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INBOUND TOURISM TO SOVIET BELARUS DURING THE KHRUSHCHEV'S THAW AS A COLD WAR FRONTLINE

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The author of this article examines the use of inbound tourism to the BSSR during the Cold War for promoting the Soviet way of life abroad. Despite a tripling of foreign visitors number during the Khrushchev's thaw era, inbound tourism continued to serve the same primary purpose as in earlier decades: to convince foreign audiences of the indisputable merits of the socialist system and the Soviet way of life while enticing more people to visit. With this objective in mind, the technical framework and intellectual foundation for the reception of foreign tourists were built. At the centre of this endeavour was the agency "Intourist", which worked closely with the Soviet government, Communist party organisations, and secret services. International guests were also received by the international youth tourism bureau "Sputnik" and the Belarusian society for cultural relations with foreign countries, which later changed its name to the Belarusian society for friendship and cultural relations with foreign countries. The impressions and attitudes of foreign visitors towards the Belarusian Soviet reality are reconstructed from a body of hitherto unstudied archive papers and magazines. Tourism was a crucial tool for the Soviet Union in projecting its ideology. It was becoming an increasingly significant weapon in its political confrontation with the West given the continually increasing number of tourists. Yet tourism was not only solidifying the opposing ideologies' stances, it was also bringing them closer together, and public diplomacy was crucial in this process.

Keywords: BSSR; inbound tourism; Cold War; ideology; propaganda; tourist service.

НА ТУРИСТСКОМ ФРОНТЕ ХОЛОДНОЙ ВОЙНЫ: ВЪЕЗДНОЙ ТУРИЗМ В БССР ЭПОХИ ХРУЩЕВСКОЙ ОТТЕПЕЛИ

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Анализируется использование въездного туризма в БССР как одного из инструментов популяризации советского государства за рубежом в период холодной войны. Иностранный туризм хрущевской оттепели сохранил черты предыдущего периода, однако в рассматриваемое время наблюдалось многократное увеличение туристских потоков. Необходимо было не только привлечь иностранцев к совершению путешествий по БССР, но и убедить их в абсолютном преимуществе социалистического строя и советского образа жизни, для чего создавалась соответствующая инфраструктура и обеспечивалось идеологическое сопровождение зарубежных туристов. Основным координатором этого процесса в рассматриваемый период являлась организация "Интурист", которая тесно взаимодействовала с советскими партийными органами, а также со спецслужбами. Также прием иностранных гостей осуществляли Белорусское общество культурной связи с заграницей (в 1958 г. переименовано в Белорусское общество дружбы и культурных связей с зарубежными странами) и бюро международного молодежного туризма "Спутник". Вводи-

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мые впервые в научный оборот архивные документы и материалы периодики позволили реконструировать отношение иностранных туристов, численность которых с каждым годом неуклонно росла, к белорусской советской действительности. Въездной туризм оказывал значительное идеологическое влияние на зарубежную аудиторию, являлся инструментом политического противостояния Западу. Одновременно расширение туристических связей способствовало не только укреплению позиций противоборствующих сторон, но и взаимному открытию друг друга, в том числе с помощью народной дипломатии.

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

Introduction

The peaceful coexistence of the socialist and capitalist regimes became a cornerstone of Soviet foreign policy after J. Stalin's death. N. Khrushchev viewed coexistence as a never-ending struggle with the West in the areas of politics, ideology, and culture. In reality, the Soviet Union's foreign policy was divided between the need to compete with the West and to cooperate with it. Its dualism resulted from this fundamental trade-off.

The doctrine promoted a rise in mass inbound tourism and more interactions between Soviet residents and foreigners. Even in the early Khrushchev's thaw years, the diversity of tourists was impressive. Among them were veterans of the German labour movement, French school teachers, Swedish footballers, Indonesian legislators, and Icelandic union leaders. The Paris Grand Opera vocalist R. Gore, the Belgian pianist A. de Vries, and the Australian violinist B. Kimber all had performances on the Minsk theatre stages in 1960. In September 1961, the Belarusian State University established a foreigner preparation programme. Children from France, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, and Finland spent their summer vacations in pioneer camps in Belarus. The first Minsk travel guide was published in English, Spanish, and Mandarin [1].

A. Mickiewicz's great-grandson, the French journalist E. Horetsky, expressed his happiness with the way his distinguished ancestor's memory was honoured at his birthplace in the city of Novogrudok in 1957¹. N. Khodasevich-Léger visited Minsk in 1959 with her husband and two sons of the general secretary of the French Communist party, M. Thorez, and left with a quite favourable impression [2, p. 37]. A "New York Times" journalist J. Reston referred to Minsk as "a symbol of the

Soviet government's achievement in reconstruction" in October 1957. The peasants "felt confidence", according to him, and "ate well". The Western region of Belarus, he continued, reminded him of "the enormous planes of the United States beyond the Mississippi River"².

Several historians and experts in international relations have studied the interactions between Belarusians and foreigners in the late 1950s and early 1960s. V. G. Shadursky looked at how individuals during the Cold War communicated their ideas through literature, film, theatre, and the visual arts [3, p. 63–146]. I. M. Aulasevich detailed how Belarusian authors came into contact with the West and utilised creative discourse to sway Belarusians' opinions against it [4, p. 136–187]. By concentrating on the economy of travel exchanges between the People's Republic of Poland and Soviet Belarus, G. F. Shapaval depicts the rise of mass international tourism in Belarus in the mid-20th century in his study of the history of Belarusian tourism [5, p. 109–122, 141–151]. M. B. Nesterovich showed in his article the "people's touristic economy", the smuggling of products by residents of Soviet Belarus and the Polish People's Republic in particular [6, p. 303–307].

Inbound tourism in Soviet Belarus, however, has not been thoroughly explored as a unique socio-economic and political and ideological phenomenon during the Khrushchev era, as our review of the existing literature reveals. This study demonstrates how inbound tourism played a crucial role in socioeconomic communication in Soviet Belarus. The Belarusian communist party's top officials viewed foreign travel as a front in their ideological confrontation with the West and devoted a growing number of personnel and resources to it.

Creation of tourist infrastructure

The Council of Ministers of Soviet Belarus founded the department of foreign tourism in 1953. Belarus' Ministry of Interior eased significantly the restrictions on foreigners' movement. The Kremlin did not respond to the "signal" given by the first secretary of the Central committee of the Belarusian Communist party N. Potolichev, that this decision "gives a chance for enemy agents to access the territory of Belarus with impunity"³ (hereinafter translated by us. – A. H.). The Belarusian society for cultural relations

with foreign countries hosted 53 foreign delegations from 23 countries between 1953 and 1958. International youth tourism bureau "Sputnik" was launched in 1958.

The joint stock company for international tourism "Intourist" established itself in Minsk in 1955, and in Brest several months later. Foreign visitors number increased significantly thereafter. The Communist party charged "Intourist" with the duty of developing positive impressions of the USSR and the successes of its socialist

¹Mirachycki L. Adam Mickiewicz's great-grandson in Novogrudok // Litaratura i mastactva. 11 May 1957. No. 38. P. 4 (in Belarus.).

²American correspondent Reston about visiting Belarus // Sov. Belorussiya. 15 Oct. 1957. No. 236. P. 4 (in Russ.).

³Natl. Arch. of the Repub. of Belarus (NARB). Fund 4p. Invent. 100. File 6. Sh. 58–59.

system in addition to its apparent function of catering to tourists. The board of “Intourist” required from its partners abroad full payment for the whole spectrum of tourist services, including the constant accompaniment of visitors by local guides, to retain the highest level of control over tourists. Many visitors, especially those from capitalist nations, were perplexed and even

upset by this service arrangement. Still, it was powerless to halt the rising interest in a nation engaged in a remarkable social experiment under the guise of communism. The number of tourists served by the Minsk branch of “Intourist” increased from 500 in 1956 to over 3,000 people in 1957. About half stopped in Minsk only briefly while passing through⁴ (fig. 1).



*Fig. 1. A group of American photographers upon arrival at the Minsk airport (1966).
Source: Belarusian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents (BSAAVD). 0-077477*

During the Khrushchev’s thaw period, the Soviet Union’s accomplishments in post-war reconstruction, science, and culture, as well as its international stature, attracted significant attention and prestige. Soviet victories in the space race sparked curiosity and jealousy in the West. International tourists praised Minsk’s new housing neighbourhoods and its educational, cultural, and recreational facilities.

Nonetheless, despite the increase in tourism, service options frequently remained constrained. The major barriers were a lack of proper tourism infrastructure, poor service, and a general inability to satisfy the growing levels of expectations. For example, in June 1960, the Belarusian KGB chief V. Petrov alerted the first secretary of the Belarusian Communist party K. Mazurov that the entire route from Brest to the border with the Russian Federation was lined with numerous old homes, barracks, half-destroyed barns, and steambaths. This was especially true in the districts of Gorodishchi, Stolbtsy, and Dzerzhinsk. He thought that the cinema “First”, built in Minsk during the Nazi occupation, made a negative impact on visitors⁵.

East German passengers on a “friendship train” in May 1959 made the following remark: “You have constructed lovely residences, it appears like you love your people and let them rest well, but why are you embarrassing yourselves with such bad bathroom hygiene?”⁶. The lack of information desks, fast food restaurants, porters, and reliable long-distance phone service in Belarus irritated tourists from capitalist countries even more. Many of these flaws increased the doubts that foreigners had about the Soviet way of life.

Between the middle of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the Belarusian government made substantial efforts to improve the number of lodging alternatives, develop and repair roads, preserve landmarks, and enhance the availability of souvenirs and other tourist-related goods. The Belarusian Council of Ministers enacted the resolution of 7 February 1956 “On enhancing the reception and serviced for foreign delegations and foreign visitors”. Dissatisfied with the speed and quality of its execution, the government promulgated on 20 March 1957, a further resolution, “On measures to enhance the hospitality and other services for foreign delegations

⁴Foreign guests in Minsk // Sov. Belorussiya. 25 September 1957. No. 227. P. 4 (in Russ.) ; Foreign tourists // Sov. Belorussiya. 11 June 1957. No. 136. P. 4 (in Russ.).

⁵NARB. Fund 4p. Invent. 62. File 531. Sh. 281.

⁶Ibid. File 509. Sh. 121.

and inbound tourists". The situation finally started to get better. A list of specific actions to promote the republic's tourist infrastructure from 1960 to 1965 was contained in a third resolution of 13 November 1959 "On measures to expand the services for foreign visitors"⁷.

The USSR Cabinet of Ministers enacted a historic decision of 28 January 1961 "On enhancing services for foreign motorists on Soviet roadways", as a consequence of the work done by the government committee headed by A. Kosygin. The proposal included a detailed plan for the construction of petrol stations, service stations, lodging and catering facilities, as well as a system of orientation in English. The resolution also noted the nearly total lack of infrastructure for auto tourism, including on the Brest – Moscow highway. Even provisions for the restaurants along the routes taken by international tourists (crabs, caviar, milk, juices, wine, and coffee) were included. The camping location in Volchkovichy, outside of Minsk, already had a satisfactory food outlet running when the mentioned resolution was enacted⁸.

The renovation and modernisation of hotels and restaurants that catered to foreign visitors were required by a decision dated 9 April 1962, which replicated the USSR Communist party resolution "On developing tourism ties with foreign countries". Restaurants had to improve their menu selections, culinary standards, and customer service. To upgrade services for organised tourists, buses would be equipped with sound systems, tour guides would be supplied with instructions and reference materials, and albums, brochures, and postcards would be printed in foreign languages⁹.

The Belarusian Cabinet of Ministers established the department of international tourism in May 1964, responding, in large part, to a sharp increase in the number of foreign visitors. Its duties included anything from running petrol stations that provided high-quality fuel to foreign visitors to educating tour guides on politics and ideologies. When the 6th Annual world festival of youth and students was held in Moscow in 1957, nearly 110,000 foreign visitors learned about Belarus. In the following year, which was more typical, inbound tourism fell by 50 % but continued its upward trend. 19,817 of the 72,604 foreign visitors to Belarus in 1968 visited Minsk. 14,018 of these tourists were nationals of capitalist nations, including, but not limited to, the United States, Germany, Italy, Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom. Around 70 % of them were motorists¹⁰.

In June 1964 the Council of Ministers identified among its foreign tourism office's top priorities the construction of a 400-bed hotel for foreign visitors to Minsk. Originally named "Beryozka", it opened under the name "Yubileinaya" in 1968. A hotel for foreign motorists for 200 beds was another priority with which the tourism office was entrusted. The motel-camping "Minskii" opened its doors in 1967. Finally, the foreign tourism office was tasked with organising trade in convertible currency through a network of "Beryozka" shops. In 1968, the network's total sales amounted to 321.9 thousand convertible roubles¹¹.

The department of international tourism's limited personnel, led by Belarusian career diplomat P. Astapenko, had to deal with several everyday difficulties in addition to its pressing obligations. An excerpt from a 1965 report by a Moscow inspector sheds light on the nature of these challenges. The inspector determined the following after evaluating Brest's facilities for international visitors: "The furnishings at the border crossing are worn out and neglected. The windows are dressed with lavish, worn draperies. The employees' quarters at the customs are in a sorry state. The table is damaged, and the sofa and chairs are outdated and filthy. However, at the sanitary station, the furniture is beyond reproach. The border crossing point has no running water. The building's roof leaks during heavy downpours. The equipment at the fuel station is outdated, unsightly and generally in bad condition. The one motel in the city, Boug, provides subpar amenities"¹².

Foreigners were often dissatisfied with the way the Soviet customs conducted their business. Customs personnel occasionally overreacted out of fear of spying. As an illustration, an 80-year-old Canadian called Churila, a native of Smorgon, "wept helplessly" when a handful of soil from his homeland that he had wrapped in a handkerchief was taken from him for radioactive testing as he was passing through customs in Brest¹³.

To address the acute shortage of trained personnel for receiving foreign visitors, the Minsk State Pedagogical Institute for Foreign Languages introduced language courses for professionals in 1960 and two secondary schools in Minsk (school No. 24, school No. 64) offered comprehensive language programmes. The translation departments of the Minsk State Pedagogical Institute for Foreign Languages were created in 1964 by the faculties of English, German, and French.

"Through the looking glass", Soviet style

Because of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, travellers on both sides faced considerable limitations on where they could visit. As part

of its "peaceful coexistence" policy, the Soviet leadership that succeeded J. Stalin in 1953 eased travel restrictions for foreigners. However, even as it worked to improve

⁷NARB. File 462. Sh. 60 ; Ibid. File 532. Sh. 88–91.

⁸Ibid. File 551. Sh. 52–57.

⁹Ibid. File 595. Sh. 281–285.

¹⁰NARB. Fund 100. Invent. 2. File 1. Sh. 1.

¹¹Ibid. File 1. Sh. 2–3 ; Ibid. File 11. Sh. 4.

¹²Ibid. File 7. Sh. 7.

¹³Karpyuk A. N. Parting with illusions. Hrodna ; Wrocław, 2008. P. 140 (in Belarus.).

the infrastructure for tourists, it also sought to control every aspect of a visitor's journey to ensure that they only saw the best of the Soviet Union. No visitor could enter Soviet Belarus without some status, such as a tourist, businessman, or diplomat. There was little room for a tourist's personal preferences because everything about their programme and agenda was scheduled. Visitors were escorted, and their arrival times and accommodations were planned. The Starobyn Communist party committee meticulously planned the visit of N. Sharko, a US citizen and a Belarusian emigrant to his home in a Starobyn district village in 1960.

10 May. To arrive at Metyavichi village. To stay with the son for the night. To meet the family members.

11 May. From 11:00 to 17:00. To see the daughter in the same village. Then to visit the cooperative farm. To stay with the son for the night.

12 May. From 11:00 to 14:00. To visit the sister in the village; after 13:00 to go back to the son's residence. The second sister arrives from Sakovichichi.

13 May. From 15:30 to 17:00 to visit the Metyavichi secondary school, to have lunch and free time from 13:00 to 15:30, 11:00 to 13:00 to visit the village store, club, and library. To spend the evening viewing a movie.

14 May. From 12:00 to 16:00 to visit the Chkalov cooperative farm, Pogost secondary school and the village hospital. To return to the son's house at 16:00 and to rest.

15 May. To visit the city of Soligorsk from 12:00 to 16:00, and to observe the construction of the potash factory. To return to the son's house at 16:00 and to rest¹⁴.

The party and government entities created a confidential list of locations recommended for visiting by foreign delegations as a follow-up to the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist party's 1955 decision "On improving reception of foreign delegations visiting Soviet Belarus" adopted on 29 September 1956. In addition to the State Art Gallery, the Great Patriotic War Museum, and the State Literary Museum of Yanka Kupala, it also included the Minsk Tractor Plant, Minsk Printing Works, the television studio, the Belarusian State University, the State Library of the Belarusian SSR, the central bookstore, and the top kindergartens and schools across the capital. Similar lists were created for regional centres at the start of 1956. Local government officials in Mogilev, for example, chose 39 tourist attractions¹⁵.

Throughout the latter half of the 1950s, there were more places that foreigners could visit. By 1961, around 100 sites were open in Minsk alone. The list was expanded in 1965 to include lake Naroch, Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park, and several hunting resorts.

Industrial businesses and communal farms, on the other hand, were removed from the list. Unofficially, it was said that the production process was being negatively impacted by foreign visitors¹⁶.

The Communist party was focused on ideology, while the government was largely concerned with tourism logistics. For example, the resolution "On measures furthering the development of foreign tourism in the Belarusian SSR" adopted on 1 December 1959 required that all excursion materials for foreigners be approved by the ideological department of the party committee of the city of Minsk. Moreover, it stipulated that a training conference be organised in Minsk in 1960, to which the tour guides and employees of the suggested tourist attractions would be invited¹⁷.

On 15 May 1965, the Belarusian Communist party's Central Committee adopted a resolution titled "On steps to increase propaganda work among foreign visitors to soviet Belarus". According to the resolution, public commissions would be established to oversee activities involving foreign visitors and would report to the party committees of the cities of Minsk, Brest, and Grodno. Writers, artists, and composers were expected to demonstrate a thriving cultural life during their arranged contact with tourists. The best Belarusian films and books were being translated for this purpose, and multilingual leaflets on the socialist way of life were being prepared¹⁸.

Foreign visitors from capitalist countries received "operational escort" from the KGB's 7th directorate. This round-the-clock surveillance was put in place to halt "unwanted" interactions and activities as well as to stop deviations from the pre-approved routes. In the early 1960s, a dedicated KGB telephone line was constructed along the Brest – Moscow route to help with this activity. "The rules on the residence of foreigners and stateless people in the USSR", in 1962, provided a legal foundation for KGB activities among foreigners. A secret addendum governed the deportation of foreign nationals for spying, anti-Soviet activities, and speculation on items like clothing or consumer goods¹⁹.

Much like the party ideologues and secret agents, tour guides and interpreters were in the vanguard of the Cold War battles in the travel and tourism industry. Summer was the busiest time. For example, 11,177 tourists took part in almost 600 tours of Minsk in 1965 alone²⁰. Tour guides were advised on how to engage in debates about ideologies and respond to uncomfortable questions. A tour guide's ability to steer visitors away from the negatives and towards the positives was seen as a crucial talent. It was expected that tour guides would be so kind and caring towards the visitors that they would feel too ashamed to make negative comments.

¹⁴NARB. Fund 4p. Invent. 53. File 62. Sh. 164.

¹⁵Ibid. Invent. 62. File 453. Sh. 41–42, 144–148.

¹⁶Ibid. File 601. Sh. 6.

¹⁷Ibid. File 542. Sh. 288–290.

¹⁸NARB. Fund 100. Invent. 2. File 2. Sh. 9.

¹⁹Ibid. Fund 4p. Invent. 62. File 585. Sh. 28–37.

²⁰Ibid. Fund 100. Invent. 2. File 5. Sh. 10.

Still, it was believed that answering biased questions were essential for propaganda. A tour guide had to be prepared to address questions such as why there was only one political party in the USSR, if there was any private farming allowed in Soviet Belarus, whether there were German army cemeteries, and even why Minsk's large billboards were so unpleasant. Foreign visitors also questioned why women were working physically taxing jobs like building pavements and why Belarusians appeared to choose foreign goods and films over domestic ones. The information section of "Intourist" gathered and examined

these and other unsettling queries before coming up with suggested answers.

It was suggested to use public sector volunteers in counter-propaganda efforts as inbound tourism increased. In November 1963, A. Lisovsky, director of the Minsk office of "Intourist" met with the Belarusian Communist party leader P. Masherov and proposed creating teams of Komsomol activists, high school students, and young professionals to explain the merits of the Soviet way of life to tourists who were interested not only in theatre, museums or old churches but also in politics²¹.

Lost in translation

Notwithstanding restrictions on visitors' autonomy and freedom of movement, the system for showcasing the advantages of the Soviet way of life occasionally broke down.

Brest citizens, for instance, said in a letter to N. Khrushchev in October 1960 that their city served as the entrance to the USSR for all visitors, delegates, and foreign dignitaries. Tourists from outside visited the shops, inquired about prices and costs, made notes, and took photographs. "The Soviet Union announces in print and on the radio that it has surpassed the United States in terms of meat and dairy product consumption. However butter, fats, and even sunflower oil had been unavailable in Brest for more than two months. There is no meat, either, and even groats of buckwheat have been out of stock for a while. Where is all of it? Why are people standing up as they did to buy food during the war if we are the richest and have everything? How deplorable! Both our allies and adversaries call us beggars at home," read the letter²².

In private conversations with the locals, tourists learned information that was at odds with the idealised perception of Soviet reality. A Russian-speaking German tourist approached an old woman on the street in Minsk and inquired about her life. The woman replied that she lived in a room of 7 m², had recently laid her mother to rest, and was making 300 rubles per month²³. Three locals stopped the Federation of Russian Canadians members as they were going through Sherashava village in the Pruzhany district and declared that "this is how our life is today. It is because of the Bolsheviks who have dispossessed us. Nonetheless, you are dressed smartly".

A Belarusian emigrant named D. Gorbatshevich visited his birthplace, a village in Slutsk district in 1966, and lamented "the deep degradation" of the villagers from the "huge quantities of moonshine" they frequently drank²⁴.

With their cameras, foreigners documented the queues, squalor, and drunkenness. The public who still viewed Westerners as them versus us, treated them with growing

suspicion and occasional mistrust. In 1961, a group of watchful Minsk citizens barred two West German professors from photographing intoxicated people, partially destroyed dwellings and shabbily dressed peasants. The photo cassette was taken in reaction to the public outcry, the academics received a warning, and rules were created to prevent future occurrences of this kind²⁵. During the same tourist season, several Minsk citizens intervened when French photographer R. Gué was photographing a nine-year-old pupil. They thought the image would show the child as a beggar²⁶. Several British World War II veterans were taken to a police station in the summer of 1968 after they photographed themselves standing in a lengthy line in front of a barrel of dry wine on a Minsk street²⁷.

It was thought that Western provocateurs were sending tour groups to Soviet Belarus to undercut Soviet propaganda. The administration of the Minsk State Pedagogical Institute for Foreign Languages reported that the English and French philology students who came to Minsk in the 1967/68 academic year to study Russian in the first summer courses may have been assigned the task of gathering intelligence through "inappropriate" means, such as speaking with the residents or taking pictures of forbidden objects. The institute also complained that most students rejected narratives about the heroic past and the sacrifices made by the Belarusian people during the Great Patriotic War and declined to visit any sites connected to these topics while in Minsk²⁸.

To present the USSR as a forward-looking nation, the party ideologists supplemented the war theme with the topic of the welfare state that its citizens were enjoying. Free housing, healthcare, education, and other benefits were emphasised. Visits were organised to model summer camps where children could rest for free. Still, many visitors remained unimpressed. To highlight achievements in industrial production was even harder. Nevertheless, the best communal farms and cutting-edge enterprises were shown to tourists.

²¹NARB. Fund 4p. Invent. 62. File 625. Sh. 96.

²²Ibid. File 548. Sh. 118.

²³Ibid. File 509. Sh. 121.

²⁴Gorbatshevich D. Two month visiting the collective farmers (notes of American tourist). New York, 1967. P. 47.

²⁵NARB. Fund 4p. Invent. 62. File. 571. Sh. 216.

²⁶Stralcow B. Sensation on a dump // Zviazda. 22 August 1961. No. 198. P. 4 (in Belarus.).

²⁷NARB. Fund 4p. Invent. 62. File 718a. Sh. 62.

²⁸Ibid. Invent. 73. File 283. Sh. 77.

On a visit to the Minsk Worsted Factory in 1961, Italian communists were astonished to discover that Belarusian weavers had harsher working conditions and fewer holidays than their Italian colleagues. They also noted that, compared to floor workers, the compensation of technical and engineering staff was low²⁹.

After visiting the Minsk Motorcycle Plant, A. Harris from the metalworkers' union in the city of Nottingham claimed that similar businesses in his country had made significant strides in increasing worker autonomy, improving working conditions and making the workplaces cleaner and more pleasant. Harris said that for every 42 hours worked, employees at a comparable plant in Britain had two days of rest. His firm "Raleigh" produced 1,800,000 bicycles a year, while the Minsk factory, with the same 6,000 employees, only made 320,000³⁰.

New Zealand poultry farm managers surprised their counterparts at the Minsk Poultry Plant by revealing that most international facilities kept their production areas lit and played music to increase productivity³¹.

The ideologists of the Khrushchev era supported internationalism as a unifying force among the significant ethnic variety. By showcasing how the various ethnicities in the Soviet Union were keeping their identities, they hoped to improve the country's appeal. Visits to the Union republics were intended to show off their vibrant cultures. Yet, intense Russification of Belarus left little space for even a passing ethnic influence.

G. Veresov, a chess player and the head of the Belarusian society of cultural relations with foreign countries, wrote to T. Kiselev, the secretary of the Belarusian Communist party Central committee: "In 1954, members of

a Polish delegation made the informal comment that they had seen too much of Russia and not enough of Belarus during their visit to the republic. Other delegations have expressed similar views. In contrast to other Soviet republics, ethnic distinctions are hardly noticeable in Soviet Belarus. Signs, posters, slogans, and billboards are frequently in Russian, even in Minsk, the capital city. Amateur and professional troupes and choirs rarely performed Belarusian music, dance and drama. Polish and Czech troupes sometimes offered more Belarusian content. The Belarusian Publishing House commissioned few translations of works by Belarusian writers³².

When visitors brought up sensitive topics or made disparaging remarks about what they observed, host organisations in Belarus usually saw them as provocateurs. Guides and interpreters were formally tasked with responding to these insinuations. F. Herrington, a photo reporter for the publication "Look", visited Minsk as a wealthy tourist on 15 June 1967. According to an incident report, "he has shown utter disregard for the situation ever since he arrived. He made it clear that he was here on business and immediately wanted to be brought to the city to snap photos. F. Herrington wanted to see historical cemeteries and meet an abstract artist". Instead, the American photographer was taken to see a bested factory's model kindergarten. As an alternative to meeting an abstract artist, he was offered a visit to A. Bembel's studio. F. Herrington finally warmed to Belarus after a meeting with P. Rumyantsev's relatives at the House – Museum of the 1st Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, as the "Intourist" official's incident report claimed³³ (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Zhitnitsky M. Point of view of some foreign journalists.

Source: Vozhyk. 1959. No. 18. P. 12

²⁹NARB. Invent. 62. File 571. Sh. 265.

³⁰Ibid. Sh. 54.

³¹Ibid. Sh. 202.

³²NARB. Fund 4p. Invent. 62. File 469. Sh. 77.

³³Ibid. Invent. 47. File 562. Sh. 138–143.

In 1964, the "Intourist" office in Minsk refused to take an American-Canadian group of geographers on a landscape tour of Polesye after consultation with the secret services. A heated dispute ensued³⁴. The Federation of Russian Canadians occasionally reported difficulties with visiting relatives of Canadians who lived close to secret locations.

J. Sorokin, an American visitor, was expelled from Soviet Belarus in June 1965 after an attempt to visit his family while on a group tour to Minsk. His countryman J. Leon was also deported after offering a private driver his gold watch in exchange for taking him to his relatives in Bobruisk³⁵. J. Sigelman, an American guest at the hotel "Minsk" in August 1965, asked a porter to arrange a trip to his family outside of Minsk. A police patrol followed and stopped him along the way. As many as 10 foreign nationals were deported from the BSSR in 1965, according to V. Petrov, head of the Belarusian KGB³⁶.

During the Cold War, the US, the UK, and West German intelligence services sent agents to Belarus posing as tourists, according to the KGB. For instance, testifying before the court of the Belarusian military district, in March 1966, BND (Bundesnachrichtendienst) agent

A. Piotrovsky admitted to carrying out an intelligence operation and recruiting his brother while visiting Belarusian territory as a tourist on 30 August 1965³⁷.

In addition to using spies, Western intelligence services also smuggled written materials to stir up anti-socialist sentiment. A. Lisovsky explained in detail the technology used in this activity in his report to P. Masherov on the outcomes of the 1961 travel season. He described instances where hotel "Minsk" staff found anti-Soviet literature in restrooms, corridors, under rugs, and in other places. Some American visitors attempted to distribute pamphlets with titles like "USA: a quick study of true facts" or "Human dignity" while they were driving³⁸.

Counterintelligence officers saw other unfavourable effects of inbound tourism in addition to spying, including prostitution, forgery, and cash transaction on the black market. These shadowy aspects of Soviet life were evident at the hotel "Minsk", where the majority of foreign visitors stayed at the beginning of 1960. For instance, the said J. Leon was apprehended with a smuggler while exchanging money in the hotel's "Minsk" toilet. Con artists and room service were in competition for access to foreign apparel and cosmetics.

Popular diplomacy through tourism

One mistake that trainee guides frequently made was becoming too informal with the tourists, which led "Intourist" to refuse their services outright. In the meantime, the climate of relative freedom encouraged many Belarusians to establish unofficial ties with foreigners. The Khrushchev's thaw, if brief, revealed that intercultural understanding stood on a solid foundation.

Author A. Karpyuk, who oversaw the "Intourist" office in Grodno at the time, describes an event that occurred in 1963 on the Paris – Moscow train. Students from France were travelling together by train. During a stop in Grodno, a train guard riding in the students' carriage hurried over to A. Karpyuk and sobbed: "Come here right away, comrade director of "Intourist"! There is a naked woman in a compartment!". The scene in the car left A. Karpiuk speechless for a moment. A tourist mentioned that the young French were holding a pageant. A. Karpiuk made it clear that beauty pageants were forbidden in the USSR. Then he turned to the train guard and calmed him when the initial shock passed: "Do not be afraid. It is just the French!"³⁹.

Early in the 1960s, people-to-people diplomacy emerged in the West, and it has since developed into an essential aspect of international relations. The arms race accelerated, global problems got worse, and popu-

lar confidence in governmental institutions decreased. Public diplomacy came into the picture. At its core was the exchange of information. In addition to meetings or marches, tourism was one of its key tools. Despite their different origins and philosophical frameworks, its actors shared a critical position on many societal concerns and looked for common solutions. The Soviet leadership supported these people-to-people diplomats hoping to benefit politically from their activism (fig. 3).

A group of American quakers organised a peace march from San Francisco to Moscow in 1960 to advance their pacifist agenda and call for unilateral disarmament. N. Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union, agreed to let them in despite his hostility to religion. Starting in California, the marchers covered 10,000 km in about a year and a half, walking across Europe and the United States. Along the route, they handed out pacifist literature and had conversations and debates mostly focused on putting an end to the arms race. B. Lyttel led the team of five quaker marchers that crossed the Polish-Soviet border in Brest on 15 September 1961, and continued towards Minsk. In each administrative district they crossed, secretaries for ideology of the local Communist party committee escorted them. Marching across the Minsk region from 20 to 25 September, they had meetings with the public in Stolbtsy,

³⁴NARB. Fund 4p. Invent. 47. File 657. Sh. 37.

³⁵Ibid. Fund 4p. Invent. 62. File 571. Sh. 218.

³⁶Ibid. Invent. 2a. File 9. Sh. 173.

³⁷Fedorov K. Under the mask of tourist // *Znamyia yunosti*. 13 March 1966. No. 52. P. 3 (in Russ.).

³⁸NARB. Fund 4p. Invent. 62. File 571. Sh. 213.

³⁹Karpyuk A. N. Parting with illusions. Hrodna ; Wroclaw, 2008. P. 220 (in Belarus.).

Dzerzhinsk, Fanipol, Zhodino, and Borisov. The meeting with the citizens of Minsk was on 23 September at the office of the Belarusian society of friendship and cultural

relations with foreign countries. While in Minsk, they carried the poster “Nations of the world disarm unilaterally” and distributed pacifist leaflets.



Fig. 3. Participants of the San Francisco – Moscow peace march head to Brest after crossing the Polish-Soviet border (1960).
Source: BSAAVD. 0-083504

The quakers urged their audiences to join their appeal to the Soviet and American leadership to halt preparations for a nuclear war and refrain from constructing military bases. They called on the public to refuse to enlist in the military or work in military factories. The hand-picked members of the Belarusian public begged to differ and lay the blame for the arms race squarely on the United States. Nevertheless, the Americans were given a cordial reception. They were met with concerts and offered lunches, and they left with an overall positive impression, as the event organisers reported⁴⁰.

Three years later, at Brest, another unusual party of people-to-people diplomats crossed the Polish-

Soviet border. L. Gillis, a 44-year-old restaurant owner from Richmond, Virginia was travelling with his family at the wheel of a covered truck nicknamed “Last wagon West”. From 1963 to 1964, they drove across Western Europe, through France and the Netherlands, en route to Minsk and Moscow. They relied fully on the hospitality and generosity of the people they met. So far as their visit was non-political, and the authorities showed no interest in escorting them. Therefore, they were free to make stops along the Brest – Moscow highway, have conversations with the people they met, take pictures and exchange souvenirs⁴¹ (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. American traveller L. Gillis with his family in Brest (1964).
Source: BSAAVD. 0-055375

⁴⁰NARB. Fund 4p. Invent. 62. File 562. Sh. 160–172.

⁴¹Panamarow V. Three years on the road // Belarus. 1964. No. 10. P. 23 (in Belarus.).

Several local publications, television shows, and even the feature film “Beloved”, made at the studio “Belarusfilm”, documented their travels. L. Gillis may have had a soft spot for communism, but when an American wagon appeared in one of the scenes, the members of the film studio’s artistic council were uneasy. One of the council members, director V. Korsh-Sablin,

discerned references to several Western films, including F. Fellini’s “Sweet life”. Nonetheless, the film was eventually released, and this visit is now part of Belarus’ documented history.

Public diplomacy expanded opportunities for unplanned and unregulated contact between foreigners and Belarusians.

Conclusions

It is no exaggeration to say that Belarus became more open to the outside world as a result of Khrushchev’s thaw. Throughout the latter part of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, Belarus welcomed tourists from 94 countries, including celebrities like G. De Santis, M. Marceau, R. Kent, and V. Cliburn. Their visits sparked advancements in the fields of science, art, music, and fashion, and – significantly – they increased exposure to novel concepts, especially for the intelligencia. Foreign visitors served as ambassadors for intellectual freedom, liberal democracy, and technical progress.

For many Soviet citizens, contact with inbound foreign tourists during the Khrushchev’s thaw was an essential first step in assimilating Western culture. Geography caused these Westernizing influences to spread from Belarus to the rest of the Soviet Union. From the middle of the 1950s, Belarus served as the USSR’s Western gateway, through which thousands of Western and Soviet visitors

passed. As a result of this exposure to the West, Belarusians gradually reexamined their past, questioned their class conscience, and reassessed the social-realist underpinnings of their art and culture. Yet, it also sparked more active anti-Western propaganda.

The growth of inbound tourism coincided with a deep transformation of Belarus in the late 1950s and 1960s, accompanied by significant strides in production, science, technology, culture and education. N. Khrushchev’s reforms were a time of positive expectations and great achievements. However, the shortcomings of the system of “advanced socialism” could not escape the view of the inbound tourists. Institutions such as “Intourist”, “Sputnik”, and the Belarusian friendship society worked hard to create islands of high-class service for these tourists, but even their best efforts failed to convince many of these visitors that the bright communist future was anywhere near.

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