 2020 was the screenwriter, playwright, director and publicist, Andrej Kurejčyk (b. 1980), although he seems to have lived in several places since emigration. This recurrent note of uncertainty seems to be an appropriate ending for the main text of this study.

### *Conclusion*

Writers, poets, and other creative intellectuals living under the intolerable conditions of boorish, destructive dictatorships are naturally far more prone to emigrate than are those who live in democratic countries. The experience of Belarusians who emigrated must have been one of gratitude to the places where they have settled and are able to continue their work without hindrance, although, of course, many look back wistfully to a better past. For those who are left behind, the loss not only of major writers but

also of publishing houses, where they could submit their own poetry and prose without hindrance, is equally deeply felt. The moving and complex picture of where people settle is unsurprising, with Poland, Lithuania, and Germany at the forefront of nations willingly opening their doors to their distinguished new residents. As has been mentioned, the subject of this article is a changing one that will require expansion and revision in the future. Since completing it, moreover, another two intellectual exiles have come to the writer's attention: Aliaksiej Lastoŭski (b. 1979), the well-known historian from Polacak, and Ihar Kuzniecoŭ (b. 1979) from Minsk. It can only be hoped that such a work as this one and its successors will become no more than history, and that the time will come sooner rather than later when the immense rift in Belarusian intellectual life will be repaired, so that those emigrants and exiles who wish to are able to return to the beleaguered country they love.

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<sup>10</sup> Andrej Januškievič, the publisher, opened a bookshop, Knihaŭka, in Minsk, which was raided the same day by Lukašenka's violent security services, and closed immediately. The publisher, who now lives in Warsaw, has started his shop again but only in online form (<https://www.facebook.com/Knihauka/>) and had not opened a stationary shop in Poland at the time of writing.

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