Belarus and Moldova
country studies

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On the cover: St. George, patron saint of Belarus, and antique Moldovan rug

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Foreword

This volume is one in a continuing series of books prepared by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress under the Country Studies/Area Handbook Program sponsored by the Department of the Army. The last two pages of this book list the other published studies.

Most books in the series deal with a particular foreign country, describing and analyzing its political, economic, social, and national security systems and institutions, and examining the interrelationships of those systems and the ways they are shaped by cultural factors. Each study is written by a multidisciplinary team of social scientists. The authors seek to provide a basic understanding of the observed society, striving for a dynamic rather than a static portrayal. Particular attention is devoted to the people who make up the society, their origins, dominant beliefs and values, their common interests and the issues on which they are divided, the nature and extent of their involvement with national institutions, and their attitudes toward each other and toward their social system and political order.

The books represent the analysis of the authors and should not be construed as an expression of an official United States government position, policy, or decision. The authors have sought to adhere to accepted standards of scholarly objectivity. Corrections, additions, and suggestions for changes from readers will be welcomed for use in future editions.

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Acknowledgments

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Preface

At the end of 1991, the formal liquidation of the Soviet Union was the surprisingly swift result of partially hidden decrepitude and centrifugal forces within that empire. Of the fifteen "new" states that emerged from the process, many had been independent political entities at some time in the past. Aside from their coverage in the 1991 *Soviet Union: A Country Study*, none had received individual treatment in this series, however. *Belarus and Moldova: Country Studies* is the second in a new subseries describing the fifteen post-Soviet republics, both as they existed before and during the Soviet era and as they have developed since 1991. This volume covers Belarus and Moldova, two nations on the western border of what was once the Soviet Union.

The marked relaxation of information restrictions, which began in the late 1980s and accelerated after 1991, allows the reporting of extensive data on every aspect of life in the two countries. Scholarly articles and periodical reports have been especially helpful in accounting for the years of independence in the 1990s. The authors have described the historical, political, and social backgrounds of the countries as the background for their current portraits. However, in general, both Belarus and Moldova (especially the former) have been written about to a lesser extent than other former Soviet republics. In each case, the authors' goal in this book was to provide a compact, accessible, and objective treatment of five main topics: historical setting, the society and its environment, the economy, government and politics, and national security.

In the case of Belarus, providing definitive spellings of personal names or place-names has been a challenge. All names have been transliterated according to the transliteration scheme devised by the United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN), which is widely used by the United States government, although not by the Library of Congress or in most scholarly works. According to the BGN system, most Cyrillic letters are transliterated similarly from both Belarusian and Russian. But some letters are transliterated from the two languages differently (for example, "e," which remains "e" in transliterated Russian but becomes "ye" in transliterated Belarusian), and some letters exist in Belarusian but not in Russian.

Because Belarusian names often differ from the Russian versions that have been used predominantly by the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the world in general, the Russian version is given in parentheses at the first occurrence of a name. Otherwise, the Belarusian names have been used throughout. The few exceptions to this are well-known names (such as Moscow) and words (such as *perestroika*) that have acquired a standardized spelling in English usage.

Another problem in writing about Belarus is what to call it and when. In its early history, the region was known as "Belaya Rus'," "Belorussia," "White Ruthenia," or "White Rus'." (A number of explanations have been proffered for the term "white.") As if this were not confusing enough, the terms "Rus'" and "Russia" have often been confused, sometimes deliberately. The original Rus' was Kievan Rus', which existed for centuries before Muscovy (which would later become Russia) gained significance. Russia later claimed to be the sole successor to Kievan Rus' and often blurred the line between the two. In the Russian language, both *russkiy* and *rossiyskiy* mean "Russian."

During the time when Belarus was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, it was commonly known as Belorussia, and the language was known as Belorussian. Occasionally, nationalist groups would form and take a name that included the word "Belarusian," but this use of the word was the exception. It was only after the Supreme Soviet declared the country independent that the name was changed from the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Republic of Belarus, despite the title of the earlier Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. The policy in this volume has been to use "Belarus/Belarusian" in the earliest historical times; "Belorussia/Belorussian" while it was a part of either the Grand Duchy, Poland, the Russian Empire, or the Soviet Union; and "Belarus/Belarusian" after the country declared independence in August 1991. The exceptions are organization names in which "Belarus/Belarusian" was deliberately chosen over "Belorussia/Belorussian."

For Moldova, the problem of personal names and place-names is somewhat different. When Moldovan, a dialect of the Romanian language, written in the Latin alphabet was designated the official language of Moldavia in 1989, the Cyrillic alphabet (imposed by Joseph V. Stalin) was dropped, thus obviating the need for transliteration. However, the Moldovan names appearing in the text of this volume are missing most of

the diacritics used by the language. In this case, it is a matter of lagging technology: the typesetting software being used simply cannot produce the necessary diacritics in the text (although they appear on the maps). For this the authors apologize and hope that by the time this country study is updated, missing diacritics will no longer be the norm.

As was also the case with Belarus, Moldova and the Moldovans are referred to in different ways depending on the period of history. Until the creation of the Moldavian Autonomous Oblast (outside the traditional boundaries of Moldova) by Moscow in 1924, "Moldova" and "Moldovan" were the terms for the region and the language. From 1924 until the legislature changed the country's name officially in 1990, the terms used were "Moldavia" and "Moldavian." As with Belarus, the policy in this volume has been to adhere to these different names during their respective periods of usage, with the exceptions of names of organizations in which "Moldova/Moldovan" was deliberately chosen over "Moldavia/Moldavian."

Measurements are given in the metric system; a conversion table is provided in Appendix A. A Chronology is provided at the beginning of each chapter. To amplify points in the text of the chapters, tables in Appendix A provide statistics on aspects of the societies and the economies of the countries. A Glossary provides information on certain terms in order to explain their background without creating distractions in the text. Chapter bibliographies appear at the end of the book; brief comments on some of the more valuable sources for further reading appear at the conclusion of each chapter.

The body of the text reflects information available as of May 1995. Certain other portions of the text, however, have been updated. The Introduction discusses significant events and trends that have occurred since the completion of research; the Chronologies and Country Profiles include updated information as available; and the Bibliography lists recently published sources thought to be particularly helpful to the reader.

Figure 1. Belarus and Moldova: Geographic Setting, 1995

Introduction

LOCATED ON THE WESTERN BORDERLANDS of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, the regions that would one day become the republics of Belarus and Moldova had long been part of a buffer zone used to protect Russia from Western influences and military forces. The imperial and Soviet governments attempted to fully integrate the two regions' economies into their own and to Russify their people in order to bind them seamlessly into their respective empires. For a long time, these efforts seemed to work, but in 1991 Belarus and Moldova declared their independence from the Soviet Union and began to go their separate, post-Soviet ways. Independence was not a totally new experience for the two countries, however; each of them had existed briefly as a sovereign entity during the previous hundred years, but this time they had much to undo from the previous regime.

The two countries, former republics of the now-defunct Soviet Union, are a study in contrasts. Belarus, mostly ethnic Belarusian (and overwhelmingly Slavic) in population, had long been part of the Russian Empire and subsequently the Soviet Union. The tsars, and later the commissars, sought to meld Belorussia with Russia and the Belorussians with the Russians. They succeeded to a remarkable extent: independent Belarus still identifies closely with Russia, and Belarusian nationalists are in the minority. Soviet-era political and economic structures, and even symbols, have been retained and even reintroduced, as was the case after the May 1995 referendum that brought back the Soviet-era flag and emblem (both slightly modified) and the Russian language.

Moldova, a country that had also been part of both empires since the nineteenth century, has a majority population of ethnic Romanians, who are not Slavs. Despite Russian and Soviet efforts to Slavicize them, most ethnic Romanians were able to maintain their identity and looked to Romania as the source of their culture. When the Soviet Union began to crumble, Moldova asserted first its sovereignty and then its independence, although the population was far from unanimous on either. But the nationalists eventually carried the day, and Moldova sought to distance itself from Russia, despite the wishes of the Transnistrians, who in 1990 proclaimed the "Dnestr Moldavian

Republic," with a pro-Soviet extralegal government, on the east bank of the Nistru River. The Transnistrians want no part of independent Moldova, its ethnic-Romanian nationalists, or a possible reunification with Romania, where they would be a small minority instead of a powerful political force.

In both Belarus and Moldova, there are many who wish to return to the days of the Soviet Union for a variety of reasons, some economic, some nostalgic, and some fearful. In Belarus these conservatives (ethnic Belarusians as well as ethnic Russians) are in the majority and are to be found throughout the population and the government. Their domination is felt not only in the political arena but in the social sphere as well.

In Moldova the conservatives (mainly, but not exclusively, ethnic Slavs) are located throughout society and the government, but their influence is not as overwhelming as in Belarus. Many of the Moldovan conservatives (although not all) live in Transnistria. Here, they believe, they are the keepers of the Soviet ideal from which a reconstituted Soviet Union will one day rise up again. However, time and the course of events have made it clear that they are trying to protect not a way of life but rather their own political and—especially—economic interests, which are often illegal (including sales of arms and illegal drugs).

Both Belarus and Moldova have stated their wish to have free-market economies, but they have proceeded in this direction at different paces. The economies of both countries had been firmly embedded in the Soviet economy, and each had specialized in a certain sector—Belarus in heavy agricultural equipment and goods for the military, and Moldova primarily in agricultural products and consumer goods—while relying on other republics for raw materials. Both republics had been especially dependent on Russia for inexpensive fuels, a fact that continued to haunt them after independence. Subsidized fuels, priced well below world prices, had made the goods produced by the two countries inexpensive and affordable by the other Soviet republics. With the loss of these cheap fuels, both countries were forced to either decrease their fuel consumption (and their output) or improve the efficiency of their industries. Belarus chose the former path, which coincided with the fact that it was selling fewer of its goods because of price and quality considerations, while Moldova tried, sometimes unsuccessfully, to take steps toward improved efficiency.

Both countries initiated privatization, or the sale of state-owned property, and both were having a difficult time reconfiguring their economies. The Moldovan government was changing its laws to make them more compatible with a free market and more friendly toward foreign investment and business in general. However, vested interests sought to maintain the system or, at least, to make large profits during the transition.

The Belarusian government decided that, despite its intention to sell state-owned property, it would leave the agricultural sector under state control. The government's reasoning was that Belarusian large-scale agriculture was best suited to the heavy agricultural equipment that the country continued to produce, despite the fact that fuel for this equipment was often scarce.

Both Belarus and Moldova stated their intention of having democratic political systems, as did many former Soviet republics. However, making the change from a communist government to a real democracy proved difficult, not the least because of officials who wished to maintain the status quo. They viewed democracy as too chaotic and unstable, unlike the predictability that had characterized their previous political lives. They also saw it as risky and feared to lose the perquisites to which they had been entitled and which they wanted to retain.

Belarus's attempts to become a Western democracy often appeared likely to remain out of reach. Although the constitution added the office of the president and declared a separation of powers, government in Belarus often seemed no different from that of the Soviet era. Political apathy among the population remained so strong that a legislature could not be seated after two rounds of elections in 1995; corruption was still widespread despite the fact that the president had campaigned as an anticorruption candidate; and political leaders looked to Moscow for political, military, and financial support, with the president trying to lead the country back into some sort of union with Russia.

Moldova kept its basic Soviet-era governmental structure, while adding a presidency, universal suffrage, and popular elections, as did Belarus. However, the country's first attempt at a democratically elected parliament showed the need for further modification of the system. The unwieldy size of the body and a hardline nationalist majority made legislative compromises among the various ethnic groups in Moldova impossible, and the result was gridlock. A smaller parliament and a larger num-

ber of moderates after the 1994 elections have made legislative progress possible despite the disagreements and factions that are still to be found.

Despite the differences between the two countries, the focal point for those who wish to maintain each country's independence is the same—the national language, the same rallying point as in the revolutions of 1848, a series of republican revolts against Western and Central European monarchies. These revolts all failed in their immediate goals, but they eventually led to greater representation of ethnic groups in legislatures and to greater cultural autonomy, including the use of languages that, until then, had been dismissed by the authorities as peasant vernaculars. However, while nationalists in the last century sought to codify (and sometimes even form) a literary language, the task of the nationalists in 1991 was to revive that language and divest it of its Russian and Soviet accretions.

To those who have never undergone forced cultural assimilation, the issue may seem trivial. What difference does it make what language is spoken or what it is called? To those who have had their use of language restricted, however, the matter goes beyond mere defiance. Language is the medium of the culture on which their daily lives and identities are based. To define what language can be spoken is to define the identity not only of the individual but also of the country.

Moldovans kept Russian as a language of interethnic communication but subsequently entered a debate as to what their own language was to be called: was it Moldovan or Romanian? The president explained that the term "Moldovan" was used in the constitution for political reasons—to assuage the fears of those who feared imminent reunification with Romania (despite the fact that Germany and Austria, for example, which both use the German language, are separate countries). Again, politics, language, and emotions were thoroughly entangled.

Belarusians, the majority of whom prefer to use Russian in their daily lives, have dealt with the language issue differently. They returned Russian to its status of official language, alongside the Belarusian language, through their response to a May 1995 referendum question. Thus the Belarusian language policy reflected Belarus's pro-Russian policies in general.

May 31, 1995

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In the months following preparation of this manuscript, Belarus's president, Alyaksandr Lukashyenka, and his government continued their pro-Russian policies and their Soviet-era mentality. When Aleksey II, Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, visited Belarus in July, Lukashyenka praised the Orthodox Church while reproaching the Roman Catholic Church for its active proselytizing and politicking. When subway workers in Minsk went on strike in August, the government sent special police units and Ministry of Internal Affairs troops against them. In addition, Lukashyenka reacted angrily to information that United States and Polish trade unions, including Solidarity, were providing financial assistance to the striking workers through Belarusian nongovernmental unions. Also in August, the president ordered that books published in 1992–95 be removed from secondary schools and institutes of higher education. In other words, these schools would return to using Soviet textbooks.

Lukashyenka also continued arrogating power to himself. His unilateral decisions, including suspending parliamentary immunity, outlawing strikes in sectors he deemed critical, banning the activity of two trade unions until further notice, withholding the salaries of parliamentary deputies, and making arbitrary changes in the state budget, paint a picture of a leader seeking to replace the separation of governmental powers with one-man rule. However, it was only after Lukashyenka's decision to suspend parliamentary immunity that the Supreme Soviet spoke up and petitioned the Constitutional Court to rule on the constitutionality of his measures. A constitutional crisis appeared unavoidable unless the two sides could come to an agreement.

Perhaps the most dramatic indication that the Soviet mentality is alive and well in Belarus was the hot-air balloon tragedy in September 1995. A yearly international hot-air balloon race starting in Switzerland included three United States balloons that crossed the border into Belarus. Although Belarusian authorities had been notified of the race earlier, the Belarusian military fired at one of the balloons, claiming that it did not have any identification and that sensitive military installations were nearby. The two American pilots of the balloon were killed when a missile caused their hydrogen-filled balloon to explode. The pilots of a second balloon left the country before any problems arose, but authorities detained the pilots of the

third balloon for a day before releasing them. The Belarusian government issued an official apology for the shooting that accepted "a certain amount" of blame but nevertheless tried to justify the military's response. Many people were convinced that this would not be the last manifestation of Belarus's Cold War mentality.

At the same time, events in Moldova centered on two men—Lieutenant General Aleksandr Lebed', commander of the Russian 14th Army, and Mircea Snegur, Moldova's president. The Russian 14th Army, previously known as the Soviet 14th Army, remained in Transnistria after the Soviet Union was dissolved to protect the ethnic Russians in what Moscow called "the near abroad." Despite their ostensible status as peacekeepers in Moldova's dispute with Transnistria, the 14th Army supported the extralegal government of the "Dnestr Republic" and was even accused of supplying weapons to it during the worst of the fighting in 1992.

At the beginning of June, Lebed' offered his resignation in protest of Russian government plans to downgrade the status of the 14th Army to that of an operational group. After initially refusing the general's resignation, the Russian Ministry of Defense accepted it and replaced him with Major General Valeriy Yevnevich. The Moldovan government's concern was that the new commander continue to keep the army's large stock of weapons safe while a political solution was sought for the problems in Transnistria. Lebed' was seen by some as a strong candidate for the Russian presidency in 1996, but his popularity began decreasing once he resigned and removed himself from the public eye.

In a surprising move in July, President Snegur resigned his membership in the ruling Democratic Agrarian Party of Moldova and took his supporters with him to form a new presidential party, later named the Party of Rebirth and Conciliation. By dividing the Agrarians and depriving them of a parliamentary majority, as well as by considering an alliance with a pro-Romanian party, the president had made moves that could disrupt Moldova's political stability. The purpose of these actions was twofold. The first was preparation for the December 1996 presidential election in which Snegur will seek to win on the strength of the ethnic Romanian vote. His two challengers, Prime Minister Andrei Sangheli and Parliament chairman Petru Lucinschi, are expected to capture the votes of Moldova's

Russian-speaking population, thus making Snegur dependent on the ethnic Romanians.

Snegur's other purpose in creating the new party was an effort to change the government to that of a personalized presidential regime, a move opposed by Parliament. This regime would be different from the existing government and would be at odds with Moldova's political traditions. Under a presidential regime, the existing balance of power between the legislative and executive branches would be disrupted, and, critics charge, the country's progress toward democracy would be jeopardized.

In Transnistria the economic situation continued to deteriorate. The authorities of the "Dnestr Republic" sought greater political legitimacy in hopes that this would help them garner more political support and financial assistance from Russia. To this end, the authorities began drafting a constitution and election law in August in preparation for parliamentary elections scheduled for late fall 1995. In the meantime, bread rationing was introduced in Tiraspol and its suburbs in late August.

A more important event also began in August—the winddown of the operational group of Russian troops in Transnistria. Withdrawal of these troops is part of a "gentleman's agreement," reached in October 1994 between Russia and Moldova, that sought a political solution to the stand-off between the "Dnestr Republic" and the rest of Moldova, but that was approved only by Moldova. However, until the Russian State Duma (the lower house of the parliament) approves the agreement, matters will remain at a standstill.

In mid-August the commander, Valeriy Yevnevich, now promoted to lieutenant general, began to transfer nonmilitary equipment from the operational group to Transnistrian civilian authorities. Work also began on the destruction of old munitions (some manufactured before 1940) that could not be transported to Russia. Several trainloads of surplus military equipment were to be sent to Russia as well. At the same time, there was a cutback in the number of the operational group's officers and support staff. But because the Russian Duma had not yet ratified the withdrawal of the operational group, military authorities were calling this a "redeployment" of forces and equipment rather than an actual "withdrawal."

In September, Igor' N. Smirnov, president of the "Dnestr Republic," addressed the Russian State Duma and made an appeal for official recognition of the "Dnestr Republic." Presi-

dent Snegur of Moldova protested this move and continued to place his confidence in political negotiations. Smirnov, on the other hand, hoped to drag out talks until after Russian parliamentary elections, scheduled for December 1995, in an effort to get more support from the new parliament, which he hoped would be more sympathetic to the Transnistrians' cause.

September 29, 1995   Helen Fedor

Chapter 1. Belarus
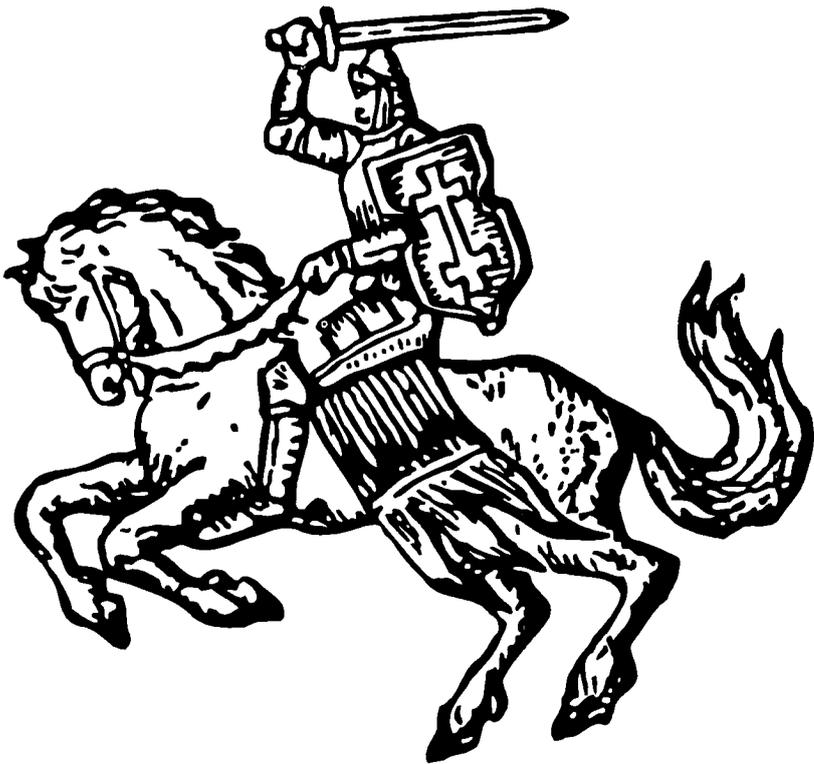
St. George, patron saint of Belarus

Chronology of Important Events

Period	Description
NINTH CENTURY	
Late	Emergence of Kievan Rus', the first East Slavic state, which soon splits into a number of principalities. One, Polatsk, becomes nucleus of modern-day Belarus.
THIRTEENTH CENTURY	
1240	Belarus and part of Ukraine come under control of Lithuania. Resulting state is called Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Rus', and Samogitia.
FOURTEEENTH CEN-TURY	
1385	Union of Krevo joins Poland and Grand Duchy in a federation.
SIXTEENTH CENTURY	
1569	Union of Lublin unites Poland and Lithuania into a single state, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.
1596	Union of Brest unites Roman Catholic Church with the part of the Orthodox Church existing within Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY	
1772, 1793, and 1795	Russia, Prussia, and Austria carry out three partitions of Poland. Belorussia, formerly part of Poland, now almost entirely within Russian Empire.
NINETEENTH CENTURY	
1839	Tsar Nicholas I abolishes Uniate Church and forces Uniates (three-quarters of Belorussians are members of Uniate Church at this time) to reconvert to Orthodoxy; bans use of name "Belorussia," replacing it with name "Northwest Territory," and bans Belorussian language.
1861	Serfdom is abolished in Russian Empire.
1863	Kastus' Kalinowski inspires uprising in Belorussia in support of Polish-Lithuanian insurrection against Russia. Insurrection fails, and Polish territories are absorbed into Russian Empire.
1864	Kalinowski, considered founding father of Belorussian nationalism, is hanged in Vilnius.
TWENTIETH CENTURY	
1905–18	Ban on Belorussian language is lifted; Belorussian culture flourishes; period of *nashaniwsta*.

Chronology of Important Events

Period	Description
1918 March	Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is signed, putting most of Belorussia under German control. Central Executive Committee of All-Belarusian Congress (Rada) nullifies treaty and proclaims independence of Belarusian Democratic Republic.
1919 January	Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (Belorussian SSR) is established by force of arms.
1921 March	Treaty of Riga divides Belorussia among Poland, Belorussian SSR, and Russia.
1922 December	Belorussian SSR is incorporated into Soviet Union.
1928	Forced collectivization starts.
1935	Belorussians in Poland opposing Polish government's policies on ethnic minorities are placed in concentration camp at Byaroza-Kartuzski.
1941	Nazis create Weissruthenische Generalbezirk (Belorussian Military District) in central part of Belorussia, establish German military regime in eastern part, and parcel out remaining Belorussian territory to Lithuanian and Ukrainian administrative divisions and to East Prussia.
1944 Summer	Red Army "liberates" Belorussian SSR from Nazis; Stalin orders sweeping purges and mass deportations.
1986 April	Chornobyl' nuclear power plant in Ukraine explodes; radiation mainly falls on Belorussian SSR. Secrecy surrounding disaster galvanizes Belorussians to mount protests against Soviet regime.
1988 June	Mass graves of Stalin's victims are found at Kurapaty, near Minsk. Discovery of some 250,000 bodies brings denunciation of old regime and demands for reform.
October	Belarusian Popular Front is formed.
1990 June	Supreme Soviet of Belorussian SSR adopts Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic; Belarusian is declared the official language.
1991 April	Demonstrations are held in several cities over economic and political issues.
August	Coup d'état takes place in Moscow; Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine declare independence from the Soviet Union.
	Supreme Soviet of Belorussian SSR declares independence on August 25 and changes name of country to Republic of Belarus. Communist Party of Belarus is temporarily suspended.
	Moldovan Parliament bans Communist Party of Moldavia. Moldova declares its complete independence from Soviet Union on August 27 and demands withdrawal of Soviet troops.

Chronology of Important Events

Period		Description
	December	Belarus signs Minsk Agreement, establishing Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).
		Eleven former Soviet republics expand CIS by issuing Alma-Ata Declaration; Minsk becomes headquarters of CIS.
1994	March	Supreme Soviet adopts new constitution; office of president is created.
	July	Alyaksandr Lukashyenka is elected president.
1995	May	Parliamentary elections are held; results of two rounds of elections are insufficient to seat new Supreme Soviet.

Country

Formal Name: Republic of Belarus (Ryespublika Byelarus).

Short Form: Belarus.

Term for Citizens: Belarusian(s).

Capital: Minsk.

Date of Independence: August 25, 1991.

Geography

Size: Approximately 207,600 square kilometers.

Topography: Hilly landscape with many lakes and gently sloping ridges created by glaciers in north; low-lying swampy plain in south. One-third of country covered by unpopulated forest tracts. Highest point 346 meters.

Climate: Temperate continental. Average annual precipitation ranges from 550 to 700 millimeters and is sometimes excessive.

Society

Population: 10,404,862 (July 1994 estimate), with average annual growth rate of 0.32 percent.

Ethnic Groups: In 1989 census, 77.8 percent Belorussian, 13.2 percent Russian, 4.1 percent Polish, 2.9 percent Ukrainian, and remainder Lithuanian, Latvian, Tatar, and other.

Languages: Belarusian official language; Russian is language of interethnic communication; languages of minorities protected.

Religion: About 60 percent Orthodox (early 1990s). Other denominations include Roman Catholic, Apostolic Christian, Baptist, Muslim, New Apostolic, Old Believer, Pentecostal,

Seventh-Day Adventist, and Uniate.

Education and Literacy: Compulsory attendance ten years; literacy rate 98 percent (1989).

Health: Health care provided by state, mostly free of charge. System overwhelmed by victims of Chornobyl' accident. Infant mortality rate 18.9 per 1,000 live births (1994). Life expectancy (1994) 66.2 years for males and 75.8 years for females. Modern medical equipment and facilities in short supply. In 1994 about 127 hospital beds and forty-two doctors per 10,000 inhabitants.

Economy

General Character: Extremely centralized. Government efforts to privatize and establish market economy weak.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP): In 1992 about US$30.3 billion; real growth rate –10 percent. Agriculture accounted for 23 percent of GDP, industry for 38 percent, and other sectors for 39 percent.

Agriculture: Mainly state and collective farms; sprinkling of small plots for private household use. Primary crops: fodder, potatoes, wheat, barley, oats, buckwheat, potatoes, flax, and sugar beets. Cattle, hogs, and sheep raised.

Industry: Machine- and instrument-building (especially tractors, large trucks, machine tools, and automation equipment), petrochemicals, plastics, synthetic fibers, fertilizer, processed food, glass, and textiles.

Minerals: Small deposits of iron ore, nonferrous metal ores, dolomite, potash, rock salt, phosphorites, refractory clay, molding sand, sand for glass, and various building materials.

Energy: Primary sources: twenty-two thermal power plants (total capacity 7,033 megawatts), additional small power plants (total capacity 188 megawatts), and nine small hydro-electric power plants (total capacity six megawatts). Country's power grid connected to grids of Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, and Poland. Almost totally dependent on Russia for oil, coal, and natural gas needed to fuel electric-power generation plants.

Foreign Trade: In 1994 about 84 percent of foreign trade conducted with other members of Commonwealth of Independent States. Imports: natural gas, oil and gas condensate, diesel fuel, mazut, wheat, corn, and sugar. Exports: crude and processed oil, heavy machinery, diesel fuel, mazut, chemical and mineral fertilizers, televisions, trucks, tractors, refrigerators and freezers, meat, and milk.

Fiscal Year: Calendar year.

Currency and Exchange Rate: In March 1995, 11,669 Belarusian rubles per US$1.

Transportation and Telecommunications

Roads: In 1994 estimated at 92,200 kilometers, including 61,000 kilometers of paved surfaces.

Railroads: In 1993 estimated at 5,488 kilometers.

Airports: In 1993, 124 airports, of which fifty-five usable and thirty-one with permanent-surface runways. Main airport in Minsk, Minsk International.

Inland Waterways: Extensive and widely used canal and river systems, especially Dnyapro River and its tributaries and Dnyaprowska-Buhski Canal connecting Buh and Prypyats' rivers. Homyel', Babruysk, Barysaw, and Pinsk major river ports. In 1991 some 800,000 passengers and 18.6 million tons of freight carried. No direct access to sea, but relatively close to Baltic Sea ports. Agreement with Poland to use port of Gdynia.

Telecommunications: In 1994 five television channels: two Belarusian (one state-owned, one private) and three Russian. No cable service available. More than thirty-five AM radio stations in seventeen cities; more than eighteen FM radio stations in eighteen cities.

Government and Politics

Government: Democracy, with president and unicameral legislature, Supreme Soviet, both popularly elected. Government composed of president and Cabinet of Ministers.

Procuracy headed by procurator general. New constitution adopted March 28, 1994; went into effect March 30, 1994.

Politics: Political parties and movements generally quite small. Include Belarusian Popular Front, Party of Communists of Belarus, Communist Party of Belarus, United Democratic Party of Belarus, Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly (Hramada), Belarusian Peasant Party, Belarusian Christian Democratic Union, "Belaya Rus'" Slavic Council, and other parties.

Foreign Relations: Recognized by more than 100 countries (late 1992), nearly seventy of which had some level of diplomatic relations. Recognized by United States on December 26, 1991. Belarusian diplomatic presence abroad limited. Relations with Russia overshadow domestic and foreign policy. Relations with Ukraine weak. Relations with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia friendly.

International Agreements and Memberships: Member of United Nations (founding member), World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Commonwealth of Independent States, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (until January 1995 known as Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe), North Atlantic Cooperation Council, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (observer status). Declared ineligible for membership in Council of Europe because of election laws and practices.

National Security

Armed Forces: Armed forces under Ministry of Defense. In 1994 totaled approximately 92,400: ground forces (52,500), air force (27,600, including air defense), some 11,000 centrally controlled units, and about 1,300 staff. No navy. Reserves of 289,500 (those who had had military service in previous five years). In accordance with stated goal of becoming a neutral state, plans originally called for reducing number of troops by 60 percent from 243,000 in 1993 to 96,000 in 1995; plans for further reduction. Universal conscription for eighteen months.

Major Military Units: In 1994 ground forces consisted of three

corps headquarters, two motorized divisions, one airborne division, one artillery division, three mechanized divisions, one airborne brigade, three surface-to-surface missile brigades, two antitank brigades, one special duties brigade, and seven surface-to-air missile brigades. Air force consisted of two interceptor regiments, three strike regiments, and one reconnaissance regiment. Four regiments had 300 helicopters, and one transport regiment had over forty helicopters.

Military Equipment: Arms from former Soviet stocks. Extensive Soviet-era defense industry has been hit severely by decreased availability of materials and external demands.

Internal Security: Border Guards (8,000 in 1995) under control of Ministry of Internal Affairs. Local assets of former Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic KGB transferred to new government. Name retained.

Russian Troops: In 1993 about 40,000 troops of Russian air force. Scheduled to leave in 1995, but not likely to do so. Russian troops tending remaining strategic nuclear weapons to remain stationed in Belarus until 2020.

Figure 2. Belarus, 1995

SINCE THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, national activists have based their attempts to create an independent Belorussian state on the Belorussian language, which had been kept alive over the centuries mainly by peasants. The stage was set for the emergence of a national consciousness by the industrialization and urbanization of the nineteenth century and by the subsequent publication of literature in the Belorussian language, which was often suppressed by Russian, and later Polish, authorities. It is ironic, then, that the first long-lived Belorussian state entity, the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (Belorussian SSR), was created by outside forces—the Bolshevik (see Glossary) government in Moscow. And it was those same forces, the communists, whose downfall in 1991 precipitated the existence of an independent Belarus. The new nation has since been torn between its desire for independence and a longing for integration with newly independent Russia.

The population of the Belorussian SSR was jolted into national awareness in the late 1980s by the occurrence of one disaster and the discovery of another. The explosion at the Chornobyl' (Chernobyl' in Russian) nuclear power plant in Ukraine not only entailed the physically damaging radiation carried by the winds but also came to represent the toll taken on the country's sense of its ethnic and cultural identity by years of Russification (see Glossary). These two sets of consequences affected both the daily lives of the Belorussians and national politics: how was the country to remedy the damage?

Belarus's other disaster was the discovery in 1988 of mass graves containing victims of the atrocities of the early Soviet dictator, Joseph V. Stalin. Although this discovery angered a broad spectrum of Belorussians, it energized only a small group of activists to try to overcome the country's political apathy. Seeing Stalin's actions as clear proof of Moscow's attempts to eliminate the Belorussian nation, nationalists wished to ensure that such barbarity could not occur again. For them, a strong, independent Belarus was the first step in this direction.

Historical Setting

Early History

Belarus's origins can be traced from the emergence in the

late ninth century A.D. of Kievan Rus', the first East Slavic state. After the death of its ruler, Prince Yaroslav the Wise, in 1054, Kievan Rus' split into a number of principalities, each centered on a city. One, Polatsk (Polotsk in Russian), became the nucleus of modern-day Belarus.

In 1240, after the Tatar overthrow of Kiev, the dominant principality of Kievan Rus', Belarus and part of Ukraine came under the control of Lithuania. The resulting state was called the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Rus', and Samogitia (see fig. 3). Because territories inhabited by Slavs made up about 90 percent of the Grand Duchy, they exerted a great cultural influence on the new state. Official business was conducted in a Slavic language (a predecessor of both Belarusian and Ukrainian) based on Old Church Slavonic (see Glossary), and the law code was based on that of Kievan Rus'.

Belorussia, Poland, and Catholicism

The Union of Krevo (1385), which joined Poland and the Grand Duchy in a confederation, hinged on the conversion of Lithuania's Grand Duke Jogaila from paganism to Roman Catholicism and his subsequent marriage to twelve-year-old Queen Jadwiga of Poland. Thus he became Wladyslaw II Jagiello, king of Poland. Poland and Lithuania were later united into a single state, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, by the Union of Lublin (1569).

When Roman Catholicism became the official religion of Lithuania shortly after Jagiello's conversion, the Lithuanian and Belorussian nobilities began converting from Orthodoxy to Catholicism and assimilating Polish culture (including the language), a process accelerated by the Union of Lublin. As a result, the Belorussian peasantry was ruled by those who shared neither its language nor its religion, Orthodoxy.

The Union of Brest (1596), which united the Roman Catholic Church with the part of the Orthodox Church that was within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was viewed favorably by both the Polish king, Sigismund III, and a number of Orthodox bishops, clergy, and faithful. The new Uniate Church (see Glossary) acknowledged the supremacy of the Roman Catholic pope and accepted articles of Roman Catholic religious doctrine. In return, the Uniate Church retained its traditional Orthodox rites and customs as well as a measure of autonomy in nondoctrinal matters; it was also given the same rights and privileges as the Roman Catholic Church. However,

fear of the new church becoming Latinized and Polonized (see Glossary) caused many of the Orthodox faithful to reject the union, and the Orthodox Church continued to exist alongside the Uniate Church in an often bitter struggle.

In the aftermath of the Union of Brest, both civil and religious authorities persecuted the Orthodox Church and supported the Uniates in their takeover of Orthodox property. Social conditions deteriorated, a large-scale revolt was waged against Polish landowners in 1648–54 (coinciding with the Khmel'nyts'kyi Rebellion in Ukraine), and many Belorussians fled to the Ukrainian steppes (see Glossary) to join the Cossacks (see Glossary). Little economic development took place in Belorussian lands, and the vast majority of the Belorussian population lived on subsistence agriculture.

The Partitions of Poland

Belorussia remained a part of Poland until Russia, Prussia, and Austria carried out the three partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795. After the last partition, the entire territory of Belorussia became part of the Russian Empire (see Glossary), with the exception of a small piece of land in the west, which was held by Prussia (see fig. 4). Orthodox Russia tolerated the Uniate Church to a certain degree, but in 1839, at a time when three-quarters of all Belorussians were Uniates, Tsar Nicholas I (with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church) abolished the Uniate Church and forced the Uniates to reconvert to Orthodoxy. He also banned the use of the name "Belorussia," replacing it with the name "Northwest Territory" (Severozapadnyy kray in Russian), and banned the Belorussian language. Overall, the state pursued a policy of Russification.

At the time serfdom was abolished in the Russian Empire in 1861, Belorussia was essentially a nation of peasants and landlords. Although they had their freedom, the peasants had little else: they remained poor and largely landless. The imposition of the Russian language, the Orthodox religion, heavy taxes, and military service lasting twenty-five years made the past under Polish rule seem better than the present under the tsars.

Early Belorussian Nationalism

It was memories of life under Polish rule that Kastus' Kalinowski (1838–64) tried to evoke in his clandestine newspaper *Muzhytskaya prawda* (Peasants' Truth), which he published to inspire an uprising in solidarity with the Polish-Lithuanian

Figure 3. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Rus', and Samogitia at Its Greatest Extent, Early Fifteenth Century

insurrection against Russia in January 1863. The insurrection failed, and the Polish territories and people were absorbed directly into the Russian Empire. Kalinowski, today considered the founding father of Belorussian nationalism, was hanged in Vilnius.

Despite the industrial development that took place in Belorussia during the 1880s and 1890s, unemployment and poverty were widespread, giving impetus to large-scale migrations. In the fifty years leading up to the Bolshevik Revolution, almost 1.5 million persons emigrated from Belorussia to the United States and to Siberia.
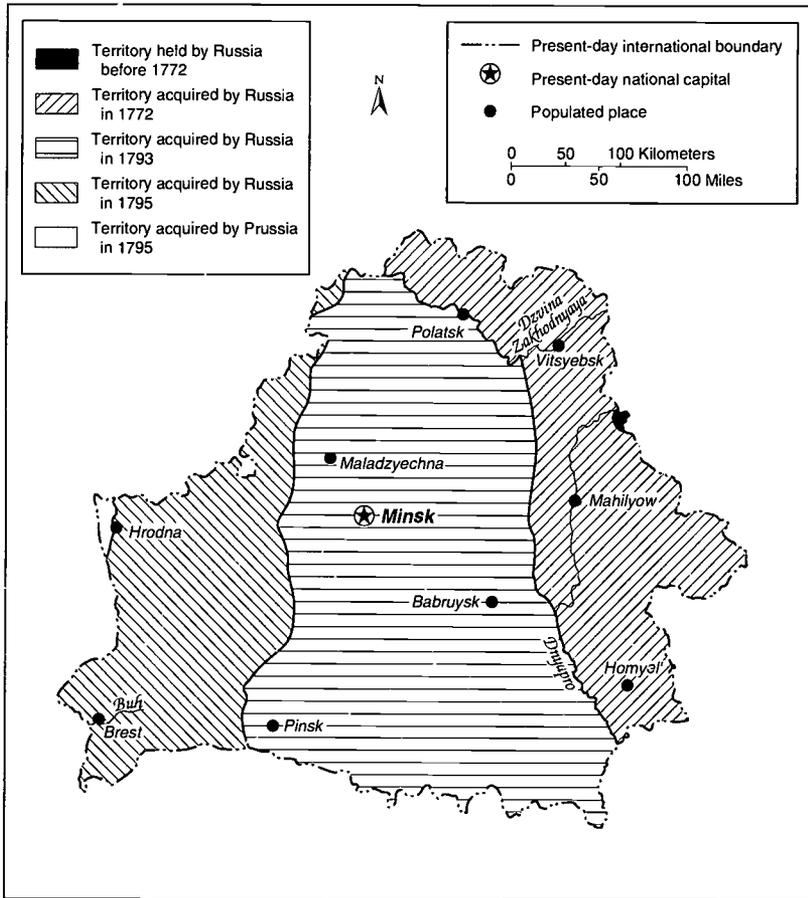
Source: Based on information from Paul Robert Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe*, Seattle, 1993, 71.

Figure 4. Russian and Prussian Acquisitions of Belarusian Territory in the Partitions of Poland, 1772–95

Following the defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War and the Revolution of 1905, strikes and peasant disorders erupted throughout the Russian Empire; to stem the unrest the tsar granted, and then extended, civil liberties. Russian authorities were forced to relax their repressive policies on non-Russian ethnic groups, prompting a national and cultural flowering in Belorussia. The ban on the Belorussian language (and other non-Russian languages) was lifted, although there were still restrictions on its use; education was expanded, and peasants began to attend school for the first time; Belorussian

writers published classics of modern Belorussian literature; and the weekly newspaper *Nasha niva* (Our Cornfield), published by the Belorussian Socialist Party, lent the name *nashaniwstva* to this period (1906–18) of Belorussian history.

World War and Revolution

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 turned Belorussia into a zone of strict martial law, military operations, and great destruction. Large German and Russian armies fought fiercely and caused the expulsion or departure of more than 1 million civilians from the country. The Russian government's inept war efforts and ineffective economic policies prompted high food prices, shortages of goods, and many needless deaths in the war. Discontent in the cities and the countryside spread, leading to strikes, riots, and the eventual downfall of the tsarist government.

The two revolutions of 1917—the February Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution—gave nationally conscious Belorussians an opportunity to advance their political cause. Bolshevism did not have many followers among the natives of Belorussia; instead, local political life was dominated by the Socialist Revolutionary Party, the Mensheviks (see Glossary), the Bund (see Glossary), and various Christian movements in which the clergy of both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Catholic Church played significant roles. The Belorussian political cause was represented by the Belorussian Socialist Party, the Socialist Revolutionary Party, the Leninist Social Democratic Party, and various nationalist groups advocating moderate forms of socialism.

In December 1917, more than 1,900 delegates to the All-Belarusian Congress (Rada) met in Minsk to establish a democratic republican government in Belorussia, but Bolshevik soldiers disbanded the assembly before it had finished its deliberations. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 put most of Belorussia under German control, but on March 25, 1918, the Central Executive Committee of the Rada nullified the treaty and proclaimed the independence of the Belarusian Democratic Republic. Later that year, the German government, which had guaranteed the new state's independence, collapsed, and the new republic was unable to resist Belorussian Bolsheviks supported by the Bolshevik government in Moscow. The Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (Belorussian SSR) was established on January 1, 1919, by force of arms.

For the next two years, Belorussia was a prize in the Polish-Soviet War, a conflict settled by the Treaty of Riga in March 1921. Under the terms of the treaty, Belorussia was divided into three parts: the western portion, which was absorbed into Poland; central Belorussia, which formed the Belorussian SSR; and the eastern portion, which became part of Russia. The Belorussian SSR was incorporated into the Soviet Union (see Glossary) when the Soviet Union was founded in December 1922 (see fig. 5).

The territory of the Belorussian SSR was enlarged in both 1924 and 1926 by the addition of Belorussian ethnographic regions that had become part of Russia under the Treaty of Riga. The area of the republic was expanded from its original post-treaty size of 51,800 square kilometers to 124,320 square kilometers, and the population increased from 1.5 million to almost 5 million persons. Belarus was expanded to its current size of 207,600 square kilometers in 1944.

The New Economic Policy (NEP—see Glossary), established by Vladimir I. Lenin in 1921 as a temporary compromise with capitalism, stimulated economic recovery in the Soviet Union, and by the mid-1920s agricultural and industrial output in Belorussia had reached 1913 levels. Historically, Belorussia had been a country of landlords with large holdings, but after the Bolshevik Revolution, these landlords were replaced by middle-class landholders; farm collectives were practically nonexistent. When forced collectivization (see Glossary) and confiscations began in 1928, there was strong resistance, for which the peasantry paid a high social price: peasants were allowed to starve in some areas, and so-called troublemakers were deported to Siberia. Because peasants slaughtered their livestock rather than turn it over to collective farms (see Glossary), agriculture suffered serious setbacks. However, the rapid industrialization that accompanied forced collectivization enabled the Moscow government to develop new heavy industry in Belorussia quickly.

During the period of the NEP, the Soviet government relaxed its cultural restrictions, and Belorussian language and culture flourished. But in the 1930s, when Stalin was fully in power, Moscow's attitude changed, and it became important to Moscow to bind both Belorussia and its economy as closely to the Soviet Union as possible. Once again, this meant Russification of the people and the culture. The Belorussian language was reformed to bring it closer to the Russian language, and

Figure 5. Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), 1922

history books were rewritten to show that the Belorussian people had striven to be united with Russia throughout their history. Political persecutions in the 1930s reached massive proportions, causing population losses as great as would occur during World War II—more than 2 million persons.

Belorussian Territory under Poland

Belorussian territory under Poland experienced its own drama. The new Polish state, where ethnic minorities, including Belorussians, Ukrainians, Jews, and Germans, made up one-third of the country's population, began as a democracy. The country's 3.5 million Belorussians were able to open their own primary schools, high schools, and teachers' colleges; the government supported cultural activities; and Belorussians elected three senators and eleven deputies to the Polish parliament, or Sejm, in 1922.

By 1924, however, Poland's policy toward ethnic minorities had changed drastically. Under the guise of combating communism, most Belorussian schools were closed, and publications in the Belorussian language were banned. The government encouraged ethnic Poles (see Glossary) to settle in the Belorussian region, but at the same time it neglected the overall economic development of the area. The Belorussian region became an agricultural appendage to a more industrialized Poland, and unemployment and land hunger were widespread. Between 1925 and 1938, some 78,000 people emigrated from this part of Poland in search of work, mainly to France and Latin America.

In May 1926, war hero Marshal Józef Pilsudski established an authoritarian regime in Poland. The following year, when the Belorussian Peasant-and-Workers' Union spearheaded a widespread protest against the government's oppressive policies in the Belorussian region, the regime arrested and imprisoned the union's activists. Further governmental policies toward the so-called Eastern Territories (the official name for the Belorussian and Ukrainian regions) were aimed at imposing a Polish and Roman Catholic character on the region.

In 1935 Poland declared that it would no longer be bound by the League of Nations treaty on ethnic minorities, arguing that its own laws were adequate. That same year, many Belorussians in Poland who opposed the government's policies were placed in a concentration camp at Byaroza-Kartuzski (Bereza Kartuska in Polish). The Belorussians lost their last seat in the Polish Sejm in the general elections of 1935, and the legislation that guaranteed the right of minority communities to have their own schools was repealed in November 1938. The state then involved itself more deeply in religion by attempting to Polonize the Orthodox Church and subordinate it to the government.

World War II

Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939. Two and one-half weeks later, Soviet troops moved into the western portions of Belorussia and Ukraine. Ignorant of, or disbelieving the existence of, mass persecutions under Stalin, most Belorussians hailed the arrival of the Red Army, only to learn quickly of the harsh reality of communism. The flourishing of national culture that the communist party permitted was strictly circumscribed by the party's ideological and political goals. Arrests

and deportations were common: about 300,000 persons were deported from western Belorussia to Soviet labor camps between September 1939 and June 1941, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union.

In June 1941, when German tanks swept through Belorussia toward Moscow, many Belorussians actually welcomed the Nazis, thinking that they would free the Belorussian people from their communist oppression. However, the Nazis' designs for the occupied territories became known soon enough: Germanizing and assimilating 25 percent of the Belorussians and either ousting or destroying the remaining 75 percent; parceling out Belorussian territory to the Lithuanian and Ukrainian administrative divisions and to East Prussia, while making the central part of Belorussia the Weissruthenische Generalbezirk (Belorussian Military District); and placing the eastern portion of Belorussia under the German military regime.

Although the front was far to the east, military operations continued within Belorussia. During the three years of Nazi occupation, enormous devastation was caused by guerrilla warfare, retaliatory burnings of entire villages by the occupiers, mass executions of the Jewish population, and two movements of the front through the area. More than 2 million lives were lost and more than 1 million buildings destroyed. An American observer, after six months of travel across Belorussia, called it "the most devastated territory in the world." Major cities, such as Minsk and Vitsyebsk (Vitebsk in Russian), were in ruins.

One of the political consequences of the German occupation was an upsurge of Belorussian nationalism, which the German authorities used for their own ends. Once the Red Army and Soviet administrators fled Belorussia ahead of the Nazis, Belorussians began to organize their own police forces and administration, which the Nazis encouraged. Belorussians living in Belorussia were assisted by Belorussian anticommunist political refugees who were permitted to return from Germany. The Nazis permitted the Union of Belorussian Youth to organize in mid-1943; the Belorussian Central Council (BCC) was formed as a self-governing auxiliary body in December 1943; the BCC mobilized the Belorussian Land Defense in March 1944; and the All-Belorussian Congress was permitted to meet in Minsk to rally resistance to the Russian communists in 1944. However, none of those measures changed the negative attitude of the Belorussians toward the brutal occupation regime.

To counterbalance the Belorussians, the Nazis allowed a number of Russians back from political exile in German-occupied countries in Europe. In addition, they encouraged Poles who had settled in Belorussia during the time of Polish control (and who were frequently at odds with the Belorussians) to become involved in the government.

When the front began moving westward, many Belorussians had to choose between two evils: life with the Soviets or departure into exile. Many Belorussians decided to flee, and tens of thousands of them found themselves in Germany and Austria toward the end of World War II. Some of those who had been deported as forced laborers to Germany agreed to go back to Belorussia, only to be redeported by the communists to Siberia or other remote places in the Soviet Union. All those who fled voluntarily to the West eventually settled in Germany, in other West European countries, or overseas.

Stalin and Russification

The country's misery did not end in the summer of 1944, when the Red Army "liberated" it from the Nazis. Stalin ordered sweeping purges and mass deportations of local administrators and members of the communist party, as well as those who had collaborated with the Nazis in any way, those who had spent the war in slave labor and prison camps in Germany and were now "ideologically contaminated" in Stalin's view, those who were suspected of anti-Soviet sentiments, and those who were accused of "bourgeois nationalism." Only in 1971 did the Belorussian SSR return to its pre-World War II population level, but without its large Jewish populace (see Ethnic Composition, this ch.).

The wartime devastation of Belorussia—the loss of people, homes, animals, public buildings, educational and cultural resources, roads, communications, health care facilities, and the entire industrial base—was complete. To make up for the industrial loss, Stalin ordered the building of new factories and plants, which were more modern and thus more efficient than most of those elsewhere in the Soviet Union.

One of the devices Stalin used to "protect" Belorussia (and the rest of the Soviet Union) against possible Western influences was a program of intensive Russification, thus creating a buffer zone for Russia along the Polish border. Consequently, most key positions in Minsk, as well as in the western provincial cities of Hrodna (Grodno in Russian) and Brest, were filled by

Russians sent from elsewhere in the Soviet Union. The Belorussian language was unofficially banned from use by the government, educational and cultural institutions, and the mass media, and Belorussian national culture was suppressed by Moscow. This so-called cultural cleansing intensified greatly after 1959, when Nikita S. Khrushchev, the leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU—see Glossary) at the time, pronounced in Minsk, "The sooner we all start speaking Russian, the faster we shall build communism." The resistance of some students, writers, and intellectuals in Minsk during the 1960s and 1970s was met with harassment by the Committee for State Security (KGB—see Glossary) and firing from jobs rather than arrests. Among the best-known dissidents were the writer Vasil' Bykaw, the historian Mykola Prashkovich, and the worker Mikhal Kukabaka, who spent seventeen years in confinement.

The Era of *Perestroika*

The early days of Mikhail S. Gorbachev's *perestroika* (see Glossary) in Belorussia were highlighted by two major events: the Chornobyl' disaster of April 26, 1986 (the Belorussian SSR absorbed 70 percent of the radioactive contaminants spewed out by the reactor), and a December 1986 petition sent by twenty-eight intellectuals to Gorbachev expressing the Belorussian people's fundamental grievances in the field of culture ("a cultural Chornobyl' ").

Whereas the full impact of the physical effects of Chornobyl' was kept secret for more than three years, the "cultural Chornobyl' " became a subject of hot discussion and an inspiration for considerable political activity. The petition pleaded with Gorbachev to prevent the "spiritual extinction" of the Belorussian nation and laid out measures for the introduction of Belarusian as a working language in party, state, and local government bodies and at all levels of education, publishing, mass media, and other fields.

The document embodied the aspirations of a considerable part of the national intelligentsia, who, having received no positive answer from the CPSU leadership either in Moscow or in Minsk, took to the streets. A number of independent youth groups sprang up, many of which embraced the national cause. In July 1988, the Organizational Committee of the Confederation of Belarusian Youth Associations called for "support of the radical restructuring of Belorussia."

In June 1988, mass graves, allegedly with up to 250,000 of Stalin's victims, were found near Minsk at Kurapaty. This sensational discovery fueled denunciations of the old regime and brought demands for reforms. An October demonstration, attended by about 10,000 people and dispersed by riot police, commemorated these victims and expressed support for the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), which had been formed earlier in the month in hopes of encouraging reform.

The group of activists who called for reform was relatively small; most people, although angry about the mass graves, remained both attached to Soviet ways and politically apathetic, believing that all these public activities would make no difference in the long run. The March 4, 1990, elections to the republic's Supreme Soviet (see Glossary) illustrated the extent of political apathy and ideological inertia. Of the 360 seats in the legislature, fifteen were unfilled (at least eleven remained so more than a year later); of those elected, 86 percent belonged to the Communist Party of Belorussia (CPB). This conservative majority was not alone in slowing the pace of reforms. A majority of the republic's population, 83 percent, also voted conservatively in the March 17 all-union referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union, even though the Supreme Soviet of the Belorussian SSR adopted the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic on June 27, 1990 (following the Russian example of some two weeks earlier).

A series of strikes in April 1991 put an end to the republic's reputation as the quietest of the European Soviet republics. The demands were mainly economic (higher wages and cancellation of a new sales tax), but some were also political (resignation of the government and depoliticization of republic institutions). Certain economic demands were met, but the political ones were not. However, increasing dissent within the party led to thirty-three CPB deputies joining the opposition as the Communists for Democracy faction one month later.

Independent Belarus

Following the August 1991 coup d'état (see Glossary) in Moscow and declarations of independence by Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine, the Supreme Soviet in Minsk declared the independence of Belarus on August 25, 1991, by giving its Declaration of State Sovereignty the status of a constitutional document and renaming the country the Republic of Belarus.

The disorientation that overtook the communists in the wake of the coup was used by liberals and nationalist reformers in various structures to advance their cause: the Supreme Soviet forced the resignation of its chairman, Mikalay Dzyemyantsyey, for siding with the coup leaders and replaced him with his deputy, Stanislaw Shushkyevich; all CPB property was nationalized; the name of the state was officially changed from the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Republic of Belarus; and the CPB was temporarily suspended while its role in the coup was investigated.

Shushkyevich's support for the continuation of some kind of union culminated on December 8, 1991, in his signing of the Minsk Agreement (see Appendix B), which established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS—see Glossary). On December 21, eleven former Soviet republics expanded the CIS by issuing the Alma-Ata Declaration (see Appendix C). Minsk became the headquarters of the CIS.

After much negotiation and considerable revision, the Supreme Soviet adopted a new constitution, which went into effect on March 30, 1994. The new document created the office of president, declared Belarus a democracy with separation of powers, granted freedom of religion, and proclaimed Belarus's goal of becoming a neutral, nonnuclear state. The winner of the quickly organized election was Alyaksandr Lukashyenka, whose sentiments and policies seemed destined to reunite Belarus with Russia in some way. Treaties were signed with Russia that made political concessions to the latter in hopes of creating economic advantages for Belarus. And there were clashes with parliament over the issue of presidential powers.

In the campaigning for the May 1995 parliamentary elections, continuing censorship of the media's campaign coverage demonstrated the less-than-democratic nature of the state. In response to the lack of information and as a consequence of continued political apathy on the part of the populace, two rounds of elections failed to elect enough deputies to seat a new Supreme Soviet. And Lukashyenka continued to accumulate power through his appointments and dismissals.

Physical Environment

Topography and Drainage

Belarus, a generally flat country (the average elevation is 162 meters above sea level) without natural borders, occupies

Children amusing
themselves in a park on a
Sunday afternoon, Minsk
Courtesy Jim Doran

Young girls in folk costumes
Courtesy Anatol Klashchuk

an area of 207,600 square kilometers, or slightly less than the state of Kansas. Its neighbors are Russia to the east and northeast, Latvia to the north, Lithuania to the northwest, Poland to the west, and Ukraine to the south.

Belarus's mostly level terrain is broken up by the Belarusian Range (Byelaruskaya Hrada), a swath of elevated territory composed of individual highlands that runs diagonally through the country from west-southwest to east-northeast. Its highest point is the 346-meter Mount Dzyarzhynskaya (Dzerzhinskaya in Russian), named for Feliks Dzerzhinskiy, head of Russia's security apparatus under Stalin. Northern Belarus has a picturesque, hilly landscape with many lakes and gently sloping ridges created by glacial debris. In the south, about one-third of the republic's territory around the Prypyats' (Pripyat' in Russian) River is taken up by the low-lying swampy plain of the Belarusian Woodland, or Palyessye (Poles'ye in Russian).

Belarus's 3,000 streams and 4,000 lakes are major features of the landscape and are used for floating timber, shipping, and power generation. Major rivers are the west-flowing Dzvina Zakhodnyaya (Zapadnaya Dvina in Russian) and Nyoman (Neman in Russian) rivers and the south-flowing Dnyapro (Dnepr in Russian) with its tributaries, the Byarezina (Berezina in Russian), Sozh, and Prypyats' rivers. The Prypyats' River has served as a bridge between the Dnyapro flowing to Ukraine and the Vistula in Poland since the period of Kievan Rus'. Lake Narach (Naroch' in Russian), the country's largest lake, covers eighty square kilometers.

Nearly one-third of the country is covered with *pushchy* (sing., *pushcha*), large unpopulated tracts of forests. In the north, conifers predominate in forests that also include birch and alder; farther south, other deciduous trees grow. The Belavezhskaya (Belovezhskaya in Russian) Pushcha in the far west is the oldest and most magnificent of the forests; a reservation here shelters animals and birds that became extinct elsewhere long ago. The reservation spills across the border into Poland; both countries administer it jointly.

Climate

Because of the proximity of the Baltic Sea (257 kilometers at the closest point), the country's climate is temperate continental. Winters last between 105 and 145 days, and summers last up to 150 days. The average temperature in January is –6°C, and the average temperature for July is about 18°C, with high

humidity. Average annual precipitation ranges from 550 to 700 millimeters and is sometimes excessive.

Environmental Concerns

The most notorious legacy of pollution from the communist era is the April 26, 1986, accident at the Chornobyl' nuclear power plant in Ukraine. Some 70 percent of the radiation spewed was carried by the wind to Belarus, where it affected at least 25 percent of the country—especially Homyel' (Gomel' in Russian) and Mahilyow (Mogilēv in Russian) *voblastsi* (sing., *voblasts'*), or counties, in the south and southeast, and 22 percent of the population. Although more than 2 million people (including 600,000 children) lived in areas affected by fallout from the disaster, the Soviet government tried to cover up the accident until Swedish scientists pressed for an explanation of the unusually high levels of atmospheric radiation in Sweden.

The Belorussian government's request to the Soviet government for a minimum of 17 billion rubles to deal with the consequences was answered with Moscow's offer of only 3 billion rubles. According to one official in 1993, the per capita expenditure on the accident was one kopek in Russia, three kopeks in Ukraine, and one ruble (100 kopeks) in Belarus.

Despite the government's establishment of the State Committee for Chornobyl', the enactment of laws limiting who could stay in contaminated areas, and the institution of a national program for research on the effects, little progress was made in coping with the consequences of the disaster, owing to the lack of money and the government's sluggish attitude. In 1994 a resettlement program for 170,000 residents was woefully underbudgeted and far behind schedule. To assist victims of the Chornobyl' disaster, a Western organization, the Know-How Fund, provided many Belarusian doctors with training in the latest bone-marrow techniques used in Europe and the United States.

The long-range effects of the disaster include an increasing incidence of various kinds of cancer and birth defects. Congenital defects in newborns are reported to be 40 percent higher than before the accident. Tainted water, livestock, farm produce, and land are widespread, and the extensive wetlands retain high concentrations of radiation. Cleanup of the disaster accounted for 14 percent of the state budget in 1995. Other environmental problems include widespread chemical pollu-

tion of the soil, which shows excessive pesticide levels, and the industrial pollution found in nearly all the large cities.

Population and Ethnic Composition

Population Characteristics

In July 1994, an estimated 10,404,862 people (fifty persons per square kilometer) lived in Belarus, with additional populations of ethnic Belarusians (see Glossary) living in Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Ethnic Belarusians in the West (living primarily in Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, the United States, Canada, and Argentina) numbered more than 1 million.

In 1994 the annual population growth rate was estimated at 0.32 percent, resulting from a birth rate of 13.1 births per 1,000 population, a death rate of 11.2 deaths per 1,000 population, and a net migration rate of 1.3 persons per 1,000 population. The birth rate had declined from 15.0 per 1,000 population in 1989, and the death rate had increased from 10.1 (see table 2, Appendix A). The estimated 1994 average life expectancy at birth in Belarus was 66.2 years for males and 75.8 years for females. The annual population growth rate is expected to decrease slowly well into the next century as a result of fears of birth defects caused by the Chornobyl' accident and the difficult economic situation (see The Economy, this ch.).

Population growth in Belarus has declined because of a rapid drop in fertility rates (an estimated 1.9 children per woman in 1994) and because of a sharp increase in infant and child mortality, which had been in decline before the Chornobyl' accident in 1986. Improvements in the infant mortality rate, which was estimated at 18.9 per 1,000 live births in 1994, were further blocked by poor maternal health, poor prenatal care, and frequent use of abortion as a means of birth control. Belarus has instituted a pronatal policy to counteract women's reluctance to have children, but difficult economic conditions and fear of birth defects caused by environmental pollution continue to be major causes of the decline in the birth rate.

Falling birth rates also have contributed to the graying of the population (see fig. 6). This will affect the country in a number of ways, including the allocation of funds from its budget. With fewer workers supporting more pensioners, the

administration will be paying more in pensions than it collects in taxes (see Welfare, this ch.).

The population's gender structure was profoundly affected by World War II. The large loss of male lives during the war ensured not only that there would be a surplus of females, but that this surplus would persist for at least another generation.
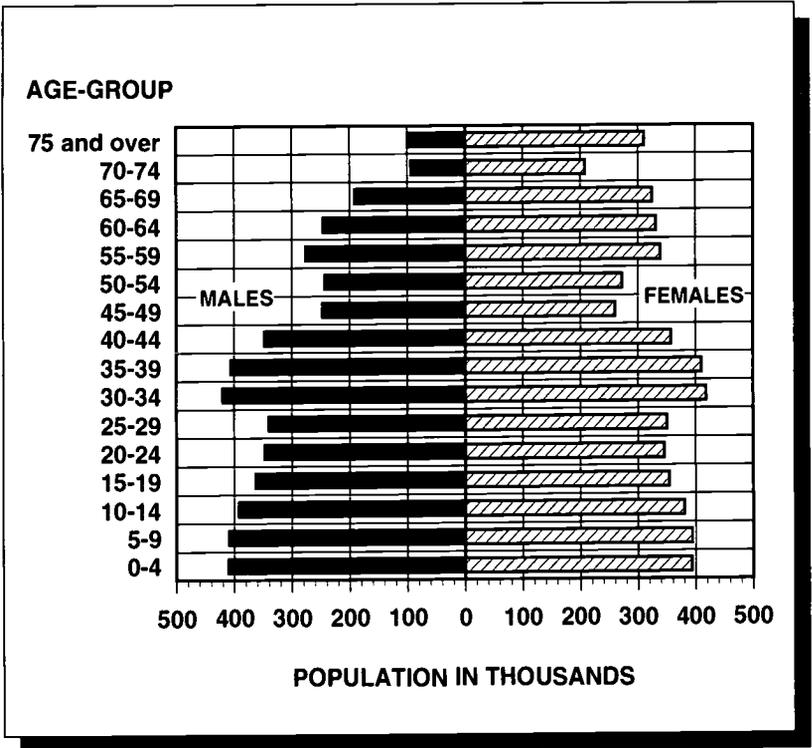
A law passed in September 1992 gave the entire population of Belarus an automatic right to citizenship. This included all the ethnic Russians (see Glossary) who had moved there over the years, including military personnel and government officials. However, many declined to acquire Belarusian citizenship. As a result, Belarus is sometimes represented abroad or administered by ethnic Russians who are residents, but not citizens, of Belarus.

In 1992 Belarus's largest cities were Minsk, the capital, with 1.7 million inhabitants; Homyel', with 517,000; Vitsyebsk, with 373,000; Mahilyow, with 364,000; Hrodna, with 291,000; and Brest, with 284,000. The republic included more than 100 cities and towns, twelve of which had a population of 100,000 or more. Of the total population, 68 percent lived in cities and 32 percent lived in rural areas in 1994. These figures resemble those for the former Soviet Union as a whole.

Ethnic Composition

The 1989 census of the Soviet Union, its last, showed a mainly Slavic population in Belorussia: Belorussians (77.8 percent), Russians (13.2 percent), Poles (4.1 percent), Ukrainians (2.9 percent), and others (2.0 percent). Other ethnic groups included Lithuanians, Latvians, and Tatars. A large number of Russians immigrated to the Belorussian SSR immediately after World War II to make up for the local labor shortage, caused in part by Stalin's mass deportations, and to take part in rebuilding the country. Others came as part of Stalin's program of Russification.

There has been little conflict with the major non-Belarusian group, the Russians, who account for about 13 percent of the population. The Russification campaign in what is now Belarus used a mixture of subtle and overt coercion. The campaign was widely successful, to the extent that Russian became the language of choice for much of the population. One-third of the respondents in a 1992 poll said they consider Russian and Belarusian history to be one and the same. A large number of

AGE-GROUP

75 and over	
70-74	
65-69	
60-64	
55-59	
50-54	MALES
45-49	
40-44	
35-39	
30-34	
25-29	
20-24	
15-19	
10-14	
5-9	
0-4	

FEMALES

500 400 300 200 100   0   100 200 300 400 500

POPULATION IN THOUSANDS

Source: Based on information from World Bank, *Statistical Handbook: States of the Former USSR*, Washington, 1992, 83.

Figure 6. Population of Belarus by Age and Gender, 1990

organized Russian cultural bodies and publications exist in Belarus.

Ethnic Poles, who account for some 4 percent of the population, live in the western part of the country, near the Polish border. They have retained their traditions and their Roman Catholic religion, and this practice has been the cause of friction with Orthodox Belarusians, who also see a decidedly political bent to these cultural activities (see Religion, this ch.).

Ukrainians account for approximately 3 percent of the population. Belarusians and Ukrainians have been on basically friendly terms and have faced similar problems in trying to maintain their ethnic and cultural identities in the face of Russification by Moscow.

Jews have been present in Belarus since medieval times, but by the late eighteenth century they were restricted to the Pale

of Settlement and later to cities and towns within the Pale (see Ethnic Composition, ch. 2). Before World War II, Jews were the second largest ethnic group in Belorussia, accounting for more than 50 percent of the population in cities and towns. The 1989 Soviet census showed that Jews made up only 1.1 percent of the population as the result of genocide during World War II and subsequent emigration.

Language, Religion, and Culture

Language

"Language is not only a means of communication, but also the soul of a nation, the foundation and the most important part of its culture." So begins the January 1990 Law About Languages in the Belorussian SSR, which made Belarusian the sole official language of the republic.

The Belarusian language is an East Slavic tongue closely related to Russian and Ukrainian, with many loanwords from Polish (a West Slavic language) and more recently from Russian (see fig. 7). The standard literary language, first codified in 1918, is based on the dialect spoken in the central part of the country and is written in the Cyrillic alphabet (see Glossary). Under Polish influence, a parallel Latin alphabet (*lacinka*) was used by some writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is still used today by some Roman Catholics in Belarus and abroad.

One early proponent of the Belorussian language, poet Frantsishak Bahushyevich (1840–1900), the father of modern Belorussian literature and a participant in the 1863 uprising, was inspired by the fact that many 200- and 300-year-old documents written in Belorussian could be read and understood easily in modern times. The concept of the native language as a repository of national identity and an expression of aspiration to nationhood has been the leitmotif of Belorussian literature and polemics beginning in the late nineteenth century.

Although the tsarist government regarded the Belorussians as well as the Ukrainians as another branch of Russians, not as a separate nation, the Belorussian language was registered in the first systematic census of the Russian Empire in 1897. In the early 1920s, Belorussian language and culture flourished, and the language was promoted as the official medium of the communist party and the government as well as of scholarly, scientific, and educational establishments. Most primary and
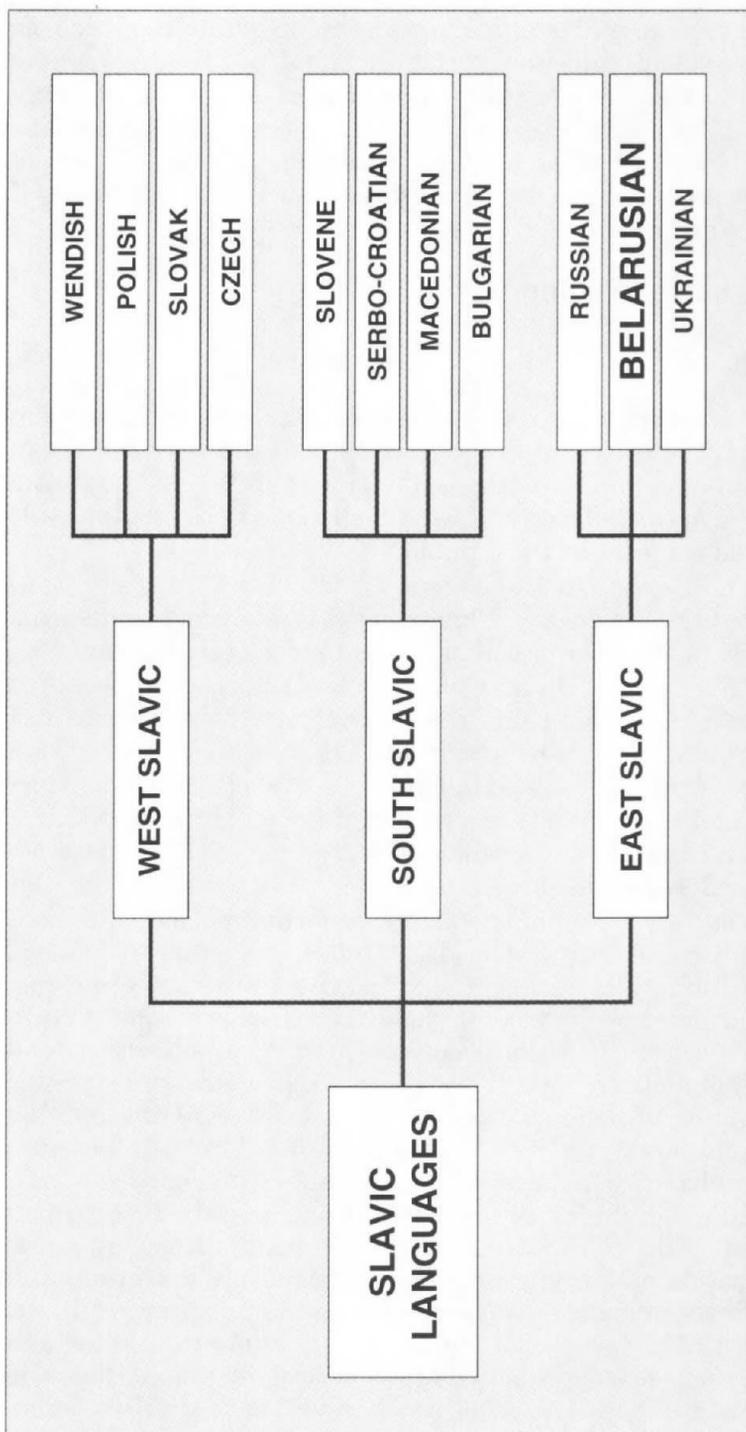
Figure 7. The Belarusian Language in the Family of Slavic Languages

secondary schools switched to instruction in Belorussian, and institutions of higher education gradually made the switch as well. The Belorussian State University was founded in 1921, the Institute of Belorussian Culture was founded in 1922, and a number of other institutions of higher learning also opened. The interests of other minorities in the republic were taken into account in a July 1924 decree that confirmed equal rights for the four principal languages of the republic: Belorussian, Polish, Russian, and Yiddish.

With the advent of *perestroika*, national activists launched a campaign to restore the Belorussian language to the place it had enjoyed during the 1920s. To urge the government to make Belarusian the official language of the republic, the Belarusian Language Society was established in June 1989 with poet-scholar Nil Hilyevich as president.

Belorussia's CPSU leadership, consisting almost exclusively of Russified technocrats, ignored all the government resolutions and decisions on languages. However, it could not ignore the general language trend throughout the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union, particularly in the neighboring Baltic states and Ukraine, where national movements were stronger and exerted an influence on events in the Belorussian SSR. After months of meetings, rallies, conferences, and heated debates in the press, on January 26, 1990, the Supreme Soviet voted to make Belarusian the official language of the state, effective September 1, 1990. The law included provisions for protecting the languages of minorities and allowed up to ten years to make the transition from Russian to Belarusian.

Despite the provisions, implementation of the law has encountered both active and passive resistance: many people still want their children to be educated in the Russian language rather than in Belarusian, and some government officials agree to give interviews only in Russian. According to data assembled in 1992 by the Sociology Center of the Belarusian State University, some 60 percent of those polled prefer to use Russian in their daily life, 75 percent favor bilingualism in state institutions, and only 17 percent favor having the government declare Belarusian the sole official language. One Western source reported that in the early 1990s, only 11 percent of the population, most of whom lived in the countryside, were fluent in Belarusian.

Since late 1992, there had been a growing demand that the Russian language be given the same official status as Belaru-

sian. The answer to a question of whether Russian should be an official language, one of four questions in a May 1995 referendum, put an end to any uncertainty: the populace voted "yes."
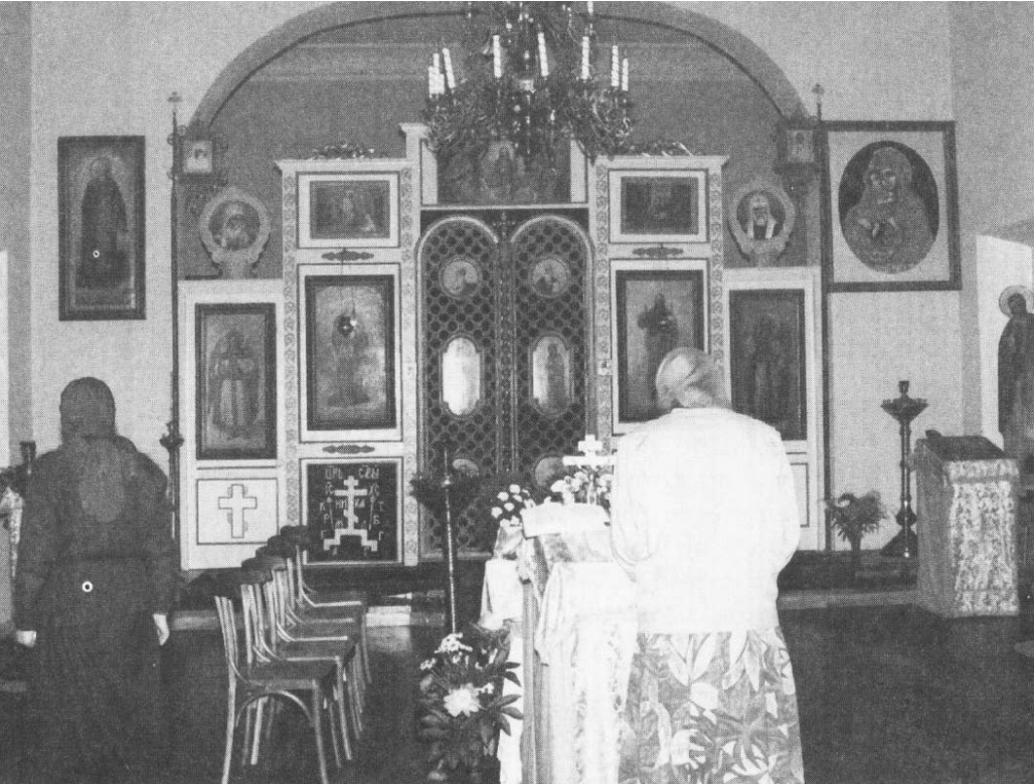
Religion

Before 1917 Belorussia had 2,466 religious congregations, including 1,650 Orthodox, 127 Roman Catholic, 657 Jewish, thirty-two Protestant, and several Muslim communities. Under the communists (who were officially atheists), the activities of these congregations were severely restricted. Many religious congregations were destroyed and their leaders exiled or executed; the remaining congregations were sometimes co-opted by the government for its own ends, as in the effort to instill patriotism during World War II.

In 1993 one Belarusian publication reported the numbers of religious congregations as follows: Orthodox, 787; Roman Catholic, 305; Pentecostal, 170; Baptist, 141; Old Believer (an Orthodox sect; see Glossary), twenty-six; Seventh-Day Adventist, seventeen; Apostolic Christian, nine; Uniate, eight; New Apostolic, eight; Muslim, eight; Jewish, seven; and other, fifteen.

Although the Orthodox Church was devastated during World War II and continued to decline until the early 1980s because of government policies, it underwent a small revival with the onset of *perestroika* and the celebration in 1988 of the 1,000-year anniversary of Christianity in Russia. In 1990 Belorussia was designated an exarchate (see Glossary) of the Russian Orthodox Church, creating the Belarusian Orthodox Church. In the early 1990s, 60 percent of the population identified themselves as Orthodox. The church had one seminary, three convents, and one monastery. A Belarusian theological academy was to be opened in 1995.

Soviet policies toward the Roman Catholic Church were strongly influenced by the Catholics' recognition of an outside authority, the pope, as head of the church, as well as by the close historical ties of the church in Belorussia with Poland. In 1989 the five official Roman Catholic dioceses, which had existed since World War II and had been without a bishop, were reorganized into five dioceses (including 455 parishes) and the archdiocese of Minsk and Mahilyow. In the early 1990s, figures for the Catholic population in Belarus ranged from 8 percent to 20 percent; one estimate identified 25 percent of

Interior of modern Orthodox church, Brest
Courtesy John Mumford

Religious procession honoring the icon of the Holy Mother of God of Zhyrovichy
Courtesy Anatol Klashchuk

the Catholics as ethnic Poles. The church had one seminary in Belarus.

The revival of religion in Belarus in the postcommunist era brought about a revival of the old historical conflict between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. This religious complexity is compounded by the two denominations' links to institutions outside the republic. The Belarusian Orthodox Church is headed by an ethnic Russian, Metropolitan Filaret, who heads an exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Roman Catholic archdiocese of Belarus is headed by an ethnic Pole, Archbishop Kazimir Sviontak, who has close ties to the church in Poland. However, despite these ties, Archbishop Sviontak, who had been a prisoner in the Soviet camps and a pastor in Pinsk for many years, has prohibited the display of Polish national symbols in Catholic churches in Belarus.

Fledgling Belarusian religious movements are having difficulties asserting themselves within these two major religious institutions because of the historical practice of preaching in Russian in the Orthodox churches and in Polish in the Catholic churches. Attempts to introduce the Belarusian language into religious life, including the liturgy, also have not met with wide success because of the cultural predominance of Russians and Poles in their respective churches, as well as the low usage of the Belarusian language in everyday life.

To a certain extent, the 1991 declaration of Belarus's independence and the 1990 law making Belarusian the official language of the republic have generated a new attitude toward the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Some religiously uncommitted young people have turned to the Uniate Church in reaction to the resistance of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic hierarchies to accepting the Belarusian language as a medium of communication with their flock. Overall, however, national activists have had little success in trying to generate new interest in the Uniate Church.

The Uniate Church, a branch of which existed in Belarus from 1596 to 1839 and had some three-quarters of the Belarusian population as members when it was abolished, is reputed to have used Belorussian in its liturgy and pastoral work. When the church was reestablished in Belarus in the early 1990s, its adherents advertised it as a "national" church. The modest growth of the Uniate Church was accompanied by heated public debates of both a theological and a political character.

Because the original allegiance of the Uniate Church was clearly to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the reestablished church is viewed by some in the Orthodox Church in Belarus with suspicion, as being a vehicle of both Warsaw and the Vatican.

Before World War II, the number of Protestants in Belarus was quite low in comparison with other Christians, but they have shown remarkable growth since then. In 1990 there were more than 350 Protestant congregations in the country.

The first Jewish congregations appeared in Belorussia at the end of the fourteenth century and continued to increase until the genocide of World War II. Mainly urban residents, the country's nearly 1.3 million Jews in 1914 accounted for 50 to 60 percent of the population in cities and towns. The Soviet census of 1989 counted some 142,000 Jews, or 1.1 percent of the population, many of whom have since emigrated. Although Belorussia's boundaries changed from 1914 to 1922, making the area smaller, a significant portion of the decrease in the Jewish population was the result of the war. However, with the new religious freedom, Jewish life in Belarus is experiencing a rebirth. In late 1992, there were nearly seventy Jewish organizations active in Belarus, half of which were republic-wide.

Muslims in Belarus are represented by small communities of ethnic Tatars. Many of these Tatars are descendants of emigrants and prisoners of war who settled in present-day Belarus after the eleventh century. The supreme administration of Muslims in Belarus, abolished in 1939, was reestablished in January 1994.

Culture

Belarusian culture is the product of a millennium of development under the impact of a number of diverse factors. These include the physical environment; the ethnographic background of Belarusians (the merger of Slavic newcomers with Baltic natives); the paganism of the early settlers and their hosts; Byzantine Christianity as a link to the Orthodox religion and its literary tradition; the country's lack of natural borders; the flow of rivers toward both the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea; and the variety of religions in the region (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Judaism, and Islam).

An early Western influence on Belarusian culture was Magdeburg Law—charters that granted municipal self-rule and were based on the laws of German cities. These charters were

granted in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by grand dukes and kings to a number of cities, including Brest, Hrodna, Slutsk, and Minsk. The tradition of self-government not only facilitated contacts with Western Europe but also nurtured self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and a sense of civic responsibility.

In 1517–19 Frantsishak Skaryna (ca. 1490–1552) translated the Bible into the vernacular (Old Belorussian). Under the communist regime, Skaryna's work was vastly undervalued, but in independent Belarus he became an inspiration for the emerging national consciousness as much for his advocacy of the Belorussian language as for his humanistic ideas.

From the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, when the ideas of humanism, the Renaissance, and the Reformation were alive in Western Europe, these ideas were debated in Belorussia as well because of trade relations there and because of the enrollment of noblemen's and burghers' sons in Western universities. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation also contributed greatly to the flourishing of polemical writings as well as to the spread of printing houses and schools.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Poland and Russia were making deep political and cultural inroads in Belorussia by assimilating the nobility into their respective cultures, the rulers succeeded in associating Belorussian culture primarily with peasant ways, folklore, ethnic dress, and ethnic customs, with an overlay of Christianity. This was the point of departure for some national activists who attempted to attain statehood for their nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The development of Belorussian literature, spreading the idea of nationhood for the Belorussians, was epitomized by the literary works of Yanka Kupala (1882–1942) and Yakub Kolas (1882–1956). The works of these poets, along with several other outstanding writers, became the classics of modern Belorussian literature. They wrote widely on rural themes (the countryside was where the writers heard the Belorussian language) and modernized the Belorussian literary language, which had been little used since the sixteenth century. Post-independence authors in the 1990s continued to use rural themes widely.

Unlike literature's focus on rural life, other fields of culture—painting, sculpture, music, film, and theater—centered on urban reality, universal concerns, and universal values.

Education, Health, and Welfare

Education

In Belarus education is compulsory for ten years, from ages seven to seventeen. Primary school, generally starting at age seven and lasting for five years, is followed by an additional five years of secondary school. These schools fall into three categories: general, teacher training, and vocational. Institutions of higher education include three universities, four polytechnical institutes, and a number of colleges specializing in agricultural or technical sciences.

In early 1992, some 60 percent of eligible children attended preschool institutions in Belarus. During the 1993–94 school year, Belarus had 1.5 million children in 5,187 primary and secondary schools, 175,400 students in thirty-three institutions of higher education, and 129,200 students in 148 technical colleges. According to the 1989 census, the literacy rate was 98 percent.

During the communist era, education was mainly conducted in the Russian language; by 1987 there were no Belorussian-language schools in any of the republic's urban areas. When Belarusian was adopted as the country's official language in 1990, children were to be taught in Belarusian as early as primary school; Russian language, history, and literature were to be replaced with Belarusian language, history, and literature. However, Russian remains the main language of instruction in both secondary schools and institutions of higher education.

Health

Belarus's health care system is in poor shape and fails to meet the needs of the population, as is common for the former republics of the Soviet Union. The communist era's neglect of this sphere, poorly trained staff, and substandard technology have resulted in a system in which basic medical services are sorely lacking, contributing to the poor health of the population. The added strains of caring for victims of the Chornobyl' accident have overwhelmed the system. In 1994 there were 127 hospital beds and forty-two doctors per 10,000 inhabitants. The country had 131,000 hospital beds at 868 hospitals. The most common causes of death were cardiovascular disease, cancer, accidents, and respiratory disease.

The Republic Center on AIDS was created in 1990 to coordinate all activities for prevention of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and control of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). There is mandatory HIV testing of all hospital inpatients and extensive testing of high-risk populations, such as homosexuals, prostitutes, and prisoners. By the end of 1991, seventy cases of HIV-positive individuals were identified, forty of whom were foreigners. However, because HIV testing kits (as well as other medical supplies) had been supplied by Moscow before the breakup of the Soviet Union, there was doubt as to whether testing could continue at the same level.

Welfare

Belarus's social safety net, largely a continuation of what existed in the former Soviet Union, is based on a guarantee of employment and a number of allowances and benefits for particular needs. Benefits were indexed to inflation in January 1991 (benefits are adjusted at the same rate as the minimum wage), and the system was expanded in 1991–92, partly to alleviate the social costs of switching to a market economy. The safety net had been a growing concern to the government because in the early 1990s it accounted for a large share of general government expenditures. Benefits were funded either directly by the budget or by two major social funds.

The government's greatest social expenditures are for pensions. The relatively low retirement age (fifty-five for women and sixty for men) and the country's demographic structure account for the large number of pensioners. In January 1992, the minimum pension was raised to 350 Belarusian rubles (for value of the Belarusian ruble—see Glossary) per month, the same as the minimum wage. The Pension Law of January 1993 based pensions on income earned at the time of retirement and on length of employment; the pensions of those who did not contribute to the Pension Fund during their years of employment are linked to the minimum wage. In January 1994, Belarus had nearly 2 million old-age pensioners and 600,000 persons receiving other types of pensions.

Legislation passed in late 1992 permits families to receive allowances for children above age three only if they meet certain eligibility requirements based on income. Previously, families with children up to sixteen years of age (eighteen years of age for those in secondary schools) had automatically received allowances based on the minimum wage. The program has
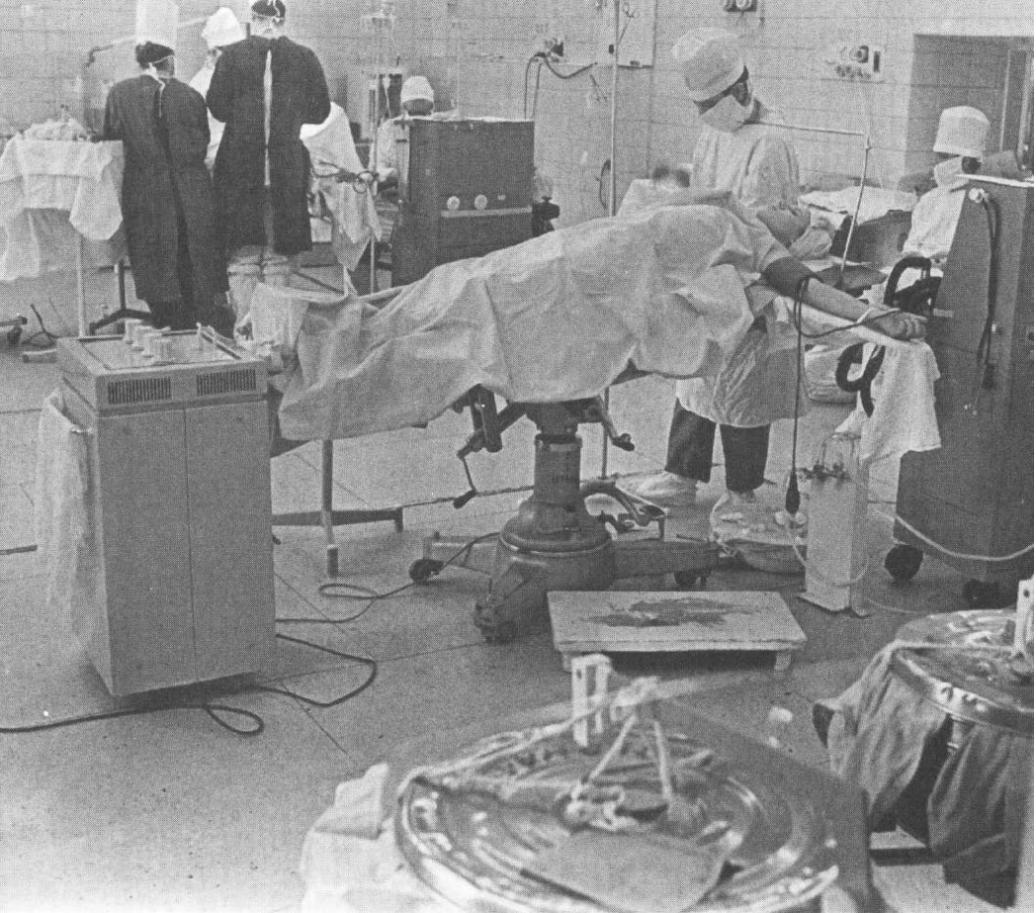
Doctors operating at a specialized medical institute, Minsk
Courtesy Anatol Klashchuk

been hampered by problems in testing for eligibility, however, because of difficulties in assessing income and because of tax evasion by the self-employed.

Unemployment compensation is provided for six months. Benefits are related to earnings for those who work for more than a year and also work continuously for the twelve weeks before separation. For those who work less than a year, benefits are tied to the minimum wage. Because the eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits are quite stringent, half of the registered unemployed are without benefits. In February 1995, some 52 percent of the unemployed received unemployment compensation. In early 1995, women accounted for more than 62 percent of the unemployed.

The government provides a number of other benefits, including lump-sum grants upon the birth of each child; temporary disability allowances; treatment at sanatoria, spas, vaca-