

Police Tractors, Lee Harvey and No Litter

I was attempting to enter a small park outside Brest, Belarus. It was difficult just getting to the park as the people selling tickets wouldn't sell me one after looking at my passport. Eventually, I found a person who would. Then as I attempted to enter the park, I couldn't find anyone that spoke English. Fortunately, I found a Belarusian woman, Lyudmila, who had married an American and was visiting her dad. She knew English and arranged a tour for all of us.

Lyudmila told me several stories about the frustration of living in Belarus under the dictator Alexander Lukashenko. She had lived in America for a couple of years thus her Belarusian driver's license expired. The process to re-acquire a license was tedious. She needed to get approval from a doctor, psychiatrist and the government official for driver's licenses but they were on opposite sides of the city and thus approval couldn't be obtained on the same day – unless you have money and connections. The whole process to get a license could take a few weeks.



Brest is located in the western part of Belarus and visitors immediately feel the grip of Lukashenko and his style of communism. The train station has a large hammer and cycle located above the city sign of Brest. The Culture Park, facing Lenin Street, is immaculately kept as there is no litter, not even leaves on the sidewalk. This is common in Belarus as everyone has a job, including many who sweep the sidewalks and power wash the sides of buildings. The park has numerous wooden statues largely showing regular people in their daily lives. It also holds regular Sunday festivals with music, dancing, rides and a lot of drinking.

Next to the big park is Lenin Plaza with numerous references to communism. The most imposing part is a statue of Lenin himself which is located in the middle of the square.

Facing Lenin is the post office and other large government buildings all with the state flag which include the hammer and cycle. Also in the square is St. Christopher's Polish Catholic Church, which seems out of place compared to all the state references.

To the south of Lenin Plaza are a couple of museums worth a look. The Museum of Confiscated Art is a collection of smuggled goods that the state seized. Much of the art is European and religious in nature, but there is a large Asian collection as well. The Museum of Railway Technology is a collection of old Soviet trains.

Historically, the most important museum is the Brest Fortress, built in the nineteenth century. As one moves to the fortress along Masherava Prospect there is a series of statues dedicated to prominent Belarusians with captions on a red background. The main entrance is a large gate with a huge star on top of the gate and booming Communist music. After entering and passing a few tanks, the stone sculpture Thirst

portrays a desperate soldier's attempt to retrieve water from a river. Beyond this statue is another large stone statue called Valor; a large soldier's head protruding out of a rock which is etched with the hammer and cycle. Next to Valor are a large obelisk and the eternal flame.

Surrounding the statues are numerous other sites. The White Palace is where the Russian and Germans signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, ending Russian involvement in World War I. The Defense of Brest Fortress Museum gives a detailed history of the fortress. The Brest Art Museum has numerous paintings of peasant life and some crafts, including many items made of straw. The Nikalaivsky Church had an assembly line of weddings on the day I visited and it was interesting to see how Eastern Orthodox weddings were performed. The maids of honor held crowns over the bride and groom, who were also bound together at their hands and led around the alter three times.

A possible day trip from Brest is to the Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park which contains old trees and unique animals. Some of the trees are over 600 years old and takes six adults with outstretched arms to circumvent. Many trees were used for the Baltic navy fleet, but they are now preserving the forested area. Inside enclosures, one can see the zoobr, a type of European bison and a Tarpan, a small horse. The park is also where the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) agreement was signed between Belarus, Ukraine and Russia officially ending the Soviet Union.

One of my favorite Belarusian moments came after passing the area where the CIS was signed. The Belarusian woman, Lyudmila, told me she remembered seeing this on television as a young girl and remembered her father cheering in front of the television yelling, "No more Soviet Union. Get out, Russians." She translated the story to her father and her stoic father smiled, nodded his head and said "Da." The smile continued for a few minutes as he reminisced.

The capital of Belarus, Minsk, illustrates Lukashenko's need for order at a more elaborate



scale. There are numerous propaganda posters which illustrates youngsters learning, women working in factors and strong men in tanks. They are not the posters one might associate with Soviet Communism under Stalin; rather they are photos of the people of Belarus. There is also a significant police force, with some riding in police tractors which were used to tow vehicles and block intersections. Grocery

stores were monitored and it was an employee's job to stand, not sit, in front of the monitor to see if anyone was stealing any of the five liter beer or any of the food.

The numerous massive government buildings could be photographed but if one sat on their front steps they were ushered on their way by police. One can view, not visit, the KGB Headquarters, located on the main street Prospect Nezalezhnasti. The building has a creepy feel as one wonders what has happened behind its large wooden doors. All of the other countries in the Soviet Union disbanded their country's KGB when the Soviet Union disintegrated except for Belarus.

The only true opposition that is allowed is the Belarusian Popular Front. Their headquarters is difficult to find and the Academy of the Ministry of the Interior hovers next door. After actually finding the building, one must head through a long narrow hallway to see the actual headquarters. There are two small rooms, one that sells newspapers and CDs and the other a planning room with Internet access. Graffiti is an establishment that sponsors some anti-Lukashenko bands; however, it is again difficult to find and the several taxi drivers we asked never heard of the bar.

There are other sights not related to the oppressive government. The apartment building of Lee Harvey Oswald, where he lived in 1960, can be viewed but the actual apartment can not. It's just a basic apartment in a yellow building. Two parks, Janki Kupaly and Horkaba Central Children's Park, are part of a surprisingly large amount of greenery in Minsk. On the east side of Svislach River is the Island of Tears, dedicated to the soldiers killed in the Russian – Afghan War. The monument shows several black statues depicting mothers and sisters with drooping faces and sorrowful expressions, mourning the death of their loved ones. The detail in the statues' faces make for a poignant memorial.



Belarus is a strange yet interesting country. It is a country in which you will not find litter. It is a country in which you will not have any rights. It is a country in which you will not understand why. It is a country which you will like if you enjoy police tractors.