

## History of Belarus

Belarus is a unique country. Its history is a little-known page in the world history. More over the Belarusians know the history of their Motherland not better than their neighbours do. But they can be proud of their past, culture and art.

Man came to these lands in the middle Palaeolithic times. But it was only in the middle of the first millennium that Slavs settled here. East-Slav tribes of Krivichi, Dregovich and Radimichi were the Belarusian people's ancestors. They settled around the Polota (a Western Dvina tributary) and were later named Polotchane. They had formed local principalities, such as those of Pinsk, Turov, Polotsk, Slutsk and Minsk by the 8th to 9th century. These all came under the general suzerainty of Kievan Rus, the first East Slavic State, beginning in the mid-9th century.

They took up honey collecting, fur hunting and agriculture. Trade developed as the Dieper was part of the «water road» from Constantinople via Kiev and Novgorod to the Baltic Sea. Trading settlements multiplied and many towns of the present-day Belarus were founded by the end of the 12th century. Polotsk and Turov first appeared in historical documents in 862 and 980 respectively, Brest —1017, Minsk in 1067.

The geographical position of the country, the development of trade attracted Dutch herring-salters, Muscovite trappers, Jewish financiers, Hungarian wine-merchants, Turkish spicers, Tatar tanners and Chinese silkmen who bought in exchange furs, dried fish, salt, linen, sailcloth, ropes, timber, tar and foodstuffs. These international contacts influenced the most distinctive features of the Belarusian national character — tolerance and hospitality.

The advantageous geographical position — on the crossroads from east to west and from north to south — more than once turned into disadvantage. Belarus was the arena of many wars, invasions and aggressions. In the 11th century the Tatar-Pfingols attacked Polotsk and Turov principalities in the east and south. In the 13th century the Crusaders invaded Belarus from the west. Sweden conquered the north of Belarus. Belarus was devastated by Russian-Polish wars (16—18th centuries), the Napoleon invasion (1812), World War I (1914—1918), the Soviet-Polish war which ended with Western Belarus ceded to Poland and the World War II and Nazi occupation (1941— 1944), the longest and the greatest fighting for freedom and independence during which Belarus lost every fourth citizen. All these tragic events slowed down but didn't stop the development of the nation. Though Belarusians belong to the East Slavic ethnic group there is a strong mixture of Baltic and Scandinavian elements in their racial, linguistic and cultural background. Belarus was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (14th century), Poland and the Russian Empire (18th century). It was a backward province where 80% of the population were illiterate. People suffered from many diseases and there was only one doctor per 7,000 patients.

The life changed for the better at the beginning of the 20th century. On January 1, 1919 the Declaration on the formation of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was adopted. In December 1922 it joined the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR) as one of its founders. On the disintegration of the USSR, Belarus proclaimed its sovereignty on July 27, 1990. In December 1991 it was one of the three Slavic republics of the former USSR to form the CIS (the Commonwealth of Independent States) with the headquarters in Minsk,

Nowadays Belarus is a country of developed industry, agriculture, science and culture. Belarusian industry produces heavy-duty trucks and tractors, large-capacity dump trucks, refrigerators, TV sets, fertilisers, meat and dairy products. They make its chief exports. Timber processing, furniture making, match and paper making, textile and clothing manufacture, food processing are the main industries for local consumption.

Most of the country has mixed crop and livestock farming with a strong emphasis on flax growing. Grain, chiefly barley, rye, oats, and potatoes are the main field crops, a large percentage of which is used for animal feed. Cattle and pig raising are also important.

Belarus is a country of well-developed science, culture and education. There is an Academy of Sciences, 37 higher educational establishments, and a lot of theatres, museums, and art galleries there.

The long history has taught Belarusians to overcome difficulties. Today they are optimistic because their historical experience makes them sure they will do their best to preserve their unique culture, language and revive industry and agriculture. But they are anxious about the future of their children after the Chernobyl catastrophe, 1986. And still they hope for the best.

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