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ARNOLD McMILLIN

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6883-9852>

University College London

## **THREE GENERATIONS OF BELARUSIAN HISTORICAL FICTION IN PROSE AND VERSE: INSPIRATION AND ICONOCLASM**

**ABSTRACT:** Beginning with attempts to deny or repress the very idea of Belarusian history, this article is devoted to the use of historical themes by three generations of Belarusian writers, with the youngest first and ending with three from the middle generation who, as a rule, do not show the influence of their elders on themselves, nor do they seem greatly to influence the younger writers. All ages, however, are engaged in the same struggle to counter the anti-historical ideas propagated by the leadership of their country, and the younger writers bring a sometimes unusual, indeed iconoclastic, approach to this important task.

**KEYWORDS:** historical writing, generations, influence, controversy, myth, fantasy

### **Introduction**

The present article looks at three stages of historical writing, beginning with the younger generation of Belarusian writers and poets, going on to the older authors who may have influenced or inspired them, and ending with three writers in between who perhaps have neither exerted influence nor been the subject of it. The younger generation come first because they are far less well known than the classical writers; of the latter a few instances are given of the inspiring influence of Uladzimir Karatkievič (1930-1984) and of the doyen of historical writing Uladzimir Arloŭ (b. 1953) as well as some lesser contemporaries. The latter, however, are far from without significance, as all were writing at a time when falsification of Belarusian history was actively encouraged, particularly by Laŭrencii Abecedarski (1916-1975) (see, for example, Abecedarski | Baranova | Pavlova 1965), whose textbook for schools received a vigorous riposte in an early issue of “The Journal of Byelorussian Studies” (anon. 1966). At the risk of hubris, I recommend to those interested in classical historical writing two of my own attempts to describe it in English: McMillin 2006; 2010, 606ff.). In any case, what is manifestly clear is that for all nationally conscious Belarusians, whatever their generation, history, like language, is of prime concern. To write about historical fiction at a time when Putin was creating and re-creating his own fictional history to justify an unprovoked attack on Ukraine

is to risk demeaning the work of many talented Belarusian writers whose aim has been to keep the history of their beleaguered land alive, while Lukašenka, not only because he may be a Greek or a Gypsy, does his best to suppress it, apparently believing that his country's history began with WWII or even in 1994 when he came to power. This thought is well expressed in a stanza from the verse *Majoj žoncy* ('To My Wife') by Siarhieŭ Koŭhan (b. 1984):

Вось і зараз чорт вусаты –  
Ці то цыган ці то грэк –  
Беларусаў гоніць гуртам  
У мінулы “светлы” век (Koŭhan 2002, 11)

[And now the moustached devil –  
Either a Gypsy or a Greek –  
Drives the Belarusian people like a herd  
Into a past “golden” age]

A visual expression of the same dubious racial identity is a picture of a young boy on a placard, giving the finger, and at the same time holding up a sign with the words, *Cyhan mnie nie Bat'ka!* ('A gypsy is no Dad to me!') (Astapova 2015, 21). Finally, the re-writing of history is expressed clearly by a talented young writer, Alieś Baranoŭski (b. 1989) in his *Rodnaja mova* ('The Native Language'), of which these are the first four lines:

Пустазеллем парасла зямля.  
Пішучь зноў гісторыю нанова...  
Самая магутная мая  
Шчырая і ветлівая мова! (Baranoŭski 2013, 34)<sup>1</sup>

[The land is overgrown with weeds.  
They are again re-writing history...  
The most powerful thing is  
My sincere and welcoming language!]

Some of the younger writers choose themes from classical times or WWII and Čarnobyĺ, and these will be mentioned later, alongside poems and prose about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (hereafter GDL), of which Belarus is the principal successor state. By describing works of sometimes wild imagination, it is absolutely not the present author's intention in any way to demean the work of serious Belarusian historians like Hienadž Sachanovič (b. 1961) and Arloŭ. It is also worth saying that the amount of space devoted to any writer or group of writers does not reflect my opinion of their worth.

<sup>1</sup> Subsequent references to Baranoŭski's book will be as DNA, followed by page numbers.

## The Younger Generation

Firstly, may be considered the work of the younger Belarusian writers and poets, some of whom, however, turn to mythology rather than re-creating history, a prime example of this being Hanna Navasielcava (b. 1983) whose six contributions to *Moj dzień pačynajecca* ('My Day is Beginning') are all described by her as mythological or legendary or both: for example, *Na viekaviečnych miežach* ('On Ancient Boundaries').<sup>2</sup>

The most significant of the younger generation is Anton Frańcišak Bryl' (b. 1982) who has written in verse and prose thoroughly researched works set in the medieval period. Of the latter, *Jan Jalmužna*, for instance, is a vivid reconstruction of life in Hieraniony Castle in western Belarus, narrated from the point of view of the eponymous chief cook to Lord Olbracht Haštaut' during the period 1506-1517. Bryl' is a scholarly writer who often provides commentaries on his own prose and verse,<sup>3</sup> and this lively tale is based on the Lithuanian Chronicle (*Lietuvos Metrika*) (Bryl' 2014, 3). The work contains numerous comic characters including priests, who consult and even confess to Jan, and there are many lively episodes, but the writer's aim is clearly not to relate history as such, but to recreate entertainingly the spirit of the times. For more detail about this work see McMillin 2016.

Bryl's verse is no less remarkable, indeed perhaps unique in contemporary Belarusian literature, being dedicated to a friend of Catullus, Helvius Cinna, and written in lines varying in length from tetrameters to those of sixteen and seventeen syllables, with a variety of rhyme schemes. His writing is very careful, and his word choice ostensibly simple, albeit not always entirely clear to a modern reader. At least half the poems in his first book have historical themes.

In *Hinvin* (Bryl' 2011, 15)<sup>4</sup>, a father asks his son to provide weapons to resist an invader in the late 14th century. It may be contrasted with two other poems in which the warnings by children of the approach by attacking forces are ignored: *Šniežań* ('December', 2010) (17) has a dismal refrain from the father to the anguish of his child, *A mnie i spravy niama* 'It has nothing to do with me'. In *Survila* (2010) a young 16th-century noble, son of Hiedrold, riding in armour with his young son, repeatedly tells him to sleep (23). Incidentally, Bryl's great learning allows him readily to admit to anachronisms in some of his own works, a good example being *Kastryčnik* ('October', 2008) about two Radzivils. Another interesting poem is *Hołša* (2009), the eponymous hero of which is one of the five sons of Grand Prince Raman (reigned 1168-1170). Hołša wasted his youth but eventually assumed his rightful

<sup>2</sup> Šnip, V. (comp.) (2015), *Moj dzień pačynajecca: Proza i paezija maladych*. Minsk (hereafter referred to as Mdp). The Navasielcava's poem referred to is on pp. 227-238.

<sup>3</sup> These commentaries are not infrequently critical of mistakes in earlier historical writing. See Bryl' 2014, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Subsequent references to poems by Bryl' will be by page numbers only.

duties, including, after various adventures, founding the town of Hałšany. Brył devotes several pages of discussion to this story and its sources, including a dispute with philosopher Valiancin Akudovič (b. 1950) over the latter's use of the word myth. He ends the poem curiously with *AMEN* written in neither the Belarusian nor the Russian way (36). The same ending is in *Hiedrus* (2010) which begins with the princely astronomer of the title and the town of Hiedrojcy. The hero builds a castle on marshy reeds which three times burns down, and when a bear that was supposed to be guarding it hides, three serpents appear in its place. The prince persuades one of them to cast off its skin and become his wife, and the poem ends with a paean to good wives (37-39). Brył's use of legends and fantasies are all based on genuine sources, and his historical writing in both prose and verse is remarkable for its conviction and readability.

Also very accessible but more fantastic are the stories and novel (which will be considered later) of the Homiel writer Siarhiej Balachonaŭ (b. 1977). Several of his stories, especially *Śmierć liutenisty* ('Death of the Lutenist'), are exceptional in a Belarusian context for what might be called the carnivalesque description of life under German occupation. The eponymous hero is interested in liberation politics, but is kept apart from other would-be rebels; he is also unwelcome because of sexual jealousy, and eventually perishes in a failed political assassination, as do many others (Balachonaŭ 2005, 212-24).<sup>5</sup> *Piatnaccac lišnich chvilin* ('Fifteen Superfluous Minutes') is more shocking, as the time is for a school teacher and his pupils to give a Nazi salute and shout *Heil Hitler!* (Balachonaŭ 177). Another, more fantastic story set in the same fraught and controversial period is *Nie ruš majho strachu* ('Do Not Move My Fear') in which the German forces, the Russians led by the NKVD, and those who are fighting in the hope of an independent Belarus, are all equally taken aback when a visitor from another planet appears. He appears to be familiar with the Belarusian language and customs, giving hope to the freedom fighters, although their aspirations remain something for the future (Balachonaŭ 190-212). One aspect of this story is the implied suggestion that there was nothing much to choose between Hitler and Stalin, a concept commonly met with in Belarusian and Russian émigré writing, but rare indeed in writing from inside the country.

Less precisely focussed than, for example, those of Brył, but with very evident passion are the highly patriotic historical poems of Žmitrok Kuźmienka (b. 1980), who also writes about the more recent past. One very solid reminder of history are the grassy mounds which commemorate bygone warriors, and in a poem *Kurhany-valatoŭki* ('The Burial Mounds of Heroes') he sees the mounds as witnesses to past deeds, as is clear from the seventh stanza:

<sup>5</sup> Subsequent references to Balachonaŭ will be by name and page numbers only.

Захінаючы мілы наш край  
 Сваёй сілай і зброяй булатнай,  
 Стануць жахам захопніцкіх зграй  
 Воі-волаты ў ззяючых латах. (Kuźmienka 2010, 50)<sup>6</sup>

[Protecting our dear land  
 with its strength and steel weapons,  
 they will strike fear in the invading mobs  
 those heroic warriors in shining armour.]

A longer poem, *Balada pra kniažacki mieč* ('A Ballad about a Princely Sword'), shows more optimism about continuity of the defence of land and ideals (Pžs, 101-06), although several other poems, as may be seen below, take a more realistic view of the negative side of palace life in the GDL. In another verse *Prytulisia chaty adna za adnoj lia kaściola...* ('The houses one after another squeezed close to the church...') the poet looks back to the one-time capital of the GDL, Navahrudak, and imagines his ancestors drinking from the same stream as he was doing, wondering whether the water was sacred, being right under the ancient walls and ruins (Pžs, 56-57). A third, bleaker, poem concerns the forced marriage of Anastasija, and the martyr Rahnieda-Haryslava, *Čarhovy dzień. Biazradasny, pusty...* ('A day like any other. Joyless, empty...') (Pžs, 51-52). Still grimmer is *Historyja. Ruiny, abieliski...* ('History. Ruins, Obelisks...'), which, in great contrast to the heroic atmosphere implied elsewhere, depicts a world of treachery and intrigues, where morality counts for little and the truth is elusive, as may be illustrated by the second stanza:

Прыдворныя віруючыя кодлы.  
 Уладныя князі. Аматыры інтрыг.  
 І побач з годнасцю –  
 атрута, здрада, подласць,  
 Паклёп і сцены, звернутыя ў слых. (Pžs, 45)

[Vile palace groupings swirl.  
 Powerful princes. Lovers of intrigues.  
 And alongside honour are poisoning, treachery and baseness.  
 Slander and walls turned into rumours.]

Later in the poem Kuźmienka, never afraid of controversy, wonders how things would have been, had the Germans been successful in WWII. His interest in the Stalin period goes deep, and the title of one poem, *Katyń. Ad slova: kat...* ('Katyń. From the word executioner...') is self-explanatory, and there are references (without detail) to Pavlik Morozov who denounced his father, subsequently being acclaimed as a hero, or to trains loaded with half-alive slaves, and German as well as Soviet

<sup>6</sup> Subsequent references to Kuźmienka's book will be Pžs followed by page numbers.

atrocities (Pžs, 60). *Naviednikam Linii Stalina* ('To Visitors on Stalin's Orders') is about the murders on the night of 29-30 October 1937 of many members of the Belarusian intelligentsia (Pžs, 61-62), and a longer poem *Načnyja hości* ('Night Guests') describes an incident typical of Stalin's repressions (Pžs, 63-68).

Before completely leaving the subject of Stalin, should be mentioned the poem, *Vosieñ tryccać dziaviataha* ('Autumn 1939', 2012) by Kaciaryna Hluchoŭskaja (b. 1995) which conveys successfully the feeling of fear during the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, with continuing political repressions and atrocities against the Jews. The first two stanzas describe autumn in a realistic but poetic manner. The second part, however, is quite different with fear and cruelty plainly evident, though not overstated. This is the third stanza:

Так – галавой у акно – назаўжды:  
 Віснуць на дрэвах увосень жыды,  
 Хлопчык маўчыць, быццам ён не галодны,  
 І не хапае халоднай вады. (Hluchoŭskaja 2013, 130)

[So, with my head permanently at the window,  
 In autumn Jews are being hung from trees,  
 A young boy is silent as if he were not hungry,  
 And there is not enough cold water.]

The invasion of the Soviet Union and the war that ended this notorious pact finds some reflection in the work of young writers, although, like the period that preceded it, the events they describe all happened long before they were born. What from its title might be an example of this phenomenon is Baranoŭski's *Uspamin pra vajnu* ('A Recollection of the War') in which he writes about it as if he had just returned from a bloody conflict. The last two lines show how unwelcome this 'memory' is to the poet, especially, it would seem, in a country where victory against the Germans is constantly celebrated in order to prop up the present harsh authoritarian regime:

Перамога у сны партызанскаю  
 песняю просіцца.  
 Хоць і нулікаў болей у войнаў  
 ды каб іх не мець! (Baranoŭski 2012, 35)

[Victory invites itself into my dreams  
 as a partisan song.  
 Although wars have far more negatives,  
 if only we did not have them!]

En passant, the German operation Barbarossa to invade the Soviet Union is referred to light-heartedly in an excellent family saga by Pavai Kaściukovič (b. 1979), *Plan Babarozy* ('The Plan of Granny Roza', 2016).

One very talented Belarusian poet, Vital' Ryžkoŭ (b. 1986), in his first book *Dźviery zamknionyja na kľiučy* ('Locked Doors', 2010)<sup>7</sup> has verses both about WWII and also set in medieval times. Taking the former first, though set in wartime they are notably peripheral to the main events as, for instance, in *dva skrypačy praz polie vajennych dziejańniaŭ...* ('two violinists crossing a field of military action...', 2009), where the two musicians flee from their orchestra when the Germans come, but one has to carry the other. They soon quarrel bitterly, and at the end the wounded man taunts Symon who is planning to leave him to his fate:

ТЫ слабак, СЫМОН, таму ты мусіш бегчы адзін  
і сына свайго абдымі і скажы, што ён мой сын  
ТЫ мамчын сыноч,  
СЫМОН! –  
чулася наўздагон (Dznk, 25)

[you are a weakling, Symon, and therefore you must run on alone  
and embrace your son and tell him that he is my son  
you are your mother's little darling,  
Symon!  
were the words that followed him]

Even less edifying is *Samaje cikavaje* ('The Most Interesting Thing', 2010), the tale of a promiscuous woman who goes through many wartime affairs and disappointments, ending up sleeping next to a kind and generous wounded soldier, whom she describes with disgust as an idiot (Dznk, 26-27). Before leaving Ryžkoŭ, it is worth mentioning a poem set in medieval times, which lacks all military heroism: *Maja karaliewa, mama, papraŭdzie, ja prosta raźbity, ja liedź tryvaju...* ('My queen, my mother, I am truly crushed and cannot bear any more...', 2010). The young prince begs his mother to cancel all the noisy celebrations and to spare him from being sent to war (Dznk, 28).

Going back to an earlier period than that of Catullus's friend Helvius Cinna, who inspired Bryl' metrically, is an 'unpoetical triptych', *Hierastracijada* ('Herostratiada') with the epigraph, *Sic transit gloria mundi*, by Alieš Jemialianaŭ-Šylovič (b. 1987); the most interesting part is perhaps the first, *Razmova Aliaksandra Vialikaha z Fierapompam* ('A conversation between Alexander the Great and Theopompus'); the latter was the first to try to restore the reputation of Herostratus (4th-c BC) who had become notorious for arson perhaps in order to gain fame or notoriety. The Epilogue adopts a humorous tone:

<sup>7</sup> Subsequent references to this book will be as Dznk, followed by page numbers.

Калі сплыве вада,  
 струхлее дрэва  
 і з’есць жалеза  
 ненажэрная іржа,  
 згадай пра запалкі,  
 што ў кішэні ляжаць. (Jemialianaŭ-Šylovič 2013, 15)

[When the water runs off  
 the tree rots  
 and metal is eaten away  
 by insatiable rust,  
 remember the matches  
 that are lying in your pocket.]

Jemialianaŭ-Šylovič’s broad thematic range includes poems about Paracelsus and Chagall, as well as is a highly patriotic verse about ‘Daŭmont’, a ruler of Pskov (c. 1240-99), of which this is the last stanza:

Па сценах пскоўскага крамля  
 Прамень слізгае прадсвітальны.  
 Ці ўбачу, родная зямля,  
 Яшчэ я Зніч твой ратавальны? (Jemilianaŭ-Šylovič, 11)

[Along the walls of the Pskov kremlin  
 a ray of pre-dawn light glides.  
 Shall I catch sight of, my native land,  
 your redemptive Žnič (sacred meteor) too?]

Even broader in this respect is the poetry of Maryja Baradzina (b. 1981) whose work includes poems about classical times, German myths, the Crusades, and the time of the GDL, always without glamorizing her subjects, and often bringing to them a very personal viewpoint. Firstly, a series of verses set in Roman times like, for instance, the cycle ‘Imperatar Trajan’ (The Emperor Trajan), in the first stanza of which, under the same title, she shows the famous leader, for all his renown, as being dissatisfied with the lack of people to complain to (Baradzina 1981, 7).<sup>8</sup> Another poem, *X Fretensis* treats the Commander of a prominent Roman sea legion of that name in a very human way, when he encounters a band of Spanish pirates and begs their leader for a little salt to see them on their way (Vpv, 8). Finally, about the Roman period is a poem *Zdahadka* (‘A Riddle’) in which a legion returns from battle but without receiving an official triumph. The answer to the conundrum is that there is no satisfactory way of returning home after fighting, as the last line states: ‘шчаслівы той, хто не вярнуўся з ловаў’ (happy is he who did not return from

<sup>8</sup> Hereafter references to this book will be to Vpv, followed by page references.



hunting, Vpв, 9). There can be no doubt as to Baradzina's affection for Rome, when in an interesting poem *Preč z Rymu* ('Be Gone from Rome') addressed to Marcus Trajan, she finally asks permission to follow him:

... Марк,  
Віхурай ці кропляй – вазьмі з сабой... (Vsp, 10)

[...Mark,  
take me with you as a snowstorm or as a drop of water...]

There is no space here to discuss the poet's Roman narrative poem. *Gaia* (Gaea, the earth goddess) or her rather fantastic verse, *Ptalamiej* ('Ptolemy'), nor indeed her utterly unromantic picture of the Crusades, *Kryžy liapiŭ sa śliny i pylu...* ('He moulded the crosses from spit and dust...'), but *Rasstajny Rycar* ('The Distant Knight'), although not specific in period, would seem to be closer to the GDL than Rome or the Holy Land, albeit including a meeting with Brünnhilde in a dream. The main idea in this little verse is that any kind of moral resistance is enough to repel the cavalry of a conquering army, as we see in the closing lines:

Ты убачыш:  
дзе ўсхліпне душа –  
пераможны атрад  
паварочвае коней дадому (Vpв, 66)

[You will see:  
where the soul sobs –  
the victorious brigade  
turns its horses homewards]

*Zimovaja balada* 'A Winter Ballad' is certainly set in the middle ages, which the poet describes with knowledge and enthusiasm. In the first stanza the mood is highly romantic:

Засяроджана-змрочна з усходу на захад  
кресьляць струны зялёныя карты зімы  
лабірынты духмянага часу, ў каторым,  
трубадуры і скальды размовы вялі. (Vpв, 41)

[In gloomy concentration from east to west  
maps of winter draw green strings  
labyrinths of a fragrant time, in which  
troubadours and skalds talked together.]

But as it goes on to describe a generous sex-starved widow, the romantic atmosphere does not last, and this is confirmed in the epilogue:

Хутка певень ускрыкне.  
Рубінавы чорцік  
рассоўвае бледныя вусны ва ўсмешцы  
раптоўнай, і можа таму непрыстойнай (Vpв, 41)

[Soon the cock will crow.  
A ruby-red little devil  
pulls apart his pale lips in a smile  
sudden, and perhaps therefore indecent]

The concept of romanticism is nearly as obscure as that of realism, but two Belarusian writers appear to write romantically in a way that precludes harsh reality. In *Niašvižski park* ('The Park at Niašviž') Našcia Sidorka (b. 1997) imagines her country's history by looking at the statues and imagines them whispering to her. Tačciana Nilava (b. 1984) in her *Hotyka tonkich padmanaj* ('The Gothic Style of Subtle Deceits') writes openly about this subject in the following lines from *Skamiečana – piekna...* ('Crumpled yet beautiful...'):

у марах  
пра рыцарства  
з царства Рамантыкі  
рушу. (Nilava 2008, 38)<sup>9</sup>

[I move in my dreams  
to the age of chivalry  
in the kingdom of Romanticism.]

By complete contrast, few things could be less romantic than the lines of Ihar Kulikoŭ (b. 1988) from an uncompromising untitled poem in which he advocates divorcing oneself from history. Here is the rather violent opening stanza:

Развесьціся зь мінулым, падаць у суд на памяць,  
атруціць дыхляфосам апошні успамін,  
замкнуць сябе ў кватэры, пакрыцца трупнай плямай  
і ссаць з задухі самотны атрапін. (Kulikoŭ 2011, 38)

[To divorce oneself from the past, to take memory to court,  
to poison with dichlorvos your last recollection,  
to lock yourself in your flat,  
and cover yourself with the stain of a corpse  
and to suck from the choking stuffiness the atropine of loneliness.]

<sup>9</sup> Subsequent references to Nilava will be to Htp with page numbers.

Also worth mentioning is a talented poet living in Poland, Taćciana Niatbaj (b. 1982) who has, in addition to a stimulating cycle of verses, *Życio praciahvajecca* ('Life Goes On, Niatbaj', 2012), also published under her own name a study of local chronicles of the 17th and 18th centuries (Nietbajeva 2012) – a reminder that not only earlier generations participated in the process of recording facts, as well as, in the case of Brył, for instance, using them. Before leaving this scholar and poet, it is worth mentioning that in 2014 she published a short collection of poems with yet another spelling of her name (Niadbaj 2014).

Finally, before turning to the older writers, it is worth describing the splendid and highly controversial novel of the already mentioned Balachonaŭ, *Imia hrušy* ('The Name of the Pear', 2005). Probably because of its title's clear reference to Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*, it provoked a quantity of comments, advice and critical comparisons. Generically, it is a quite extraordinary book, containing, like Eco, elements of historical and detective fiction with an admixture of a strong sense of play with words and meanings. It presents the memoirs of three women (Russian, Polish and Belarusian), all former lovers of the charismatic Vajnislaŭ Boŭt, who has disappeared. None of the accounts lead to a definite conclusion and Balachonaŭ, almost following Barthes's theory of the death of the author, states clearly that it is left to the reader to decide what has become of this Slav Don Juan; indeed, the author in the preface tells his readers that there are various forms of truth and that is they, rather than he, who own the book (Balachonaŭ, 3). The time is 1858, just before the Rebellion of Kastuś Kalinoŭski, and the Russian woman, Natal'ia Klykovskaia begins with a warning to the reader that much of what she has to say is from personal experience, adding that she has no reason to lie (Balachonaŭ 10-11). What she does give is a vivid picture of 19th-century Miensk, with its various nationalist groups and a serial killer of respectable women. The second part consists of a letter in which Kamiła Świętorzecka tries to describe exactly who Boŭt was, and not let him sink into 'the slimy and putrid thing that is history' (Balachonaŭ, 117). The third part of the novel comprises fragments from the diary of Irena Halavackaja, written in an unconventional language with a predominantly ludic element. The author explains that some words of the document were indecipherable, so that the reader must struggle alone. There are many characters in this postmodern novel, some historical and some fictional, one of the most entertaining being Mme Schroeder who speaks in a mishmash of different languages, commenting on the whole situation thus: 'Und čem tutaj sense?' (Balachonaŭ, 72) (And what sense is there in this?)

## The Older Generation

Uladzimir Karatkievič (1930-1984) was the greatest of Belarusian romantic historical novelists, and he had also considerable talent as a poet and playwright. Here, for reasons of space, the outline of his work is limited to plays and novels. His three historical plays are not in historical order, beginning with perhaps the best and most celebrated of his many commemorations of Kalinoŭski and his anti-Russian Uprising, *Kastuś Kalinoŭski: Śmierć i nieŭmirućaść* ('Kastuś Kalinoŭski: Death and Immortality'), which was written in 1963, a century after those tragic and inspiring events; it went through ten versions before being premiered in 1978 and first published two years later. The play opens very boisterously, and has many contrasting episodes and a rich mixture of real historical characters and fictional people, whom the author claimed were all taken from life. As an epic drama, Karatkievič's strong and well researched play is one of the most remarkable contributions to historical drama in the middle of the 20th century.

*Zvony Viciebska* is no less romantic and tragic than its predecessor, dealing as it does with events surrounding the Viciebsk Rebellion of 1623-1624. The two main historical characters are Archbishop Iosafat Kuncevič (known to the people as *dušachvat* – soul stealer) and Ściapan Pasijora who is rebelling against the imposition of the Uniate faith on patriotic grounds, seeing it as a disguised form of Polish Catholicism.

After the writer's death in 1984, a third historical play was staged, *Maci urahana* ('Mother of the Hurricane'). It concerns the Kryčau Uprising of 1734-1744 led by Vasiľ Vaščyla, and, like the earlier plays, combines humour with tragedy, hope with despair and a lofty Romantic vision. As a contribution to Belarusian national and cultural self-awareness, even survival, the plays of Karatkievič are unsurpassed.

It is, however, for his novels that he is best remembered. The first, *Nielha zabyć* ('It must not be forgotten', 1962) is set at the time of the 1863 Uprising, but does not feature Kalinoŭski himself. The two main characters are Captain Para-Lienanovič, an embittered local man with few scruples, engaged in the crushing of his own people; he is not greatly trusted by the Russian authorities either, who send him an assistant, Iurii Gorev, a man of high principles and advanced ideas, seeming to embody Karatkievič's ideals for the intelligentsia. It is an exciting story of conscience, passion and love, with the author's characteristic avoidance of national and other generalizations, and mastery of a complex and absorbing plot.

Karatkievič's next novel is probably his most popular and successful in purely literary terms: the Gothic *Dzikaja paliavaŭnie karalia Stacha* ('The Wild Hunt of King Stach', 1964). For a contribution to history, however, the book that followed it was more important, being meant to instruct as well as entertain: *Kalasy pad siarpom tvaim* ('Ears of Corn Under Your Sickle', 1965). The author's aim was to present as full a picture as possible of a historical period, combining real and

fictional characters, with a strong input of his own ideas and beliefs, many of which are expressed through vivid metaphors and personification of nature to represent the fate of Belarus. The period is that of the Warsaw Uprising of 1861 and the Emancipation of the Serfs in the same year, and Karatkievič seeks to show these events as the background to Kalinoŭski's Uprising. When asked why he had written such a long novel, he explained that it was because of the ignorance of Belarusian history by many of his fellow-countrymen (Maldzis 2010, 72). The novel, rich in cultural references and extremely broad in its historical setting, emphasizes the far from polarized distance between nobles and peasants at this time.

A tragi-comic medieval romp, *Chrystos pryziamlüšia ŭ Harodni* ('Christ Came to Earth in Harodnia', 1966) started life as a film, *Žycije i ŭźniasieñnie Jurasia Bratčyka* ('The Life and Ascension of Juraś Bratčyk'), which had been promptly and permanently shelved by the Soviet authorities. This highly satirical novel is set in the early 16th century, and inspired by the brief mention of a false Christ during the reign of Zygmund I the Elder, which Karatkievič had found in *Maciej Strykoŭski's Kronika* ('Chronicle', 1582). In terms of historical fiction, the novel is mainly significant for the easy way the author creates a plausible background for the adventures of a group of travelling actors led by the petty swindler Bratčyk.

Finally, the last novel to be published in Karatkievič's lifetime (after ten years' gestation) was *Čorny zamak Aľšanski* ('The Black Castle of Aľšany', 1979-1980), another historical detective story, with a present-day investigation of events in the 17th century. The author hoped that a very lively plot would help to foster the waning interest in the Belarusian language at that time. The message that knowledge of the past is an integral part of the present is expressed very clearly: 'Whoever does not remember the past, whoever forgets the past is condemned to relive it. Again and again' (Karatkievič, 7, 417).

To list all Arloŭ's historical novels and other books could fill an article on their own, so this is only a brief account of his earliest works followed by those that have been translated into English: this protean writer made his name with *Dobry dzień, maja Šypšyna* ('Good Day, My Briar-rose', 1986), which includes a diary by a nationally conscious young Belarusian that reveals concern over the apparent apathy of his fellow-countrymen, as may be seen in the following excerpt:

[...] If people around you are asleep, that means you have not awoken them... [...] the past can punish us for ignoring it even more terribly. We ourselves can turn into the Present, without a Future, and, thus, always remain in the Past. (Arloŭ 1986, 45)

His next book, *Dzień, kali ŭpala strala* ('The Day when an Arrow Fell to Earth') comprises a novella and six short stories, and takes several historical periods, with at the centre of the novella Prince Valodša, who is trying to defend Polacak against the Teutonic invaders. Two of the stories will serve as illustrations: in *Misija*

*papskaha nuncija* ('The Mission of the Papal Nuncio', 1984); set in the 17th century, Arloŭ shows his mastery of dialogue in the vigorous exchanges between the eponymous cleric and a free-thinking Belarusian scholar, as well as depicting faithfully the historical background of the time. The other story from this work, which, incidentally, several commentators thought to be the book of the decade, is *Piać mužčyn u liešničoŭcy* ('Five men in a woodcutter's hut', 1985), set at the time of Kalinoŭski's Uprising: the characters are based on real people, and one of them, nicknamed *Topor* ('the Axe'), believes that 'ideals can only survive if people die for them'; moreover, if he and the rebels fail, 'their deaths will help others to realize that they are not a herd but people' (Arloŭ 1988, 191).

Finally, worth mentioning are a few of Arloŭ's non-fiction history books: two on Saint Euphrosyne (Arloŭ 1989 and 1992), and two on the more general significance of the city of Polacak (Arloŭ 1994 with three reprints, and Arloŭ 2014), as well as several general histories of Belarus (Arloŭ 2001; Arloŭ 2012, and 2018, and Arloŭ 2012 and 2013). This writer's many history books and historical novels have a wide and appreciative readership although his ideas are not always accepted, indeed they sometimes provoke controversy: for instance, Lianid Dajnieka (1940-2019) in his *Ślied vaŭkalaka* ('Trace of a Werewolf', 2001) depicted Prince Uladzimir of Polacak in an essentially negative light, whilst Arloŭ views him as a positive patriotic hero.

No Belarusian historical novelist has exerted nearly so much influence on younger writers as have Arloŭ and Karatkievič, but here are some other contemporaries and their principal works. Kastuś Tarasaŭ (1940-2010) whose main novels are *Try žyćci kniahini Rahniedy* ('The Three Lives of Princess Rahnieda', 1997), the stirring *Pahonia na Hrunvałd* ('The Pahonia to Grünwald', 1997) and the decidedly unromantic *Apošniaje kachannie kniazia Mindowha* ('The Last Love of Prince Mindowh', 2000). To Dajnieka, mentioned above, belong two other main novels: *Žalieznyja žaludy* ('Iron Acorns', 1993) and *Mieč kniazia Viački* ('The Sword of Prince Viačka', 2000). Dajnieka won several prizes before the collapse of the Soviet Union, whilst Arloŭ only won them after that event.

Vołha Ipatava (b. 1945) was a distinguished poet before, at the beginning of the 1970s, she turned to prose, using her interest in Belarusian history to write several historical novels of real quality. In 1971 she created a great stir with her story *Pradyslava*, the woman who later became St Euphrosyne, depicting her as red-blooded and in love with a typical Belarusian youth with blue eyes and fair hair. Indeed, Ipatava has been criticized for her depiction of peasants and nobles alike (Žukoŭski 2003, 133). It is also worth mentioning here a trilogy of novels devoted to the setting up of the GDL: published together in 2002, they are *Alhierdava dzida* ('Alhierd's Pike'), *Zalataja žryca Ašvinaŭ* ('The Golden Priestess of the Ašviny') and *Viaščun Hiedzimin* ('Hiedzimin the Soothsayer'). Ipatava undoubtedly made a real contribution to Belarusian historical writing.

Hienrich Dalidovič (b. 1946) is a prolific writer whose works are largely documentary and autobiographical. The three main periods of his historical novels are the 13th century, the period around the 1917 Revolution, and the collectivization of agriculture after Western Belarus had been incorporated into the BSSR; the latter event is well described in *Zachodniki* ('The Westerners', 1994), but it is in his trilogy of novels about the period before and just after the 1917 Revolution that he showed his greatest narrative skill. On the earlier period, *Klič rodnaha zvonu* ('The Summons of Our Native Bell') set in the 13th century, first appeared in 1997 but was subsequently revised and incorporated into later works.

Vitaŭt Čaropka (b. 1961) is an unusual writer who made his name at the age of twenty-five with *Chram biez boha* ('A Church without God', 1992) centring on the Battle of Klieck against the invading Crimean Tatars in 1506, a period that had not frequently been approached in Belarusian literature. He has also written several books that are purely belletristic, albeit basically factual. Unwilling to join the Writers' Union, he nonetheless has brought erudition as well as literary flair to his historical writing.

Another very individual writer is Andrej Fiedarenka (b. 1964) who had already attracted critical attention, both good and bad, before he wrote his first fully historical novel, *Ničyje* ('No-one's' 2001) about the Sluck Uprising of late 1920, which is rich in characters, events and ideas, and furnished with footnotes to add verification. The author's reputation for controversy, however, continued with this novel which was turned down for publication in Russian.

## The Middle Generation

Three writers, all born within a year of each other, comprise this section (although they are older than Bryl and Balachonaŭ): Alieś Paškievič (b. 1972), Žmicier Dziadzienka (b. 1972) and Sieviaryn Kviatkoŭski (b. 1973). Paškievič, like Fiedarenka, also wrote about the Uprising in what he described as a novel-document, *I dam tabie vianok žyćcia* ('And I Shall Give You a Garland of Life', 1995-1999), which aimed to show the depth and strength of national feeling in the years 1918-1920. Already in this unusual and enterprising book, the author showed his lasting interest in émigrés from Belarus, and his first novel was reprinted as part of a set with the title, *Plac voli* ('Liberty Square', 2001), the other novel being a study of Belarusians in a variety of European countries during the years 1916-1946. Later he published more on émigré life in *Zmaharnyja darohi* ('Paths of Struggle', 2001), and *Kruh* ('The Circle', 2001) about the outstanding poet who emigrated and returned, Uladzimir Duboŭka (1900-1976).

*Dziadzienka's Historyja ŭ pryciemkach* ('History in the Half-light') contains three novellas, of which *Jajki ptuški Ruch* ('The Eggs of the Roc Bird') is an engaging

and inventive historical fantasy or fictionalized legend about attempts to find these eggs from the Mongol period, via aristocrats of the GDL and the French King, Pope Urban VIII and Peter the Great to the present day; the security services, paranoid as ever, were very concerned in the 1920s about beautiful statues that had suddenly appeared in a park, which were rumoured to have come from some prehistoric bird, whose eggs were in the Ahinski family. This kind of historical writing, though not informative for scholars, does in *Dziadzienka's* case entertain by including a linking of past and present, as well as introducing into the Belarusian setting a ruthless Mongol who is especially keen to discover the whereabouts of the Roc's egg.

Kviatkoŭski is a prolific and inventive writer, whose *Stračanaja staronka* ('The Lost Page') from his book *Padarunak dlia Adeli* ('A Present for Adelia', 2012), is also about the search for missing information and material items. The narrator is dismayed by the lack of documents relating to Belarusian history, in particular the Polacak Chronicle, and he wonders how it disappeared and why the Muscovites destroyed it (Kviatkoŭski 2021, 79-80).<sup>10</sup> An interesting feature of this work is a description of the relatively unknown history of the Khazars, but its ending is bizarre, suggesting that now they (he and others) can work on the Lithuanian Lexicon and thus live in their own immortality (PA, 87-88). It is strange that the last example of historical writing anticipates the author's immortality, when the purpose of the major Belarusian historical novelists is not concern with themselves but with preserving the rich and disputed past of their country. Indeed, some of the writers mentioned in this article have been bitterly attacked for writing about the frequently denigrated history of Belarus. Those mentioned here are not alone, and the very fact of keeping the nation's past alive is of the greatest importance. In this task the youngest and the middle generation, whilst branching out in form and content, often look for inspiration mainly to Karatkievič and Arloŭ, pillars of this eminently worthwhile enterprise.

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<sup>10</sup> Subsequent reference to this book is PA with the page reference.

<sup>11</sup> At that time all reviews in what is now "The Journal of Belarusian Studies" were anonymous.



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