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German Soldiers in the Period of the Nazi Occupation in the Memories of the Belarusian Villagers

Żołnierze niemieccy w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej we wspomnieniach mieszkańców białoruskich wsi

Нямецкія салдаты ў перыяд нацысцкай акупацыі ва ўспамінах беларускіх вяскоўцаў

Abstract

The evaluation of German soldiers by the Belarusian population during World War II has practically not been studied in Belarusian historiography. This led to the need for further study of this problem. The aim of the study is to identify the real picture of the attitude of the Belarusians to German soldiers. The principles of oral history are used as the most important methodological apparatus. The author of the article examines the attitude of the rural population of Northern Belarus to the Nazi occupiers in 1941–1944. Additional research has shown that the estimates of the autochthons are characterised by opposite values from 'the inhuman enemy" to 'the good stranger'. This depended on the specific circumstances of the contacts of the Wehrmacht soldiers with the local population. The collective perception of the occupiers was characterised by uncertainty, anxiety and fear. Against the background of mass terror, the attitude of individual Wehrmacht soldiers to the local population was distinguished by humanism. However, such cases were considered by the Belarusians as an exception to the rule.

Keywords: Belarus, World War II, oral history, enemy image, German soldiers

Abstrakt

W białoruskiej historiografii kwestia postaw ludności zamieszkującej tereny Białorusi wobec niemieckiej okupacji w czasie II wojny światowej nie została dotąd wystarczająco zbadana, co zadecydowało o wyborze tematu niniejszego artykułu. Celem publikacji był opis stosunku Białorusinów wobec żołnierzy hitlerowskich w latach 1941–1944 na podstawie relacji ustnych

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

mieszkańców wybranych wsi północnej Białorusi. Badanie wykazało, że w analizowanym okresie indywidualne oceny autochtonów były zróżnicowane i – w zależności od sytuacji – obejmowały zarówno charakterystyki negatywne („nieludzki wróg"), jak i pozytywne („dobry nieznajomy"). Z kolei w świadomości zbiorowej utrwalił się negatywny wizerunek wroga, wywołujący w miejscowej ludności poczucie niepewności, lęku i strachu. Wobec powszechnego terroru stosunek żołnierzy niemieckich do lokalnej ludności jedynie sporadycznie oceniany był jako humanitarny.

S**łowa kluczowe:** Białoruś, II wojna światowa, historia mówiona, wizerunek wroga, żołnierze niemieccy

Анатацыя

Ацэнка нямецкіх салдат беларускім насельніцтвам падчас Другой сусветнай вайны ў беларускай гістарыяграфіі практычна не вывучалася. Гэта абумовіла неабходнасць даследавання дадзенай праблемы. Мэтай публікацыі з'яўляецца выяўленне рэальнай карціны адносінаў беларусаў да нямецкіх салдат. У якасці прыярытэтнага метадалагічнага апарата выкарыстаны прынцыпы вуснай гісторыі. Аўтар артыкула разглядае адносіны сельскага насельніцтва Паўночнай Беларусі да нацысцкіх акупантаў у 1941–1944 гг. Даследаванне паказала, што ацэнкі аўтахтонаў характарызуюцца супрацьлеглымі азначэннямі: ад «бесчалавечнага ворага» да «добрага чужынца». Гэта залежала ад канкрэтных абставінаў, у якіх салдат вермахта сутыкаўся з мясцовым насельніцтвам. Калектыўнае ўспрыманне акупантаў характарызавалася няпэўнасцю, трывогай і страхам. На фоне масавага тэрору стаўленне асобных салдат вермахта да мясцовых жыхароў ўспрымалася як гуманнае. Аднак, такія выпадкі разглядаліся беларусамі як выключэнне з правіла.

Ключавыя словы: Беларусь, Другая сусветная вайна, вусная гісторыя, вобраз ворага, нямецкія салдаты

The issue of the Second World War, the Nazi occupation in particular, have been and will be a topical and debatable field of studies of Belarusian (as well as European, in a wider perspective) historiography for long time. They reveal not so much methodological disagreements but rather 'wars of memory', i.e. a hard conflict between ideological constructs of the formal and alternative history in the post-Soviet area. The fundamental divergence between the Western European and Soviet discourse of war awareness was described by M. Ferretti:

> If, schematically speaking, the memory of the war in the countries of Western Europe... was built and founded to be the basis for the national identity of different countries in order to convey and consolidate the values of freedom and democracy in the minds of people, values which nurtured the anti-fascism movement for which this movement fought, then the case of Soviet Union was different. Here, the memory of the war was built by putting not the struggle for freedom, but the heroism of the Soviet people in the foreground (2005, p. 137).

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Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

In the sovereign and independent Republic of Belarus, the official doctrine of the Second World War was a successor of the Soviet ideological constructs to a certain extent. According to these constructs, a global tragedy in the history of mankind has the format of the 'Great Patriotic War', where the key concepts, as before, are 'the heroic actions of the Soviet people' and 'the heroic struggle of Belarusian partisans and underground fighters against the German occupiers'. At the same time, the historical myth of the 'partisan Republic' from the Soviet times has been updated according to the political ambitions of the ruling elites.

From the end of 20th to the beginning of 21th century, however, there was a whole new research trend, focusing primarily on the key themes of the Belarusian military history of the partisan movement during the Nazi occupation, the challenges of collaboration and the Holocaust, as well as the forms and content of German occupation policy on the territory of Belarus (Musâl, 2018, pp. 9–14). A great amount of archival materials were first introduced into scientific circulation by both Western and Belarusian historians, which significantly contributed to the detailed substantive works on various aspects of the military history of Belarus. This revealed problems which proved 'inconvenient' for the official historiography, such as the nature and content of the interrelationship between the guerrillas and the peaceful population, or the scale of collaboration on the occupied territory. On the other hand, the rapid development of factology raised numerous methodological questions for researchers. It became clear that the principle of 'objectivity' in the study of military realities is extremely difficult to implement, primarily due to the fact that the 'familiar – stranger' antinomy is implemented in dozens of different variations in the conditions of occupation, in contrast to the frontline events.

Methodological Problems, Subject and Sources of Research

A German historian and the author of the fundamental study entitled 'Everyday Life Behind the Front Line', Bernhard Chiari, stated that there is a need for new methodological approaches in the study of the Nazi occupation period in Belarus. He listed, however, the problems of their use in practice.

> To adequately construct a vast scenario, microhistory – that is, the study of a particular village, city, enterprise, or military unit, or a particular family – could be considered as a convenient tool. The state of the available sources did not allow us to follow this way. Our work, however, was strongly influenced by the concepts of everyday history and oral history [...] (2008, p. 23).

In this case, the reference to microhistory is not accidental. Historical sources show, even at first glance, the extreme heterogeneity of the Belarusian socio-cultural landscape under occupation, when almost every village, city or town had its 'own' his-

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Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

tory of the war. This is clearly reflected in the collective memory of local communities. As for the 'oral history' sources, unfortunately, they are either almost completely absent in modern research (Chiari, 2008; Turonak, 2008; Brakel′, 2013; Bartuška, 2014), or have a sporadic and marginal character in relation to a large number of archival sources (Gartenschläger 2008; Musial, 2018). Even in the work devoted to the civilian population of Belarus under German occupation, the author does without a single 'live' eyewitness testimony of those events, and bases his study on the documents of the occupation administration alone (Greben′, 2016).

Such an approach, where the only subjects of the history are the conflicting parties (occupiers and partisans), leads to the fact that the vast majority of the population of occupied Belarus is presented in research as the object of violence and suppression, a 'silent majority', whose voice, vision, awareness and interpretation of dramatic events in the history of the country are not taken into account or retold indirectly from the reports of the occupation authorities or commanders of partisan detachments. Paradoxical as it may seem, however, it is the rural population of Belarus that has become the main actor in the three-year tragedy of the Nazi occupation, without which all discussions concerning both the partisan movement and the fate of the Belarusian nation as a whole have no meaning.

It should be noted that the 'oral history', as an appeal of the intellectuals to the direct witnesses of events, was recorded in the Soviet period. A vivid example is the documentary story 'I Am from the Burning Village...' presenting the memories of miraculous survivors from 147 Belarusian villages destroyed by the occupiers (Adamovič, Bryl′, Kales′nik, 1983, p. 6). It is quite significant that it was not professional historians that were assigned with searching the witnesses and recording a documentary of their memories, but Belarusian writers: Ales Adamovich, Janka Bryl, and Vladimir Kalesnik, who had participated in the guerrilla resistance in Belarus personally. On the one hand, the publication was an emotional and truthful 'first person' testimony of the criminal nature of the Nazi regime in Belarus, but it clearly indicated that the fate and the 'microhistory' of tens of thousands of Belarusian villages that survived the horror of the occupation did not fit into the official Soviet doctrine of the Great Patriotic War. Therefore, as L. Gudkov notes, 'the layer of everyday experiences from the hopeless war was practically omitted, displaced from the collective memory (collective consciousness)' (2005, p. 88).

The return to the 'oral history' in the contemporary research of the events of the last war faces a much more significant problem: 'Today, there are no more than 6–7% of people who survived the war. These are mainly elderly and poorly educated women, who mostly have neither the means nor the opportunities, and, importantly, no motives, no intention to share such an experience' (Gudkov, 2005, p. 88). The physical outcome of the military generation and the inaccessibility of their testimony in the near future is underlined by the German researcher B. Musyal, who states that 'it is, finally, worth mentioning one type of source which will no longer available in a few years, but which plays an important role in this work, that is interviews and testimonies of for-

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

mer partisans [...], Belarusian, Polish, Russian and Jewish witnesses, as well as former German soldiers' (2018, p. 17).

The use of 'oral history' materials, especially if the respondents are villagers, is very specific in that the researcher faces a personal perception of the history of a particular person, relevant in the local community and poorly correlated with the pragmatics of the 'national history' in its significant moments. 'Usually, the nation is too far from the individual for him to consider the history of the country as something broader, with which his personal history comes into contact only at a few points' (Halbwachs, 2005, p. 40). Moreover, it is necessary to recognise that the perception, fixation, interpretation of historical events in the traditional picture of the world in the rural society is significantly different from the principles governing the official 'written history' with its exact chronology and mandatory ideological component. If a precedent outweighs the typology and chronological accuracy in the stories of a rural resident, emotionality replaces rationality, and the basic principles of human morality replace ideology.

The absence of the 'little individual' in numerous studies of the 'big war' actualised anthropological approaches into military history, when the war became the subject of research not only for historians, but anthropologists, philosophers, culturologists, sociologists, and psychologists. In the recent decades, the problem of 'man and war', long been ignored by the official history, has become extremely relevant.

> The war is generally described by official historians as a series of episodes, events in a time order. Historical science focused on the study of military, military-political and military-economic aspects and was characterised by an 'event' approach, which covered the course of military actions, major battles, the heroics of the war. The study of the human component of war belongs to the field of military-historical problematics, which has recently become the subject of research for professional historians, and is separated into individual sections of historical science, i.e. historical anthropology and the history of everyday life (Lobačevskaâ, 2010, p. 39).

It should be noted that the subject field of the new direction followed by the researchers of the discipline, i.e. military-historical anthropology, largely intersects with the problematics of a number of national cognitive disciplines: ethnography, ethnology (cultural anthropology), ethnolinguistics and folkloristics. In particular, among the problematic tasks of military-historical anthropology, A. S. Syanyavskaya also identifies a section of knowledge relevant to the people as a whole: the analysis of values, ideas, beliefs, traditions and customs of all social categories in the context of the maturation of the war, its course, completion and consequences; the study of the evolution of the concepts of 'свой – чужы' ('familiar – stranger') and the formation of the image of the enemy in various armed conflicts...' (2002, p. 14).

The subject of this study is the mental reaction of Belarusian villagers to the events of the last war and the period of the Nazi occupation, expressed in the situational and

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

objective characteristics of German soldiers as representatives of the basic category of the traditional picture of the world – 'чужыя' / 'strangers' (enemies).

The main body of sources consists of memories of villagers of the Vitebsk region, recorded during the field folklore and ethnographic expeditions of the Polatsk State University in the period 1990–2010[1]. The recorded narratives are specific in that they are told mainly by people who were children or teenagers during the occupation. Given this circumstance, however, the perception of military events reflected in children's consciousness, shared already in their adulthood, has a special character. 'Memories of military childhood are characterised by emotionality, imagery and spontaneity, that is why they are valuable as a historical source, which restores the psychological atmosphere of the time' (Ûsupova, 2005, p. 245). At the same time, the military history of children is extremely highly integrated and results from the history of the nearest social environment (family, village), where the evaluation system and the strategy of behaviour of the parents, relatives, villagers becomes a priority. This does not exclude the actual childlike accents in the perception of the reality under occupation (for example, the vivid memory of candy treats given by German soldiers).

The nature and content of war stories is significantly determined by geographical factors. A vast difference in the perception of military events in this case is due to the affiliation of the Vitebsk region before 1939 to the Second Polish Republic. The first encounter with the Soviet order (collectivization, repression, prohibition of private property, militant atheism) often caused shock in the local peasants. During the occupation, the former 'Polish' areas were included in the General district of Belarus under civil German administration, whereas the eastern region (the territory of the BSSR) entered the rear area of the 'Centre' army group under military administration. The economic situation in the West was incomparably better than in the East (Turonak, 2008, pp. 632–633). On the other hand, the guerrilla movement had the greatest impact in the former Soviet expanses (Musâl, 2018, p. 222), which, in turn, caused massive and extremely harsh punitive actions on the part of the occupiers, primarily detrimental to the civilian population. But even within one district, almost every village had its 'own' history of the war, with significant circumstances being the location (near / far from the German garrisons, transport arteries, in the woods / treeless terrain, in the guerrilla zone or beyond), the nature of the relationship between the inhabitants, the guerrilla and the occupation authorities, the social climate in the village community and, of course, the personal fate of the narrator and his family.

[1] The Folklore Archive of Polotsk State University contains about 170 memories of villagers dedicated to the war and the period of occupation, recorded in 15 districts of Vitebsk region; most of the materials were published (PEZ, 2011, pp. 236–259, VOV, 2016, pp. 208–315).

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

'Familiar' and 'Stranger' in the Context of the Nazi Occupation

The 'familiar – stranger' antinomy, fundamental to any world image, 'this opposition, in different forms, permeates the whole culture and is one of the main concepts of any collective, mass, folk, national worldview' (Stepanov, 2004, p. 126). In the traditional image of the world among the Belarusian peasantry, the 'familiar and 'stranger' categories governed almost all levels of life reality, formed the basis of both cultural and social landscape structure, and were based on mythological schemes, deeply rooted in the collective consciousness.

In real-life dimension of the inter-ethnic interaction, the 'stranger' does not act as a monolithic and unchanging category, but may have different poles of representation: the 'other' – the representative of someone else's cultural or social group, integrated into the local cultural landscape, differs in matters which are not dangerous to the life system of the community, but strengthens its identity; the 'enemy' – a very negative image of the 'stranger', threatens the very existence of the group and its core values.

In the pre-war time, the structure of the rural landscape of the Vitebsk region involved forms and the content of the intercultural interaction between Belarusians and Jews, Russians, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians and other ethnic groups. The character of these relations was based on a fixed model, where socio-cultural roles, ethnostereotypes, as well as communication strategies and practices resulted from a vast historical experience of peaceful coexistence. In the traditional world image of the indigenous population, 'strangers' were treated rather as 'others', without the 'enemy' connotations in the major part.

With the rapid advance of the Wehrmacht units, the collapse of the Soviet state system on the territory of Belarus, the mobilisation of the male population into the ranks of the Red Army, the information vacuum, brutal battles and the first mass victims, the war brought a total destruction upon the existing life system at all its taxonomic levels: family-community-country. 'The mass attitude towards the war is almost identical to the perception of it as a traditional natural disaster – starvation, pestilence, floods or earthquakes, the causes of which are obscure, and the consequences – terrific' (Gudkov, 2005, p. 87). In a semiotic projection, war can be compared to the 'death' of the old world order in ritual calendar practices, when the boundaries between one's own and another's disappear, and the representatives of another world find themselves among people. The only difference is that it was not the mythological hypostases of 'strangers' that appeared during the war, and the destruction of the world order was not symbolic, but the enemy – the German army, accompanied by violence, death and destruction –was absolutely real.

War essentially blurs and devalues the semantic field of 'familiar' in the sense of 'neighbour', 'close', 'safe', 'positive'. In the specific circumstances of the war years, the 'familiar' person (yesterday's neighbour, villager, even a relative) could become a source of violence, coercion and death threats, while 'stranger' could be the one to save someone from death.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

> In contrast to the texts found in the official discourse, there are no ideal, de-individualised characters in the oral stories, who would have certain features because of being rooted in one of the parties. There are living people who act in one way or another, according to their own individuality and circumstances. They can be good and bad, weak and strong, stranger and familiar, but strangers can turn out to be good and familiar people – bad (Kormina, Štyrkov, 2005, p. 225).

Paradoxical as it may seem, the local Soviet partisans and the local policemen within the framework of the ethno-cultural identification were perceived as 'familiar' by Belarusian peasants, but the estimated characteristics could differ radically. Those who served the occupier authorities and became active Nazi agents, implementing their policy of violence and terror against 'our' people, are perceived negatively in the memoirs, to a greater degree than the Wehrmacht soldiers.

> Былі і паліцаі, былі і „народнікі", былі і немцы. Эта „ народнікі" былі, што тут, з нашых, з нашага жыцельства. Паліцай пойдзець, тады сваіх людзей ён давіць, цісне. Вот такія паліцаі называліся. „Народнікі" тожа такія, бальшынство былі з нашых людзей. А немцы, яны как чыстакроўныя былі немцы, прошчэ гавара не так сільна (Бешанковіцкі р-н); Былі паліцаі, былі. Хужэ былі немцаў, так як ёсць. Ну дак, раз ішлі на сваіх, канешне хужэ (Лёзненскі р-н); Толька пад канец вайны стаялі у нас немцы… Але паліцаі горшыя былі. Чуць трошку што, дык, шчас казаў той, за шыварат і ў каталажку, б'юць. (Гэта ж свае, месныя?) Да, калі хочаш і сваіх было (Мёрскі р-н)[2] (VOV, pp. 216, 284, 288).

But cases of violence and looting of the rural population by 'their' familiar guerrillas were rather frequent during the occupation, which is confirmed by numerous dispatches and reports of the guerrilla command (Musâl, 2018, pp. 231–246, 435–450), as well as abundant memories of witnesses of those events (VOV, pp. 216, 225, 235, 237, 240, 271–272, 296). The analysis of the sources shows that the polysemantic image of the 'familiar' under occupation was due to the demonopolisation of the state's right to violence and the appearance of a new subject with extraordinary powers – a 'man with a gun' – in the structure of the rural landscape. This could be anyone for whom the

[2] There were policemen, there were 'narodniks', there were Germans. These 'narodniks' were from here, from of our place. The policeman would go and beat down his own people. How is that for a policeman? 'Narodniks', too, most of them were our people. But the Germans, since they were full-blooded Germans, they didn't speak that well (Beshankovitsky distr.); There were policemen who were worse than Germans. Somteimes they would act against their own people, so they were certainly worse (Liozno distr.); The Germans were there only at the end of the war... But the policemen were the worst. They would take you by the collar and put in jail, and beat you down. (They were from here, local people, right?) Yes, if you like to put it this way, they were our own people (Miyorsky district).

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

social and legal norms of rural society were of no importance: 'who has got a revolver is the lord'.

> У нас сваі былі партызаны, з вёскі, яны толькі самі ў сваю пользу. Карову сцягнуць, зарэжуць і з'ядуць. Людзі баялісь іх зачапіць, у іх аружые было. Прыдуць ноччу. У мяне мамка была, так ей руку выбілі, пазваночнік пераκруцілі. Каб у падводы ехала, жанчына старая, каб іх вазіла. Каня ўзялі, свіней забралі і курэй. Пад мятлу гналі ўсё. Свае, вот былі (Пастаўскі р-н)[3] (VOV, p. 296).

The multidimensionality and ambiguity of the 'familiar' category in the traditional world image held by the rural population of the period of occupation requires a separate study and will not be discussed in this article. This paper focuses on the characteristics of the image of German soldiers, reflected in the memories of the villagers of the Vitebsk region.

Soldiers of the German Army in the Perception of Belarusian Villagers

The Nazi aggression against the USSR in the collective consciousness of the Belarusian rural population certainly correlated with the generalised image of the Germans ('the Germans attacked', 'the Germans came'), which was quite dim and undefined at the beginning of the war. The experience of direct intercultural interaction with the Germans was almost absent, the stories of the few participants of the World War I who were captured by the Germans were perceived by the village community as tales about a world too distant and too strange, while the Soviet pre-war propaganda from autumn 1939 suggested the idea of an unbreakable friendship with Nazi Germany. 'In general, there was no anti-German attitude in the Soviet society on the eve of the war. Many Soviet citizens, especially the elderly, had respect for German technology and culture, and admired the inherent diligence, punctuality, and conscientiousness of the Germans' (Krynko, 2005, p. 330).

From the emotional perspective, the first contact of the villagers with the German soldiers in summer 1941 can be described as a wary interest in foreigners, followed by a positive or negative impression. First of all, however, the identification of the 'stranger' was based on the basic markers – appearance and unknown language: '(And what kind of Germans were they? What kind of people?) *Well, like normal people*. *But*

[3] We had our own guerrillas, from the village, who did only what suited them. They would steal a cow, slaughter it and eat. People were afraid to catch them, since they had weapons. They would come at night. They broke my mother's arm and twisted her the spine. They had an old woman drive them in a cart. They took the horse, the pigs and the chickens. They took everything and hid. We knew them, they were ours (Pastavsky district).

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

not dressed like us. And constantly doing their gyr-gyr-gyr' (FAPDU, 1). In the western regions, there was also a positive reaction to the arrival of the Germans:

> Вот дзетка, Саветаў не знаю, а вот як немцы ішлі, не знаю які гэты год быў, дык хадзілі пераймаць на бальшак. Не баяліся. (Радаваліся, што немцы ідуць?) Ай, чорт іх ведаіць. Каму тут радавацца. Але сільна давалі гасцінца. Хадзілі, радаваліся. Сястра большая ды я, так чуць прыняслі. Канфеты і ўсяго там, а мы ж ня відзілі гэтага[4] (FAPDU, 2).

> Наступаў немец праз Докшыцы. І мы ж гэткія дзеўчукі, паляцелі ж глядзець немцаў, ну дурные ж гэдкія. Дык нарвём цвятоў гэдулькі і кідаем ім у машыну[5] (VOV, p. 270).

It is clear that the reaction of the village children to the German vanguard could not be spontaneous and arbitrary, but influenced by the opinion of their parents. Therefore, they reflected the collective perception of the Wehrmacht soldiers as 'liberators' from the Soviet violence. Oral evidence correlates with the German sources of that time. In July 1941, an Abwehr officer described the public atmosphere in Ashmyany in the following way: 'Observing the mood of the population, one can generally have the impression that the inhabitants of the former Polish territories such as Lithuanians consider the arrival of the German soldiers as a liberation from the Bolshevik rule' (Musâl, 2018, p. 49).

In the eastern areas of the Vitebsk region, where the Soviet authorities managed to conduct mobilisation, the village population was more apprehensive towards the arrival of the Germans because a significant number of men (sons, brothers, fathers) were already in the ranks of the Red Army. Hence, the Wehrmacht soldiers were perceived as not just 'stranger' soldiers, but precisely as soldiers of an 'enemy' army. This opinion was reinforced by the impression of the robberies committed by German soldiers in Belarusian villages, and, especially, by the very harsh treatment of Soviet prisoners of war, involuntarily extrapolated on the possible fate of a close person.

> Яны ж прыйшлі к нам у дзярэўню, Божачка, прыехалі, і с танкамі. І яны з танкамі сталі там і стаяць. Божачка, за курамі бегалі па двару і стралялі курэй. Яны ж мяса, ім нада! А мы ўжо баяліся і з мамай, мы ўжо ні слова не гаварылі. Нічога. А яны, брат ты мой, з пісталета застрэлюць курыцу і забераць. Во як было! Не дай Бог, не дай Бог! (Бешанковіцкі р-н)[6] (VOV, p. 224).

[4] I did not know any Soviets, but when the Germans came, I don't know which year this was, we went to wait for them on the highway. We were not afraid. (Were you glad that the Germans were coming? – Ah, hell knows. Was anyone happy back then? But they gave us a lot of goodies. They were cheering. My big sister and I, we heard that they gave out sweets and other things, but we did not see it.

[5] The Germans went through Dokshytsy. And we were girls, we went to look at the Germans, well, stupid girls. We picked some flowers and threw them in their car.

[6] They came into our village, my God, they came with tanks. And they would stand there with their tanks. God, they ran around the yard after the chickens and shot them. They needed meat!

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

> Каб немец тады ў гэты мамент не стрэляў гэтых пленных… Ён травінку атарваць сагнуўся на дарозі, вадіцы ўхапіць сагнуўся, а немец – трэсь! – і забіў, яшчэ другі сагнуўся, а ён – трэсь! Мне тады было 16 гадоў.., а мой брат быў на вайне.Пашлі ўсе іскаць, у каго на вайне пабітыя. Пленных немец гнаў, а там у карманчыках, во тут у штанах, адраса. Такая трубачка у салдацікаў і там адраса. Мы падойдзем: Ай, – кажа, – ня мой. Гэта адкуль?Ён не жывый, кроўю сыйшоў. Ляжыць адзін тут, тады другі. Па ўсім бальшаку гэтых трубачак назбіралі, во такія прыгоршчы (Лепельскі р-н)[7] (PEZ, p. 248–249).

According to the villagers, the occupiers' inhuman treatment of prisoners of war was one of the main reasons for the creation of a mass guerrilla movement and the defeat of the German army as a whole.

> Дык вот, як паступіў так немец, як стаў убіваць (палонных), во тады яны абдумаліся і ўсе ў лес. Страляй, аднаго застрэліш, апяць уцячэць у лес, у лес. Токі дзе дарога кала лесу, так яны – шмыг. А Ушацкі раён наш, гэта мы Лепельскі цяпер, а там – адны лясы, балоты такія. Дык там накапілася гэтых салдацікаў поўна і арганізавалі парцізаншчыну. А каб ён, немец гэты, гэтых пленных не стрэляў, ён ба аж у Маскву лёгенька зашоў бы і не было б гэтага – ні парцізан, ні ўбійства (Лепельскі р-н)[8] (PEZ, p. 249).

The illusions about the German army were held in the western areas of the Vitebsk region (Belarus) for a short time, because, as B. Chiari noted, 'the fact that the Communist terror and Sovietization was replaced by an expansion of violence to a degree unheard of before should have been clear by summer 1941' (2008, p. 65). This is confirmed in the 'oral history' records which clearly indicate an essential evolution of the opinions on the German military.

We were afraid of them. Me and my mom, we didn't say a word. Nothing. And they would shoot a chicken with a pistol and take it away. That was it! God forbid, God forbid! (Beshankovitsky district).

7 At that moment, the Germans would not shoot these prisoners... one man bent down on the road to drink some water, and the German – crack! – killed him. Another bent down, and crack! I was 16 at the time.. and my brother was at war. Everyone came to look who had been killed in the war. The German drove prisoners, and there were addresses in their in trousers pockets. Soldiers had such a tube with their street address. We would approach them and look. 'Ay,' one would say, 'not mine.' Where did he come from? He's not alive, he bled to death. One lies here, another one there. These tubes were collected along the big road, handfuls of them (Lepelsky district).

8 The Germans just started to kill (the prisoners), so they thought for a second and ran into the forest. They started shooting, they shot one and five would run into the forest, into the forest. Only where the road was near the forest, they would run again into the woods. And in our Ushatsky district, now Lepelsky, there's nothing but woods, swamps perhaps. So there were a lot of such soldiers and they organised guerilla departments. And if he, this German, did not shoot these prisoners, he would go to Moscow lightly, with no partisans, no murder (Lepelsky district).

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

> Дык вот я помню, як у 41-м гаду мы з папам пайшлі глядзець. Ну мне было сколька, ну 4 гады, і мы сядзім так на скамеечках, а шоў абоз сюда, на Полацк да нас. Немцы, ну, фуры такія ішлі крытыя, ну там можа прадукты вязлі... Помню, едзіць легкавая. Ну, ужо едзіць афіцэр, там ужо не знаю, якое там званне ў яго было. Афіцэр быў і ўжо ўгашчаў мяне канфетамі. Ну, дык гэта было первае, первае. Гэта так мне запомніліся первыя немцы. А патом ужо былі, Божа мой! Патом ужо было тут у нашай местнасці, яны не ўспелі тут папаліць, ну яны ж прыхадзілі, усё грабілі, яны ж не счыталісь ні з чым… Бралі, што ім нравілася. Ну, в обшчэм, грабілі і ўсё (Шаркаўшчынскі р-н)[9] (VOV, p. 307).

The real shock for the local population was caused by German punitive actions against the local Jews. It should be emphasised that in the memories of the Belarusian peasants, it is not the eradication of some abstract category of citizens, but old friends and neighbours with whom they had had good relations for a long time.

> Ані кажнага падазрывалі немцы, кто вот чорныя воласы. Абычна людзі панімалі, то лі перекрашываліс, то лі скрываліс куды… Ну, ані схаваліс, зналі, што немцы лютуюць над яўэрэямі, хавалі людзі. А вот жэншчына гэта маладая, што была з Ленінграда, както там не ўспела скрыцца. Так яны прывязалі к легкавушкі сваей і таскалі па дзярэўні. (Бешанковіцкі р-н)[10] (FAPDU, 3).

> А яўрэі ў Кублічах жылі, я нічога пра іх не знаю. Расстрэльвалі ж іх, бедных. Даже вучыцель такі ў мяне быў, у школу мы хадзілі, ён учыцелям па нямецкаму быў, і таго расстрэлялі. Ну, яўрэяў, немцы ж гэту нацыю не любілі. Яны ж не толькі ў нас парасстрэльвалі, яны ж ўсюды пасабралі. Заваявалі. Парасстрэльвалі. Яны ж нявінныя. Яўрэі ж нявінныя людзі. Я ў школу хадзіла, там хлопцы і дзяўчаты вучыліся. Яны ж ня ўрэдныя, ніякія, як і мы ўсе (Ушацкі р-н)[11] (VOV, c. 304).

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[9] I remember when my dad and I went to watch them in ’41. How old was I, well, 4 years old, and we were sitting on benches, and the convoy was coming here to Polatsk, to us. The Germans, well, the wagons were covered, there may have been some goods... I remember a car coming. An officer, I do not know what rank. The officer came and gave me some sweets. Well, that was the first time. This is how I remember the first Germans. And then, my God! Then they were already here in our district, they did not manage to burn everything here. They came, all plundered, they did not hold anything sacred... They took what they wanted. Just robbed and all that (Sharkavshchynsky district).

[10] They, the Germans, suspected everybody who had black hair. Usually people, you know, either died or disappeared somewhere ... Well, they hid, they knew the Germans were raging against the Jews, people hid. But a woman, young woman from Leningrad, somehow did not manage to escape. So they tied her to their car and dragged around the village. (Beshankovitsky district).

[11] And the Jews lived in Kublichy, I know nothing about them. Poor people, got shot. I even had a teacher like that, we went to school, he was a teacher of German, and he was shot. Well, the Jews, the Germans did not like this nation. They shot at us everywhere they gathered. They shot

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

At the same time, it cannot be said that the image of the German soldier in the world image of the rural population of Belarus was unambiguous. Contrasted with the local and personal experience of the respondents, he generalised nomination of enemies as 'Germans' largely disintegrates and is concretised. In the concept framework regarding the 'stranger' in the guise of the 'enemy', the extremely negative pole was occupied by the notion of various punitive military detachments whose representatives participated directly in the criminal acts of mass destruction of civilians and objectively embodied the ideas of extraordinary cruelty, death, and annihilation.

> Дзярэўня гарэла, скока разоў гарэла. Прыйдуць немцы, спалюць. Убівалі людзей, стралялі, падпалівалі. У баню загонюць, автаматам дадуць, а потым саломы нанясуць, падпалюць, закрыюць дзверы (Докшыцкі р-н).
>
> Паджыгалі. Власаўцы не, власаўцы не зжыгалі, немцы зжыгалі тока, як адступалі. Людзі ўспевалі ў лес, хто-куда, хто-дзе мог і як адзе пріхадзілася. Вот Асташева, там немцы сагналі людзей, сто дваццаць чалавек і іх сажглі ў Асташеве, загналі ў хаты ці сараі, або ў баню і сажглі хаты, і іх ў хаце спалілі (Лёзненскі р-н).
>
> Ай, прышлі туды на гару страляць нас, карацельныя немцы. А такія ў іх на шапках карацельныя чарапы, зубы там. І гаворыць: „Русь капут, Русь капут!". І гэтых там пастралялі, дзевочка дажа прыехала з Ленінграда, Зоя, к бабушке. А валоскі былі падстрыжаны, камсамолка. Тут як далі с аўтамата, дык і на кусочкі дзевачку (Расонскі р-н)[12] (VOV, p. 262, 283, 297).

However, as demonstrated in the memories, not all German soldiers were cynical and soulless 'screws' in the ruthless Nazi machine of obliteration and submission. Manifestations of humanism and ordinary benevolence on the part of the soldiers of the German army were a taboo topic in the Soviet historiography. The German rather embodied 'a symbol of evil, whose core of ethnic portrait was cruelty to the point of sadism, anger and violence against the Soviet people...' (Krynko, 2005, p. 242). In the

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at innocent people. Jews are innocent people. I went to school with Jewish children. They are not harmful, no, just like us all (Ushatsky district).

[12] The village burned, I don't know how many times it burned. Germans would come and burn it down. People were killed, shot, set on fire. Put in a bathhouse with doors closed and set on fire (Dokshytsky district).
Burned. Not Vlasov, though. Vlasov did not burn, the Germans burned only for fun. People managed to flee into the woods, wherever and however they could. The Germans drove a hundred and twenty people to Astasheva and burned them, they put them into houses or sheds or in the bathhouses and set them on fire, and they burned inside (Lyozensky district).
Oh, the Germans came to punish us, they came there on the mountain to shoot us. And they had those skulls and teeth on their hats. 'Russia kaput, Russia kaput!', they shouted. And those people were shot there, one girl, Zoya, a komsomolka, came from Leningrad to see her grandmother. And they cut her hair. And they fired a machine gun and shot the girl to pieces (Rassonsky district).

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

memory of Belarusian peasants who survived the horror of war and occupation, the humane actions of German soldiers, which contradicted not only the Nazi ideology, but also the Wehrmacht army regulations, are evaluated extremely highly.

> Былі немцы ўсякія. Калі б знала імя немца, я напісала б благадарнасць родственнікам у Германію. Немец майго бацьку вывеў із плену. Вывеў з плену і адправіў у Бабруйску за горад. У пляну быў, а ён яго вывеў і ўгаварваў узяць камарада, ета друг, і завёў пад ружжом за горад, выстряліў уверх два раза і адправіў. Во, які немец! (Бешанковіцкі р-н)[13] (VOV, p. 211).

Manifestations of humanism on the part of the Germans in the most critical situations, for example during the punitive expeditions into the guerrilla zones, where destruction of civilians reached a massive scale, was perceived extremely emotionally and recorded vividly in the personal memory.

> Ну, парцізаны сказалі, што… спасайцеся гдзе-куда. Зашлі мы, у нас у лесе нейкая стаяла ілі баня, ілі вот такі акоп выкапаны. І мы там сядзелі… І там у аснаўном былі і жэншчыны старые, ну і дзеці… Як зазвінела акно! Такое вот ці з вінтоўкі, ці з аўтамата ў акно, і асвяцілі фанарыкам. І крычалі што: ‘ Парцізан, вылезай!” Ну, тут крык, сталі плакаць, жэншчыны гэта старыя сталі плакаць. Дзеці праснуліся. Нам жа тожа страх быў… І тады зашло тры немца, адзін сеў на парог. Усе палажылі гэта руж’і свае, дасталі хлеб, парэзалі, пасчыталі сколькі нас і каждаму рабёнку кусочак хлеба і масла памазалі. Ну і сталі раздаваць. Мы ўсе сядзім, баімся ж есьці браць. Тады яны панялі, што гэта мы баімся есьці. Ну, нам страшна было. Яны тады самі атрэзалі з гэтага хлеба, масла з гэтага парэзалі самі з’елі і сказалі на ломаным рускім ці беларускім, што есьці ня бойцеся. Мы з радасцю з’елі гэты хлеб, бабы нашы старэнькія, цалавалі гэтых салдат, што адзін заплакаў... І сказаў: „Мы ідзём, мы прайдзём. А вот што дальшэ за намі будуць – ухадзіце” (Лепельскі р-н)[14] (VOV, p. 251).

[13] There were all kinds of Germans. If I knew the name of some, I would write thank-you letters to their relatives in Germany. One German rescued my father from captivity. He freed him in Babruisk and sent him to the city. My dad was a prisoner, and he led him out and convinced his camarade that my dad was an ally, and led him under his arm outside the city, fired twice and sent him away. What a German! (Beshankovitsky district).

[14] Well, the guerrillas said... flee wherever you can. We ran to find some forest shacks or bathhouses, or trenches. And we sat there... And there were mainly old women and children... The window smashed so loud! Someone shot it with a rifle or a machine gun and lit a flashlight. And shouted, ‘Guerrilla, get out!’ There was a cry, they began to cry, the old women began to cry. Children awakened. We were terrified, too… And then three Germans came, one sat in the doorway. Everybody put down their guns, took out some bread, cut it, counted us and gave each child a piece of bread with butter. We were all sitting, afraid to take food from them. Then they realised that we were afraid to eat. Well, we were scared, of course. So they cut some of that bread, put butter on it and ate it themselves, and said to us, in broken Russian or Belarusian, not to be afraid. So we ate

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

The peculiarity of the eastern districts of Vitebsk region, which were part of the rear zone of army group 'Center', was the placement of a large number of front-line units in the settlements. In this case, when German soldiers and officers lived under the same roof with Belarusian peasants, mutual contacts were much more dense and, as a rule, sincere. It should be noted that the vast majority of positive references to the soldiers of the enemy army during the occupation concerns the German 'front-line soldiers'. A similar pattern was revealed by American researchers immediately after the war, who tested 1,000 Russian (Soviet) displaced persons who survived the German occupation. 'On the question of who behaved in the best way, 545 people spoke for front-line soldiers, 162 – for civilians, 69 – for garrison troops and only 10 – for members of the SS and SD' (Krynko, 2005, p. 339).

Probably, in a psychological situation of uncertainty and fear of tomorrow (for a soldier, sending to the front could mean death) for soldiers of mature age that left their loved ones and had no guarantees of return to them, in a simple Belarusian house, the illusion of 'peaceful life' was created with the transfer of their human care to the family, in which the war also took a husband and a father.

> І ў нашай хаце было дзвеннаццаць немцаў. Адзін афіцэр. <…> А яны былі гэтыя немцы шаферня. І вот как поўзаў я і з адным немцам тры месяцы еў я з аднаго кацялка. А ў яго тры было кіндэры. І нас тры было, у мяне дзве сястры і я…І патом, значыць, яго ставілі днявальным, і ён завець мяне і матку. А мне ўжо быў трынаццаты год, трынаццаць ці чатырнаццаць. А ў афіцэра была эта самая радіостанцыя, радіва было, і вот ён лавіў песню. А там Левітан: „Бейце фашыстаў!" Ён круціў, круціў і дакруціў эта: „Ой гармонь, мая гармонь, залатыя планкі, парэнь девушку дамой праважаў з гулянкі". Эту песню: „Тока сцежка каратка". А матка заплакала і я заплакаў. Вы панімаеце, што стала, слёзы пацяклі ў нас, мы ж не чулі гэтыя радзіва стока ужэ врэмені, і нашых песен. Так арганізм скаланула, што мама заплакала і я... Ён глянуў і гаворыць: у мяне тры кіндэры, мне вайна не нада. Гітлера і Сталіна нада во так во вот (праводзіць рабром далоні па горлу) (Бешанковіцкі р-н)[15] (VOV, pp. 214–215).

that bread gladly, the old women kissed these soldiers, one of them cried... And they said, 'We're going now, but we'll come back. If anyone else comes here, run away' (Lepelskiy district),

[15] And there were twelve Germans in our house. One officer. [...] And there were those Germans drivers. And here I crawled and I ate from one pot with one German for three months. He had three children. And there were three of us, I have two sisters and I ... And then, he was on duty, and he called me and my mother. I was thirteen, thirteen or fourteen. And the officer had this radio station, there was a radio and he was trying to catch a song. And there was the sound of Levitan: 'Beat the fascists!' So he kept twisting and turning and finally found it. 'Oh, the accordion, my accordion, gold straps, a boy followed a girl home from a party'. The song was 'Only the Path is Short.'And my mother cried and I cried. You understand, tears were flowing from our eyes, we had not heard the radio and our songs for such a long time,. My body shook so much that my mother cried and I cried ... He looked up and said: I have three Kinder, to me war is not necessary. It is necessary to deal with Hitler and Stalin, he said (putting the edge of his hand on his throat). (Beshenkovichskiy district).

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
Data: 11/09/2026 01:00:55

Zh. Kormina and S. Shtyrkov, who made an analysis of the memories of Russian witnesses from the occupation period, noted that the stories of respondents often contain the picture of a German soldier confiding with a local peasant woman, talking about his family, showing photos of his children, and expressing personal dissatisfaction with the war, Hitler and Stalin. The latter went on to study 'the human nature of these strangers' (2005, p. 225).

Most of the positive memories of the German soldiers concern the support they provided in respect of food and medical care, primarily to children. Yet each particular case of humane behaviour of the Germans was perceived by the local people as an unusual phenomenon on the part of a deadly enemy.

> Немец стаял ва врэмя вайны. І цэлую ноч крычал этат рабёнак… Немец бярот автамат і пашол. Ані думают, што он этава малова прыстрэліт. А он пашол в лес, нарвал травы. Здзелал атвар. Матка падумала, што, значыт, этат немец атравіт малова. Аказываецца, у этава малова балел жывот. Он проста-напраста вылечыл этава рэбёнка. Патом немец паказал „рябінку" ат укуса змеі. Трава называлась „рябінка" (Верхнядзвінскі р-н)[16] (VOV, pp. 229–230).

The analysis of the respondents' memories from the period of occupation shows that the image of the German soldier in the eyes of Belarusian villagers was not unambiguous, formed primarily under the influence of personal military experience of people and not rigid ideological clichés of the Soviet period: *'my Dear, there were all sorts of Germans... those who tortured, and those who treated us well'* (Dokshytsky district) (VOV, p. 249); *'There were Germans and there were Germans. Some did nothing, and some kicked us in the ass, shouting 'vek'! and went'* (Polatsk district) (FAPDU, 4). At the same time, there were cases of humane behaviour of the Wehrmacht soldiers towards the local population, reflected in the memories of the period of occupation. However, they could not outweigh the policy of destruction and devastation carried out by the enemy army on the Belarusian territory: *'The Germans beat us and burned everything. There were some good ones, but these were rare'* (Glybotsky district) (VOV, p. 233). Against the background of numerous punitive actions and mass victims, the humane attitude of individual Wehrmacht soldiers towards Belarusian villagers was perceived by the latter as an unusual exception to the general rule, where the notion of 'German' personified a mortal threat.

Translated into English by Marharyta Svirydava

[16] The German stood in the time of war. And that child screamed all night long... The German took a machine gun and went there. They thought he was going to shoot the kid. And he went into the woods to pick some herbs. He made a decoction. The mother thought he wanted to poison the baby. It turned out, the baby had a stomach ache. He simply cured that child. Then the German showed them a 'ryabinka' from snake bites. The grass was called 'ryabinka' (Verkhnyadvinsky district).

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Bia?orutenistyczne **http://bialorutenistyka.umcs.pl**
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