

The beginning and end of World War II

Belarus, 1944

Lesson
90 minutes

Additional
material

Diaries /
Memoirs

3 July 2020

We're celebrating the anniversary of the liberation of Minsk!

The Leonid Levin History Workshop in Minsk is celebrating the anniversary of the liberation of Minsk from Nazi occupation! It's impossible to overstate just how important this day is to all of us. It is especially significant for those who survived the harrowing years of the occupation of Belarus, imprisoned in ghettos and work camps. That day, 3rd July 1944, marked a turning point for the future of our country. As survivors of that time have said, "it was only then that life began".

To better understand their experiences, we'd like to draw your attention to two cases from the history of the Minsk Ghetto and the Maly Trostenets concentration camp.



Thanks to the liberation of Minsk, the last prisoners of the Ghetto were saved. By that point they had been hiding in the *malina* (a type of hidden underground shelter) under a half-ruined house on Sukhaya Street for 9 months. Just 13 of the 26 people there survived. When they were found, only one was able to walk unassisted. **Semen Dobin** remembered how, "over the next two months the majority of them didn't even have the strength to get out of bed". They had gone underground, hiding from certain death before the liquidation of the Minsk Ghetto in October 1943. It was only after the liberation of the city by Soviet troops on 3rd July 1944 that they were able to receive any kind of medical attention and have any hope of a long future restored.



Upon leaving the city, the Germans hid the evidence of their crimes by killing anyone who was left alive in their prison camps. Miraculously, **Nikolai Valakhanovich** escaped death in the barn of Maly Trostenets. He had been arrested by the SS for his links with the partisans. He lost an eye in the mass shooting of 29th June, but miraculously survived by pretending to be dead, ending up lying under a pile of dead bodies. Nikolai overheard the soldiers talking about their plans to burn the barn where he had been shot. He managed to get out unnoticed, while the firing squad were busy attending to a vehicle that had just arrived. He ran to the neighbouring wheat field, where he fainted, and only woke up when the barn was in flames. The next day he left the camp territory and went to a nearby village, where he was given medical assistance, food and new clothes. The liberation of Minsk saved his life. Later, he would go on to help the Extraordinary State Commission for the investigation of Nazi crimes in their investigation into the barn and the burned bodies, some of the last victims of Nazism in Minsk.

455 Words

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