

OUTBOUND TOURISM FROM SOVIET BELARUS AS A NEW BATTLE LINE IN THE COLD WAR DURING THE KHRUSHCHEV'S THAW

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This article explores the use of outbound tourism during the Khrushchev's thaw as a Cold War propaganda tactic for publicising the Soviet project abroad. Despite a threefold rise in tourist numbers, the primary goal of outbound tourism during the thaw years was the same as in the preceding years. The Soviet tourist was expected to build the USSR's international image and standing with their appearance, words, and actions, and their mere presence was supposed to demonstrate the freedom of movement they enjoyed at home. The Belarusian Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, the Minsk branch of the agency "Intourist", the Central Committee of the CPSU's commission for trips abroad, and the tourist and excursion division of the Belarusian Republican Council of Trade Unions all handled the organisational and technical aspects of outbound tourism. The international youth tourism bureau "Sputnik" created in 1958, was also vested with a similar function. The study reconstructs the institutional and organisational-legal landscape, the volumes and geographic scope, and also the forms and features of Soviet outbound international tourism in 1955–1968, using archive materials, published sources, and post-Soviet and Western historiography. By employing a non-institutional, anthropological approach, the author was able to take into account not only the actions of the bodies that organised Soviet citizens' travel abroad but also the political and ideological significance of these journeys, as well as the hidden behaviours of Soviet tourists during the Cold War.

Keywords: BSSR; outbound tourism; Cold War; ideology; propaganda; touristic services.

НА ТУРИСТСКОМ ФРОНТЕ ХОЛОДНОЙ ВОЙНЫ: ВЫЕЗДНОЙ ТУРИЗМ В БССР ЭПОХИ ОТТЕПЕЛИ

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Анализируется использование иностранного выездного туризма в БССР как одного из инструментов популяризации советского проекта за рубежом в период холодной войны. Основная миссия выездного туризма времен оттепели сохранила преемственность с предыдущим периодом, однако она реализовывалась в условиях многократного увеличения туристских потоков. Советский турист должен был своим внешним видом, словами и поступками поднимать престиж СССР, а сам факт его поездки доказывал, что в Советском Союзе есть свобода перемещения. Все организационно-технические вопросы выездного туризма решались комиссией по выездам за границу при ЦК КПСС, минским отделением организации "Интурист", Белорусским обществом культурных связей с зарубежьем, а также туристско-экскурсионным управлением Белорусского республиканского совета профсоюзов. С 1958 г. эту же функцию выполняло бюро международного молодежного туризма "Спутник". На основе архивных документов, опубликованных

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источников, постсоветской и зарубежной историографии реконструируются институциональные и организационно-правовые аспекты, объем, география, формы и особенности советского выездного зарубежного туризма в 1955–1968 гг. Использование неинституционального антропологического подхода позволило рассмотреть в контексте холодной войны не только деятельность организаций, отправлявших граждан СССР в зарубежные туры, но и политико-идеологическую составляющую этих поездок, а также теневые практики советских туристов за рубежом.

Ключевые слова: БССР; выездной туризм; холодная война; идеология; пропаганда; туристическое обслуживание.

Introduction

The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) set new directions for the deepening of international tourism exchanges by postulating the idea of peaceful coexistence of two world systems and rejecting the dogma of the inevitable onset of a new world war. The Soviet government viewed sending tourists overseas as a component of its foreign policy initiatives, and the tourists themselves were seen as a means of promoting the USSR, their country of origin. Like with inbound tourism, the economic benefits of outbound travel were only a side motive.

Several historians of international relations have explored the increase in interactions between inhabitants of Soviet Belarus and citizens of other nations between the mid-1950s and early 1960s. V. G. Shadurski chronicles the exchange of people and ideas in literature, film, theatre, and visual arts during the Cold War [1, p. 63–146]. I. M. Awlasenka highlights various Belarusian writers' discovery of the West and

their use of creative techniques to portray it negatively among Belarusians [2, p. 136–187]. G. F. Shapoval depicts the growth of widespread international tourism in the mid-20th century as a phenomenon in Belarusian tourist history [2, p. 109–122, 141–151]. A. F. Vyaliki explores the reasons and preconditions of Polish repatriation from Soviet Belarus in the late 1950s in a comprehensive study that includes quantitative data [4].

Outbound tourism, however, has received insufficient attention as a distinct socioeconomic and politico-geographic phenomenon in Soviet Belarus during the Khrushchev's thaw, as follows from the examination of this literature. According to the sources and materials discussed here, outbound tourism in Soviet Belarus was an essential aspect of sociocultural communication. It was another battle front in the ideological war for the Belarusian Communist Party, to which it was devoting an increasing amount of resources and a rising number of people.

The "iron curtain" goes up

After a CPSU Central Committee resolution of 25 April 1955, the first international trips by Belarusian tourists took place. Initially, they were to Communist countries, including the German Democratic Republic, the People's Republic of Czechoslovakia, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the People's Republic of China. In the first year of the mentioned resolution, 125 Belarusians travelled to these destinations. The Belarusian Society of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, the Minsk branch of the agency "Intourist", the CPSU Central Committee commission for trips abroad, and the tourist and excursion division of the Belarusian Republican Council of Trade Unions were in charge of the technical and organisational details of these visits. In 1958, the international youth tourism bureau "Sputnik" was established and vested with similar functions.

At full price, the tours were not cheap. A 12-day journey from Minsk to Romania costed 1179 roubles in 1958, and a 12-day visit to the GDR costed 1400 roubles. A 12-day trip to Western Europe would have the cost nearly twice as much. A 29-day boat journey across Europe costed between 4000 and 5400 roubles, depen-

ding on the cabin class. However, the top performers were eligible for reductions¹.

Republican and regional trade union councils were some of the bodies in charge of completing the paperwork for the border crossing permission. Trade union committees assessed the applications form candidates for overseas travel and chose workers and students in the best standing, as well as those who were trustworthy on political, moral, and life grounds. These criteria were used to choose the first Belarusian State University students to go to socialist countries in 1958. According to the letters of recommendation, Henadz Buraukin was in charge of the university radio, and an active member of the student theatre. He also composed and performed poetry in the working collectives. A. Mihailov was a modest and disciplined student who was a member of the faculty of history trade union bureau. V. Sidortsov, a student of the same faculty and trade union representative, was doing well on exams and performing in a folk instruments orchestra².

Prospective tourists to capitalist countries were subjected to a comprehensive background check. They needed outstanding recommendations, pristine records,

¹National Arch. of the Repub. of Belarus (NARB). Fund 265. Inv. 7. File 15. Sh. 61, 82.

²Ibid. File 12. Sh. 209 ; Ibid. File 13. Sh. 46, 124.

and, in most cases, good histories of travel to people's democracies. They were also obliged to fill out a long questionnaire regarding their families, employment, relatives overseas, and parents who resided in nazi-occupied territories, as well as provide health information. People of Jewish ancestry faced particular challenges.

Tourist group lists were to be finalised five to six weeks before departure, and visa applications had to be submitted to the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at least three weeks in advance. The groups were designated leaders and given instructions on correct behaviour before departure. The orientation typically continued after the delegations arrived at their destination, and they were greeted by a Soviet embassy officer. On the more "difficult" trips, a KGB officer accompanied the party.

In 1956, 24 Belarusians sailed aboard the cruise ship "Pobeda", hired by agency "Intourist", with 376 other Soviet tourists. They had all gone through the long and rigorous selection process, as well as the time-consuming paperwork and orientation, but their efforts paid off. From 4 to 30 July 1956, guests aboard the ship "Pobeda" visited Stockholm, sailed via West Germany's Kiel Canal, explored Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and the Hague, and visited Paris after disembarking in Havre, and continued to Naples, Rome, Athens, and Istanbul⁵.

The cruise was outwardly a leisure activity with free time. However, its designers saw it primarily as a tool of ideological indoctrination directed at foreigners and tourists alike. That explains the socio-professional makeup of the Belarusian travellers. The Soviet tourist was supposed to represent the new Soviet citizen, and the bulk of those selected were professionals. I. Melezh, a well-known Belarusian novelist, was named group leader for the Belarusian tourists on the cruise ship "Pobeda".

In contrast to many of their counterparts from capitalist nations Soviet visitors would devote their leisure time to creative endeavours and personal development. Academician P. Ragavy gave a presentation about the historic Pompeii to the other tourists. Academician Kh. Goreglyad, with whom he shared a cabin, was taking photographs for his scientific collection. L. Bessmertnaya, a professor at the Belarusian State Conservatory, and M. Godneva, a researcher at the Institute of Biology of Academy of Sciences of the BSSR,

augmented their coin collections. Writers I. Melezh and V. Zub kept literary diaries to document their experiences. Aspiring head of the Belarusian Communist Party Central Committee's department of propaganda S. Pavlov, a graduate of the faculty of philology journalism programme at the Belarusian State University, also used his free time to hone his literary abilities⁴.

I. Melezh wrote that every port in Western Europe had a friendly welcome for Soviet tourists. Right there on the dock, they struck up discussions, made jokes, took photographs, performed songs, and exchanged trinkets with the visitors. Throughout the tour, I. Melezh never experienced a single objection to their presence. Stockholm's plethora of vehicles, bicycles, and items from all over the world, as well as its attractive architecture and the perseverance of the Swedes, all left an impression on him. He also wrote about the historic structures in Naples, Athens, and Istanbul, as well as the canals, charming residences, and stunning architecture in Rotterdam, the Hague, and Amsterdam⁵.

The Society for the dissemination of political and scientific knowledge organised a meeting with the cruise participants on 23 August 1956, at the Felix Dzerzhynsky club in Minsk. According to the reports, the discussion met a high standard, ideologically and politically. The society's deputy chairman V. Antonishyn, wrote to the Secretary of the Belarusian Communist Party Central Committee T. Kiselyov: "No hostile ideas were expressed, and bourgeois culture was not magnified. The comrades correctly understood their task and accurately presented the facts about their journey"⁶ (hereinafter translated by us. – A. H.).

After the mid-1950s Belarusian tourist groups travelled to multiple socialist and capitalist countries. The press gave significant attention to these visits. Newspaper's pieces were illustrated with photographs of tourists' departure from the Minsk railway station, like the departure of a tourist group to Czechoslovakia in 1955. However, the look of the Belarusian tourists on the streets of foreign cities often took the locals by surprise. N. Kavriga, a student from Minsk who travelled with a group to Czechoslovakia, noticed that their countrymen were dressed out-of-date, and stood out from the locals by their manners. N. Kavriga wrote that on several occasions, the locals looked at her countrymen with surprise and confusion⁷.

The birth of mass tourism

The organisation of international tours, however, was not always up to the mark. For example, the tourist groups organised by the Belarusian Republican Council

of Trade Unions in 1958 were routinely below the anticipated size. In April, the group of Belarusian tourists who travelled to Warsaw numbered 5 instead of 34. In May

⁵Macveev N. [Through the eyes of foreigners] // *Maladosc'*. 1956. No. 11. P. 5 (in Belarus.).

⁴Ragavy P. [Around Europe] // *Rabotnica i sjaljanka*. 1956. No. 11. P. 12–14 (in Belarus.).

⁵Melezh I. [Sheets of the notebook] // *Polymja*. 1956. No. 10. P. 117–134 (in Belarus.).

⁶NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 47. File 425. Sh. 67.

⁷Kawguga N. [About taste and tactfulness] // *Chyrvonaja zmena*. 1958. 9 March. No. 48. P. 3 (in Belarus.).

only 4 tourists travelled to East Berlin instead of 30; in July only 15 tourists out of 30 visited Bulgaria, and four out of 14 went to Great Britain. Furthermore, the lists of tourists from Minsk usually arrived too late for Mos-

cow's approval. In his memoirs, writer I. Shamyakin remembers three boring days in 1959 which he spent with another Belarusian writer Maksim Tank (fig. 1) waiting for their papers to be processed in Moscow⁸.



Fig. 1 Maksim Tank in New York (1960).
Source: Belarus. State Arch.-Museum of Lit. and Art (BSAMLA). Fund 25. Inv. 25. File 74. Sh. 3.

The first international tourists from BSSR had few factory workers and hardly any collective farm employees among them. Conversely, there were a lot of housewives. Many tour groups consisted mostly of women, attracting ironic comments and jeers from foreigners. One commentator of the time jokingly advised ill or pregnant women to travel with the trade unions. Inadequate tourist preparation was also a common complaint. It was said that most were unprepared to engage in deep intellectual debates, and knew too little about the country they were visiting⁹.

The situation reportedly improved little in 1959, when only 520 Belarusian tourists travelled abroad. As a result, the 1959 target for outbound tourism from Minsk was fulfilled by only 70 %, and from the regional cities by 46 %. Rules for group formation were sometimes bypassed. The dynamic changed little in 1960¹⁰.

The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions in Moscow finally took notice. Its resolution of 24 April 1961 "On serious defects in the organisation on foreign tourism in the Belarusian Republican Council of Trade Unions", identified several shortfalls in the performance of the Belarusian trade union bodies and organisations and important deviations from both qualitative and quantitative criteria. The document named several instances

when "untrustworthy comrades" from the BSSR were selected for inclusion in the tour groups, and spent their time abroad speculating or drinking, instead of publicising the success of the 7-year plan, as they were expected. For example, an engineer from the Minsk Bearing Plant No. 11, who was visiting Hungary with his spouse in June 1960, sold a wristwatch and a camera for local currency. According to the document, workers of Mogilev's factory "Strommashina" displayed similar behaviours¹¹.

In response to the criticisms from Moscow, the authorities in Minsk began to form professionally oriented tourist groups. As expected, its members would effectively promote new management and organisational practices in socialist manufacturing industries and agricultural production. In 1962, 19 out of 30 international tourist groups from the BSSR were selected according to their profession. Large enterprises established a reserve from which candidates for foreign travel were chosen. Travellers were expected to give a presentation for their peers after their return, and group leaders submitted reports for the tourism and excursion division of the trade unions which it reviewed regularly¹².

In the 1960s, the number of international tourists from Soviet Belarus increased, and so did the number of

⁸*Maksim Tank*. [On the stone, iron and gold]. Minsk, 2012. P. 24 (in Belarus.).

⁹NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 62. File 489. Sh. 19–21.

¹⁰Ibid. File 520. Sh. 221–224.

¹¹Ibid. File 541. Sh. 22.

¹²Ibid. File 570. Sh. 288.

countries they visited. Mikhas Lynkov published a series of pieces based on his remarks from his visit to India¹³. “I have travelled a lot across the world, especially in the previous six years. I have been to eleven European nations, Canada, and the United States”, – wrote another writer, Janka Bryl, in 1962¹⁴. Vital Volsky could be seen not only “beyond Berezina, Naroch, and Polesye, he could also be seen in Stockholm, Rome, Brussels, and the African savannahs”¹⁵. Frequent travellers could also be found outside of the literary circles. Y. Klimchenko, a worker at the Minsk Tractor Plant, visited Paris, Am-

sterdam, Berlin, Dresden, Rome, Milan, Florence, several other cities in Western Europe between 1958 and 1963, travelling as a tourist¹⁶. Some countries remained off-limits to these tourists, including Israel, vilified by Soviet propaganda.

Despite all efforts, there were always fewer international students from the BSSR than visitors from other countries over similar periods. For example, the Belarusian Republican Council of Trade Unions sent 950 international tourists from the BSSR in 1963, while receiving 1557 visitors from Communist nations¹⁷.

Cream of society

Following M. Khrushchev’s example, party and government officials in the Soviet republics increased their participation in foreign affairs. Foreign travel was an unacknowledged privilege of the nomenklatura. Initially reserved for the higher ranks, it was gradually extended to the middle and lower positions. For example, in 1956, the first secretary of the Belarusian Communist Party’s Central Committee K. Mazurov visited Great Britain as a member of the Soviet delegation, attended the World exhibition in Brussels, participated in the Swedish Communist Party congress in 1958, took

part in the UN General Assembly session in New York in 1960 (fig. 2) and went to the Belgian Communist Party congress in 1964¹⁸. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the BSSR, K. Kiselyov went on a holiday to Hungary with his wife. He had been invited by his Hungarian counterpart, E. Sik, to facilitate cordial friendships between the Soviet and Hungarian peoples¹⁹. Likewise, A. Zawadzki, the head of the State Council of the Polish People’s Republic, invited V. Kozlov, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Belarus, for a visit²⁰.



Fig. 2. Petrus Brovka among the Belarusian delegation at the 14th session of the UN General Assembly in New York.
Source: Lit. Museum of Petrus Brovka. KP 13653.

The Belarusian officials’ formative years were under J. Stalin’s harsh rule, and many found it hard to believe that honest work and exclusive travel offerings were

compatible. In 1958, representatives of the republican ministries visited the International spring trade fair in Vienna, the Exhibition of industrial textiles and carpet

¹³Lynkov M. [Under the sun of India] // LiM. 1957. 26 Jan. No. 8. P. 4 ; 13 Feb. No. 13. P. 4 ; 16 Feb. No. 14. P. 4 ; 20 Feb. No. 15. P. 4 ; 23 Feb. No. 16. P. 4 ; 27 Feb. No. 17. P. 4 (in Belarus.).

¹⁴Janka Bryl. [Thoughts in the road] // Polymja. 1962. No. 12. P. 105 (in Belarus.).

¹⁵Bojka U. [Tireless traveller, inspired worker] // LiM. 1961. 5 Sept. No. 70. P. 3 (in Belarus.).

¹⁶Kononova N. [In a strange world] // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 1963. 4 Aug. No. 182. P. 2 (in Russ.).

¹⁷NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 62. File 650. Sh. 32–33.

¹⁸Mazurov K. [Memories, speeches, interviews]. Minsk, 1999. P. 329 (in Russ.).

¹⁹NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 62. File 570. Sh. 286.

²⁰Ibid. File 545. Sh. 175–179.

products in London, the National electrical engineering exhibition in London, the International spring industrial and trade fair in Utrecht, the International technical fair in Copenhagen, the International spring fair in Frankfurt am Main, the National exhibition of construction machinery and equipment in Munich, the International agricultural fair in Strasbourg, Finnish industrial fair in Helsinki, the International motor show in Geneva, and many other events, under a plan approved by the Belarusian Council of Ministers²¹. In 1959, Deputy Chairman of the State Committee for Nature Protection, F. Prokudin, was dispatched to an environmental seminar on a cruise ship departing from Basel and chartered by its organisers²².

Belarusian academics rediscovered the value of international exchanges for the progress of science and research, and the Soviet Union's scientific links with other nations deepened. Academics from Belarusian universities and the Academy of Sciences of the BSSR travelled abroad to give lectures, attend conferences and seminars, and act as consultants. Director of the Institute of History of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences I. Kravchenko was among the first to travel internationally for the 3rd congress of the International Association of Sociologists in Amsterdam in August 1956²³. Later in October, head of the Belarusian department for the archives A. Azarov travelled to Florence for the International congress of historians archivists in Florence²⁴. Head of the Belarusian Polytechnical Institute's department of architecture A. Voinov attended

the 11th International architectural exhibition in Milan and participated in a tour of Italian cities after its closure²⁵. Head of department of the history of Belarusian State University U. Sikorski travelled to the 10th session of the global conference "University today" in July 1965 in Dubrovnik, a famous tourist destination. After presenting the achievements of the Belarusian education system, he toured "...the famous places and scenic parts of the Adriatic coast, visited Cetinje, the ancient capital of Montenegro, viewed the historical monuments of Sarajevo, and appreciated the bliss of the hot southern sun and warm Adriatic Sea"²⁶.

In the summer of 1958, the international youth tourism bureau "Sputnik" dispatched around 100 top students of Belarusian universities to Bulgaria, East Germany, and Romania, tasked with spreading the truth about the life of the Soviet people among their peers in other countries²⁷.

Fans of the Belarusian sports club "Torpedo" travelled to an international skiing event in Finland, opening the door for mass sports tourism²⁸.

Members of the Belarusian Union of artists learned about the other nations imaginatively. During their foreign tour, they painted landscapes in nature and also toured European art museums. As a result, their conception of socialist realism was challenged by what they saw. An exhibition hosted by the art museums of Minsk and Moscow after their return in 1962 featured works by I. Akhremchyk, B. Malkin, S. Gerus, V. Stelmashonak, E. Krasovski and S. Selikhanov among others²⁹.

The winds of the Cold War

Belarusian tourists were closely supervised throughout their visits, including by their group leaders (selected from among the activists of the Communist party, Komsomol, or the labour unions), and sometimes they were escorted by KGB officers. The group leaders prepared in-depth reports for their management on the internal political situation of the countries visited, perceptions of the USSR abroad, and tourist behaviour. Some of these reports resembled spy novels. For example, the leader of the Belarusian group sailing around Europe on the steamship "Pobeda" wrote to K. Mazurov on 21 November 1956: "In Paris, a man approached a group of our comrades. He introduced himself by his last name and claimed he was a Russian who fled the Soviet Union in 1951. He said he hated the Soviet Union and accused the Soviet authorities of murdering his father in 1937.

He attempted to get our comrades to read anti-Soviet newspapers. Here is one fascinating detail. We arrived in Paris. Although the Parisian newspapers had not written about our visit, he was waiting for us at the hotel, and the details of our arrival were fully known to him, as it became clear during a conversation. Later in Athens, anti-Soviet leaflets were distributed again as the buses were approaching the Acropolis... A British warplane passed the cruise ship at deck level in a sweeping flight in the Dardanelles Strait. A police boat with its lights off was seen on the right side as the boat was leaving the port of Piraeus after sunset. Unexpectedly, the boat swerved left and struck the steamship's stern with its nose"³⁰.

F. Baranov, secretary of the Communist Party's Grodno regional committee wrote in a report to K. Mazurov

²¹NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 62. File 462. Sh. 151–152.

²²Ibid. File 602. Sh. 43.

²³Kravchenko I. [Ten days in Holland] // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 1956. 18 Nov. No. 269. P. 3 (in Russ.).

²⁴[Belarusian scientists at the international congress] // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 1956. 29 Sept. No. 228. P. 2 (in Russ.).

²⁵[Soviet architects in Italy] // Sovetskaya Belorussia. 1957. 13 Nov. No. 267. P. 4 (in Russ.).

²⁶Sikorski U. [On the shores of the Adriatic] // Zvjazda. 1965. 5 Sept. No. 210. P. 4 (in Belarus.).

²⁷[Tourist trips abroad] // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 1958. 13 June. No. 136. P. 2 (in Russ.).

²⁸[Belarusian tourists vent to Finland] // Zvjazda. 1957. 22 Feb. No. 45. P. 4 (in Belarus.).

²⁹[Artists about abroad] // Polymja. 1962. No. 8. P. 192 (in Belarus.).

³⁰NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 53. File 59. Sh. 57–58.

about a “vast network of retail businesses” in Poland’s Bialystok voivodeship that thrived during the Homulka thaw: “There are multiple private shops along with state and cooperative ones. Their prices are twice as high, but their products are of superior quality. The zloty has weak buying power.

There are 450–480 active churches in the area. The priests are calling for 45 more to be built. Atheistic agitation is not widespread. Optional lessons in religion are offered at schools. In the Polish United Workers’ Party, attending church after a party meeting is considered normal practice. After the well-known October incidents, fewer people have been joining the party.

Out of the 300 collective farms active in the voivodeship before the Polish United Workers’ Party’s 8th plenum, roughly 30 have remained. The Socialist youth organisation’s draft programme urges the Polish youth to combat Stalinism as their primary responsibility”³¹.

The basic rules of conduct of soviet citizens travelling to capitalist and developing countries and the basic rules of conduct of Soviet citizens travelling to socialist countries set strict guidelines for tourist behaviour. Tourists were forewarned that Western secret services might be watching their every step. They were cautioned against exploring the city on their own, visiting stores, restaurants, and other places of entertainment, starting conversations with strangers, exchanging addresses with them, and making independent contacts.

Typically, Soviet tourists interacted with locals during scheduled meetings with members of left-leaning political parties, public groups, and labour unions. At these gatherings, Belarusian visitors were expected to tell their audiences about their country’s achievements in building a new communist future for all its citizens. This included the discussion of social security enjoyed by the Soviet people, including the absence of

unemployment, free healthcare and education, and free summer camps for children. During his 1959 visit to the United States, the Soviet state’s leader N. Khrushchev gave an example of such advocacy when he shook hands with the Belarusian emigre D. Zastupnevich, a worker at the machinery “Mesta” and said that Minsk has become a great and attractive city today and D. Zastupnevich probably would not recognise it.

Frequently, however, the questions, comments, and actions from the audience disrupted the standard routine of these staged events, or “directed tourist performances”, as A. Gorsuch referred to them in her graphic metaphor [5, p. 13]. Tourists were made to feel uneasy, uncomfortable, and sometimes frustrated. L. Proksha, editor of the newspaper “Voice of the Fatherland”, recalls one such uncomfortable incident at the opening of the World exhibition in Montreal in 1967. As D. Polyansky, deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR was addressing the visitors to the Belarusian pavilion, emigre writer K. Akula cried out “Free Belarus!” and tossed a bundle of flyers into the crowd³². When delegates from the twin cities of Minsk and Nottingham met on British soil in 1965, the visitors from Minsk deviated from the standard plan and went on a counteroffensive, attacking the lack of maternity leave for British women and the rising cost of public transport in the UK³³.

Visits to plants, factories and agricultural businesses were essential elements of any tour programme. Tourists were expected to treat them as opportunities to present the advantages of socialist production. Frequently, however, the reality differed from the plan. For example, the delegation of Belarusian textile workers was impressed by the superior organisation and working conditions at a textile mill they visited on their journey to Norway at the end of 1962³⁴.

Tragedies in the consumer’s paradise

Sometimes, the encounter with Western realities changed the lives of Soviet tourists with occasionally catastrophic results. One such incident occurred in August 1961 while a group of writers, painters, academics, journalists and other intellectuals was on a 12-day visit to France. The tour had been organised by agency “Intourist”, which appointed V. Kravchenko, a 45-year-old author and editor-in-chief of the children’s magazine “Biarozka”, as the group leader. B. Merkulov, a student at the Academy of Social Sciences under the Central Committee of the CPSU, was the head of the group, and an officer M. Repich was the KGB representative.

The group arrived in Paris. The director of the Yanka Kupala Theater V. Brovkin was impressed by the abundance of goods in the stores and complained

that Soviet tourists were too poor and could not afford a thing. The situation quickly went out of control. V. Brovkin frequently separated from the group to attempt visits to night clubs and start conversations with foreigners. He sought private meetings with the Paris television studio’s artists to ask about the pay and working conditions for artists in Paris. He also asked about the cost of an apartment in Paris in case he might decide to stay. Finally, when a tour guide in the Louvre, a Russian immigrant, observed that Ilya Repin is unknown in France, he agreed with him enthusiastically.

After a consultation, B. Merkulov and M. Repich decided to send K. Brovkin back to Minsk without delay. On 24 August, V. Brovkin and Vasil Vitka, the editor-in-chief of the children’s magazine “Vjasioka”, were placed on

³¹NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 62. File 469. Sh. 258.

³²BSAMLA. Fund 92. Inv. 1. File 273. Sh. 151–152.

³³Shydlovski A. [The dialog of friendship] // Zvjazda. 1965. 10 Feb. No. 33. P. 3 (in Belarus.).

³⁴Kalinin G. [In the country of blue fjords] // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 1962. 18 Dec. No. 295. P. 3 (in Russ.).

a flight from Paris to Moscow. Vasil Vitka's behaviour did not raise any objections. The whole group was sad because of the incident. As they began their bus tour around France, V. Kravchenko expressed deep concern about Vasil Vitka and V. Brovkin being sent back. He even asked B. Merkulov to send him to Minsk as soon as possible. He was depressed the whole time, according to accounts from the other tourists³⁵.

On 27 August the tourists arrived in Cannes and checked into the hotel "Moderne". V. Kravchenko oversaw the check-in process as the group leader. He went to his room on the 6th floor with the artist E. Tikhonovich. As E. Tikhonovich later recounted, as soon as they opened the door, V. Kravchenko went to the restroom and he heard a strange scream from there minutes later. "When I entered the bathroom, I saw him sitting on the grating of the open window. He was leaning back, and there was an odd smile on his face, – remembers E. Tikhonovich. – Kravchenko threw himself down through the bars as I attempted to grab him. He died in 30 minutes after landing on the cement roof of the adjacent hotel cafe"³⁶.

The French police investigating the death found V. Kravchenko's farewell letter, later published by the French newspaper "Jour": "I cannot consider myself a communist any longer. On this tour, I found the true meaning of freedom, but I cannot betray my homeland by staying behind and asking for asylum. The only way

to end this drama is by death. I bring my most sincere regrets and apologies to my family, my country, my wife and children"³⁷.

The incident was also investigated on the Soviet side, sparking a debate among the intellectuals in Minsk and also in the Belarusian emigrant circles. The investigation found that V. Brovkin and V. Kravchenko should not have been sent abroad in the first place. V. Brovkin's father was sentenced to eight years imprisonment for anti-Soviet propaganda in 1941. In 1942 K. Kravchenko's wife was became forced labourer in Nazi Germany, where she later married a British army officer.

Additionally, V. Kravchenko had had an active neurological condition since 1949. The investigation's findings led to the dismissal of the KGB officer in charge of screening the group members, and doctors were instructed to be more stringent when examining candidates for foreign travel³⁸.

Overseas travel was thus more than just a once-in-a-lifetime chance to peer behind the "iron curtain", but also a test of one's worldview that not everyone could pass. First-time tourists from Soviet Belarus had multiple misconceptions about living abroad. For their entire lives, they had been targeted by the Soviet propaganda's negative portrayals of the West. The tourist's encounter with the concepts, values and realities of the West created cognitive dissonance and resulted in psychological discomfort.

Living up to the honour and trust

Tourists' accounts about life over there were published in the media and used as propaganda tools in negative portrayals of the West. For example, the newspaper "Chyrvonaja zmena" launched the column "Travel notes" in 1955, and the magazine "Maladosc" started the section "Around the world" in 1956. Likewise, the newspaper "Sovetskaya Belorussiya" featured the column "What the tourists say" in 1958. The Society for the dissemination of political and scientific knowledge launched a public lecture series called "The world map".

I. Orlov and A. Popov have summarised some of the most common propaganda clichés about the West: that the world's workers and peasants look to the life of the Soviet citizens with hope and view their wealthy classes with hostility and fear, that most people in the West are poor, their social problems are neglected, and their future is uncertain that material wealth and comforts are illusory and enjoyed by a very small proportion of the Western population [6, p. 258].

For example, one Belarusian tourist described the situation in 1962 France as pre-revolutionary. He wrote: "The wealthy French are dreaming of France's return to its former glory. They overeat, drink to excess, and want to live in the old way. They ignore the proletariat's struggle, as their newspapers are filled with stories of weddings, divorces, and scandals in aristocratic families. Their clubs run jazz and striptease shows. But no one can stifle the voices of the people"³⁹. V. Polyakov wrote about his visit to the Benelux nations: "A Dutchman with an average income eats meat once a week, substitutes butter with margarine, and drinks low-fat milk"⁴⁰. Other columnists who travelled around Europe wrote about "the weary, exhausted workers of Istanbul", "the huts of Alexandria hit by the bombs launched from British and French planes", and "the squalid slums on the outskirts of Cairo"⁴¹.

Returning Belarusian tourists routinely criticised avant-garde art displayed in Western museums of contemporary art. Z. Azgur, whose social standing and resources were sufficient to travel to the West relatively freely,

³⁵NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 62. File 556. Sh. 196.

³⁶Ibid. Sh. 198.

³⁷Ibid. Sh. 206.

³⁸Ibid. Sh. 199.

³⁹Ponomarev V. [France in front of the lens] // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 1962. 9 Dec. No. 288. P. 4 (in Russ.).

⁴⁰Polyakov V. [In Belgium and Holland] // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 1959. 19 May. No. 115. P. 2 (in Russ.).

⁴¹Shcheglova V. [Homeland is the most precious thing] // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 1958. 26 Sept. No. 226. P. 3 (in Russ.).

left this account about his visits to Italian museums in 1965: “I am happy that Soviet art remains grounded in the traditions established by the greatest masters of realism, and rejects the overtures of the abstractionists”⁴². Literary critic A. Adamovich commented on his visit to the pavilion “50 years of world art” at the 1958 Brussels world exhibition: “This modernist display seemed to me like a twisted mirror, that reflected man and nature in a most unseemly manner... I was delighted to see how the visitors’ faces brightened up as they entered the pavilion with Soviet art”⁴³. N. Krasnova, a secretary of the Belarusian Young Communist League (Komsomol), commented on M. Chagall’s painting “Bouquet and flying lovers” in London’s Tate Gallery: “Only a liar or a madman could have painted it”⁴⁴.

Yet despite all efforts, the tourists’ exposure to Western realities challenged these cliches and sometimes

dispelled them. Later in his life, novelist I. Shamyakin gave the following account of his encounter with the Americans in the 1960s: “We envied their country’s wealth. We were critical, but still envious”⁴⁵. Belarusian actor and playwright E. Romanovich remembered his stay in the a Paris budget hotel “Brabant” in 1956: “The beds are large; they are not simple beds, but some kind of platform for sleeping, and also for jumping and rolling. They look like boxing rings”⁴⁶. As the pressure of ideology weakened during the thaw years, N. Vorvulyov, solo singer of the Belarusian Opera and Ballet Theatre, wrote about the high standard of service in British restaurants, hotels, and shops, and even described the use of an X-ray machine to help customers try on their shoes⁴⁷. Famous chess player K. Zvorykina left a highly positive account of her visit to the Netherlands⁴⁸. In turn, Yanka Bryl wrote a complementary review on his trip to Canada⁴⁹ (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Maksim Tank and Janka Bryl' in Paris (1960).
Source: BSAMLA. Fund 25. Inv. 1. File 71. Sh. 33.

Rector of the Belarusian Agricultural Academy I. Garkusha, was surprised at the small number of villages he saw on his visit to Sweden at the end of 1962 with a Soviet delegation. The academician wrote: “Lonely, isolated farms are scattered across the land”. He believed this isolated way of life left an imprint on Swedish society and psychology, where “the notion of private property has exceeded normal human bounds”⁵⁰. The relative merits of Swedish farms were difficult to discuss in the Soviet press then, especially in comparison

with the Belarusian collective farms. However, even his objective description of a 300-year-old Swedish farm let through by the censors betrays the scholar’s surprise and envy. I. Garkusha was well aware of the horrors of the socialist modernisation of the Belarusian countryside. He said: “For several centuries, this Swedish farm had been passed on from the great-grandfathers to the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren, without a single transgression on its boundaries. Even the original buildings have been preserved”⁵⁰.

⁴²Azgur Z. [The sun is Italian guide] // Polymja. 1965. No. 7. P. 159 (in Belarus.).

⁴³[4th writer’s congress. Discussion over P. Brovka’s report] // LiM. 1959. 18 Feb. No. 14. P. 4 (in Belarus.).

⁴⁴Krasnova N. [Three weeks in England] // Znamya yunosti. 1956. 26 Sept. No. 188. P. 3 (in Russ.).

⁴⁵Shamyakin I. [Thoughts on the last stretch]. Minsk, 1998. P. 268 (in Belarus.).

⁴⁶BSAMLA. Fund 243. Inv. 1. File 259. Sh. 11.

⁴⁷[A mounth in England] // Maladosc’. 1956. No. 4. P. 8 (in Belarus.).

⁴⁸Zvorykina K. [With camera in Holland] // Maladosc’. 1956. No. 12. P. 12 (in Belarus.).

⁴⁹Janka Bryl’. [On the Western side of the planet. From Canadian memories] // Belarus. 1960. No. 3. P. 10–14 (in Belarus.).

⁵⁰Garkusha I. [In Shveden] // Sovetskaya Belorussiya. 1963. 4 Jan. No. 3. P. 3 (in Russ.).

Belarusians had difficulty sticking to the ideologies they had imparted, not least because of the culture shock they experienced when visiting the shops. Financial and customs restrictions put in place in the 1950s were meant to check the spirit of consumerism slowly spreading among tourists. Tourists to socialist countries could exchange only 30 roubles which they could use as pocket money to buy postcards or souvenirs. The limit for the capitalist countries was 25 dollars. However, some tourists could not exchange even those small amounts. In May 1963, I. Sorokin, a star singer from the Belarusian Opera and Ballet Theatre, was dispatched on a train tour to Turkey without any foreign currency⁵¹.

The state had a monopoly over foreign exchange transactions, and tourists from Soviet Belarus brought goods from their country to sell on the black market or exchange for other goods. Stringent customs rules

restricted the export of items like jewellery, cameras, radios, cigarettes, vodka, or caviar, which many tourists bypassed in the desire to acquire expensive imported goods that also had a high symbolic value at home. Vasil Bykaw who attended the 1965 European society of writers congress, recounted with great humour how he had helped his colleague V. Aksyonov get through the Italian customs with a load of cigarettes⁵².

Group leaders often noticed and reported extreme consumerist behaviour among tourists. The arrival of high-end Western consumer products during the Cold War era challenged the Soviet Union's image as a forward-looking nation. Tourists risked serious sanctions for speculation and other unethical behaviours after their return. Belarusian poet and translator Yazep Semyazhon was one of the tourists punished in 1960 for selling a bottle of vodka to a Belgian during a stopover in Antwerp⁵³.

Conclusions

Poet Vasil Vitka, wrote in 1960: "Few people today would view a visit to Europe or America and their return home as something unusual". With hindsight, this observation now appears to be an understatement. International travellers, especially to capitalist countries, had the respect and envy of many Belarusians who had no such opportunity. Foreign travel not only changed the lives of tourists but also became a mark of high social standing. The division between the elite minority who could travel abroad, and the great majority whose movements were restricted to their place of residence, employment and a modest resort inside the country, was one of the cleavages that emerged in the Belarusian society during the Khrushchev's thaw, as it did in the rest of the Soviet Union. "Ersatz travel" in public lecture rooms, movie theatres or on television, was a much safer way to meet the people's needs for travel

in terms of ideology. One of the most widely watched programmes on Soviet television at the time was the "Travellers club".

Despite restrictions on international travel and the ideological pressures surrounding it, not every visitor to the West returned home with the belief that the communist utopia was around the corner. Travellers' experiences, even from visits to Socialist states, did a lot to dispel the Soviet ideological cliches. Tourists from the BSSR saw greater levels of political and economic freedom in the countries they visited, and some attributed to these freedoms the high standards of living enjoyed by the majority. Their accounts, supplemented by other information, such as from the "enemy" radio broadcasts, eventually altered the collective consciousness of Soviet Belarusians and challenged their perception of the world as shaped by J. Stalin's propaganda.

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⁵¹NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 73. File 238. Sh. 48, 51.

⁵²Bykaw V. [How I was a smuggler] // LiM. 1966. 1 Jan. No. 1. P. 4 (in Belarus.).

⁵³NARB. Fund 4p. Inv. 62. File 541. Sh. 187.

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