Chapter 27. Medieval Reenactors: A Manifestation of Belarus’s European History
The situation is different in the case of another noteworthy example of actualization of alternative Belarusianness, the youth movement represented by medieval reenactors organized in “knight orders.” The beginning of this movement dates back to 1992–93, and from an informal association of some dozens of people it developed into a real youth movement by the end of the 1990s. Today, in Minsk alone, there are about fifty groups of reenactors. Nearly every Belarusian city and town has a reenactor group.

The basic idea of the movement is reflected in its name: “reenactment” is a reproduction and staging of Belarusian historical events, tournaments, and historic battles from the Belarusian past. For example, the festival titled “The White Castle”, organized by the group Dragon Heart (in 1999 renamed The North Temple Order) was a reenactment of the Nemiga battle in 1067, and “The Toll of Zaslavl” (2001) was the reenactment of a castle siege and a battle between the armies of prince Svidrigaylo and princes Andrew and Yuri of Zaslavl in 1434. The idea of the group Prince Court (based in Minsk and founded in 1999) reflects in fact the general ideology of the movement: “Our association is engaged in studying the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as well as in re-creating the ornaments, household utensils, and attire of that epoch and state.”

Interest in history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is connected here with an interest in visual and emotional actualization of the past. The reenactments are held in the neighborhood of surviving Belarusian castles, and, in some cases, the “knights” themselves repair and restore the castles. Thus, in organizing the festival “The Hoary legend” (2001) in Drutsk, part of the castle was restored from the ruins by the reenactors. The participants made costumes rendering as closely as possible the original clothing of the historical epochs. For instance, group members can participate only after examination by a special jury. The judgment system includes the following criteria:

1 See www.bel-knight.com.
“the documentation of the costume”—in this case the artisan’s work is examined, for example, based on the fabric samples given in the description, a full list of sources, illustrations from the primary sources, and patterns;

• “the historical character of the image and defense of the costume”—the correspondence of the image to the stated period, class, and ethnicity, the full value and authenticity of the costume, and defense of the costume demonstrated by a participant on the stage are examined;

• “historical pattern of cutting”—the correspondence of the cutting to historical sources is examined.

In other words, the “historical basis” of both the costumes and the events that are reenacted at the festivals is accentuated. The participants are expected to demonstrate knowledge of the sources and even the “full value of the literature” used in preparation is examined. A permanent partner of the reenactment is the Internet resource of the project “The History of the GDL,” an academic group of researchers dealing with the period of the GDL. Interest in the history of the GDL and a desire to “become” people from that time and re-enact events of that epoch bring the alternative GDL history to life, transforming it into “our state” and “our past.” The repeated reclamation and actualization of knightly tradition serves as a reminder that in the old days the culture of European castles was on the boundary of Belarusian lands. Farther from Smolensk quite a different tradition started—the tradition of kremlins. Belarus was on the outskirts but nevertheless a part of Europe.

In 2000 several reenactor groups, “The Prince Court” (Kniazhy Guf; Minsk), “The Dainava” (Lida), “The Brest Banner” (Berastseiskaia har'gyv; Brest), and “The Iron Wolf” (Polotsk) founded the association of the “Knights of the Grand Duchy” in Belarus. The purpose of the association, as its charter states, was “an integration of military and historical reenactment groups of the GDL in the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries for joint activities at the national and international levels, an exchange of information and experience, and the organization of common events to enhance the prestige of the fatherland’s history.”2 Although from the very beginning, the association declared its indifference to politics, the idea of revival of the Belarusian past of GDL times has apparent political implications in present-day Belarus. And though the groups are not allowed to take part in political actions and events, each festival of medieval culture and each

2 Ibid.
medieval reenactment is a symbolic manifestation and actualization of alternative Belarusian history and, through it, alternative Belarusianess in the public space of Belarus. With the return of medieval knightly culture in Belarus is the return of Belarus to the European tradition.

The groups hold annual medieval festivals and tournaments in different towns and organize concerts and exhibitions of armaments and household utensils of the GDL epoch. The first Belarusian reenactment was held in Minsk in 1995. Today about ten major festivals and about twenty reenactments are held in the country annually. Most large groups hold festivals of their own, many of which attain annual status. The festivals “Zaslavl Toll,” “The Knights’ Saga,” “The White Castle,” “The Castle of Navargrad,” “Ancient Nesvige,” “Gedymin’s Castle,” “Medieval Belarus,” and many others have already became new “knights” of Belarusian tradition.

In the extended festival geography and “mass” character of the events organized by the Belarusian reenactor groups, and in the idea of European Belarus that they manifest in their activity, one can see a form of spreading and propagation of the ideas of alternative Belarusianess. Nevertheless, “the public life” of the groups and their relations with official Belarusian culture is different from that of Misterium Occupation or the Free Theater.

In the mid-1990s the activity of the reenactment groups had the status of a peculiar subculture that was not banned and was accepted by the authorities neutrally. With the growth in demand for symbolic support of the official national idea these groups were invited into the official cultural space. The authorities not only gave permission to hold festivals and reenactments but sometimes participated in their organization. Thus, the reenactors’ festival “The Hoary Legend” (2001) in the ancient town of Drutsk was organized with the help of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Belarus. The organizers of the festival “Gedymin’s Castle 2005” in Lida were the republican youth association “The Knights of the Grand Duchy” and the local authorities of Lida. Sometimes, the reenactors are invited to official celebrations and this seemingly makes them part of the official cultural strategy. The festivals “The Knights’ Saga I” in 2002 and “The Knights’ Saga II” in 2003 were held in the context of the official celebration of Minsk’s anniversary. The festival “Ancient Nesvige” took place on July 3–4, 2003, and was timed to coincide with the official festivities celebrating Belarus’s Independence Day. The medieval reenactors’ festival “Novopolotsk 2003” was held on the day of the town anniversary celebration with the support of the local authorities. Official electronic media pub-
licize reenactors’ festivals: in 2003 the STV (the capital television channel) organized a live transmission from the festival. In 2004 the festival “The White Castle” became the basis of a television project with the same title shown on the first national channel.

All of these events testify to the official acceptance of the reenactment movement, showing the nominal rehabilitation of pre-Soviet and off-Russian Belarusian history by the Belarusian authorities as part of the Belarusian past, albeit with a number of “reservations.” The Belarusian ideologist S. D. Laptenok admits that knightly culture did exist in Belarusian history and even agrees that “organizing theatrical performances that reproduce the knightly duels of our ancestors and the heroic acts of princes and Belarusian voevodes, virtuous noblemen, and landlords is a useful thing. We must know history.”\(^3\) However, from the official perspective, their meaning for patriotic education should not be overrated because “the main hero, the people, are left behind the screen in these celebrations, even though, without the heroism and self-sacrifice of the common people those individual heroes would not be possible.”\(^4\)

However, individualism and a lack of collective heroic deeds in the knights’ tournaments is not the only reason, or the main reason, for official ideology to remain cautious about this period of the Belarusian past. As the reenactors themselves assert, “the reenactor groups’ activity has an enormous positive educational impact and is necessary for youth who want to undertake a deep study of the history of Belarus and Europe on the whole.”\(^5\) Such is the exact arrangement of geopolitical coordinates of Belarussianness: “Belarus and Europe on the whole” represented in the knight’s tradition make the reenactment questionable in the official perspective. The main conflict between the medieval reenactors and official Belarussianness is symbolic—they appeal to different national ideas backed by different national traditions. In 2001, during the election campaign, the candidate for presidency Siamion Domash attended a medieval reenactment which highlighted the cultural and symbolic sense of his political program: he was in favor of Belarus with European roots. These roots, in turn, imply the political meaning of the reenactor groups themselves as they reconnect today’s Belarusians with their forgotten past and revive their Europeanness. Although, as M. Zhbankou and A. Rasinski note, “This past


\(^{4}\) Ibid.

\(^{5}\) See www.alterego.tut.by/clubs.
has been so deeply forgotten that in order to have it back it should be created anew.”

Possibly, this “newness” of the European Middle Ages in the Belarusian tradition makes it relatively safe from the point of view of official ideology. The original sense of Belarusian knighthood as “our history” emphasized by the reenactors themselves is often replaced by a metaphorical reading of their image. The newspaper *Nasha Niva* published a photo resembling an ideological collage—it depicts Belarusian medieval reenactors and a large Soviet-style Belarusian poster above them “Welcome to the winners of the Battle For The Harvest.” “The Battle For The Harvest” is a classical expression of the Soviet era, currently in Belarus, the winners of this “battle” are honored annually at *Dazhinki*, special festivities at the end of harvest season. This photo in fact expropriates the sense of historical heroic victories and transforms Belarusian knights into symbols of the heroic battle for agricultural production.

At the same time, the authorities use the ideas and “techniques” of the reenactment movement to revive memories of World War II in a similar manner. In 2005 the foundation Afghan Memory (a state organization) ini-

tiated the creation of the historical and cultural center Stalin’s Line. It is a memorial complex of the ancient “Stalin’s Line” of fortifications that according to the official version of history was built before World War II to protect Minsk from the western areas. The complex was reconstructed in strict conformity to its former state in the prewar years near the town of Zaslavl (located thirty-five kilometers from Minsk). The concept of the memorial complex is to restore fortified objects from the 1930s and 1940s in order to revitalize the real history of war, to present samples of military machinery, and so on. However, the idea of the complex is not only to create a museum of historical fortification, it also provides its visitors with a reenactment of battles between the Soviet army and Fascist occupiers. These theatrical performances revive the first days of the fascist invasion of Belarus. The idea of such a reenactment is borrowed from the ideas of medieval reenactor groups. In 2007, the complex’s management proposed its territory as the site of the Belarusian Reenactors’ Festival. This set a precedent that created historical continuity between the history of heroic knights on the Belarusian lands and the more recent events of World War II. Thus, in the context of official Belarusianness, “Belarusian knights” are interpreted as the historical predecessors of those who won the Great Patriotic War in the twentieth century. Presented in this way, the reenactment movement loses its “geopolitical implications,” and “knights” as a manifestation of Belarusian Europeanness are reworked into Belarusian phenomena without connoting a wider cultural tradition.

The reasons why the authorities periodically “receive” Belarusian reenactors on their territory might differ. First, the period of time in question is rather distant and thus appears safer in the Belarusian consciousness than the film *Misterium Occupation*, which touches upon the events of the relatively recent war. Second, the conflict between the two Belarusian traditions—the one manifested by the knights and the one advocated by official culture—becomes resolved in official initiatives by a rereading of the

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7 Popularization of history by means of historical reconstruction is not an exclusively Belarusian skill. The largest living history museum in the world is located in Williamsburg, Virginia, which is the restored eighteenth-century capital of Britain’s most populous outpost of empire in the New World. It consists of hundreds of restored, reconstructed, and historically furnished buildings that re-create the historic era. The conception of this reconstruction, according to the foundation’s mission statement, is to vivify the “Becoming Americans” theme and to “tell how diverse peoples, having different and sometimes conflicting ambitions, evolved into a society that valued liberty and equality. [...] In this historic place, we help the future learn from the past.” See [www.colonialwilliamsburg.com](http://www.colonialwilliamsburg.com).
knights’ history in their own way. Deprived of their civilizational (Euro-
pean) context, Belarusian knights are transformed into brave Belarusian
ancestors with no other meaning. Besides, the performance and spectacle
character of the festivals organized by the reenactors makes these events
more entertaining than reflective. For an unaware mass spectator, the
“idea” is hidden behind the thick curtain of visual effects. It is the richness
of various effects of medieval reenactor festivals—their medieval music in
original and modern arrangements, old Belarusian cuisine, and a combina-
tion of sport competitions with artistic decorations characteristic of the
tournaments—that makes the festivals attractive to the masses.

However, the main reason for favorable treatment of the reenactors’
activities on the part of official culture may be the fact that such a “spor-
adic” manifestation of alternative Belarusianness cannot compete with
the work of the state machine working on the symbolic reification of the
official Belarusianness.