

Larp in Kamensky forest

Anita Myhre Andersen & Erik Aarebrot

6

EDUCATION

DESIGN

SCENE

In October 2008 some 40 people gathered in the Kamensky forest outside Minsk, Belarus, to arrange and participate in the larp “1943”. This larp was the product of one and a half year of work. For many of the participants it was the first larp they had ever attended. As such, the larp was intended to serve both as an educational activity on the topic of the Second World War (WWII) *and* as a training case for a group of Belarusians on how to organize larps. We, the two article authors, participated in “1943” as the only foreigners. This article is an account of our experiences with helping, training and finally participating in this Belarusian larp. Much of the work revolved around transferring larps from the Nordic cultural context to the context of Belarus. Many larpers will probably nod in recognition when reading of the many challenges that the Belarusian larp organisers faced during their planning and implementation. In this respect, the

article might serve as a check list for organising larps: in addition, we also try to share some of the unique experiences of shaping a larps and an educational programme in an authoritarian regime.

Origins and background

“How could I know how it feels to be abused?” is a question that is frequently asked by participants of larps which aim at studying, exploring, and educating on the issue of human rights abuses. Such questions, and the discussions on approaches, techniques and strategies for optimizing larps, are the basis for Knudepunkt. Two years ago, at Knudepunkt 2007 in Denmark¹, these discussions were given a novel focal point. Prior to Knudepunkt, Tue Beck Olling raised the question of whether larps could be used as a tool for democratization in Belarus. This question generated a considerable amount of curiosity and enthusiasm in Kristin Hammerås and the two article authors, who then proceeded to ask the Knudepunkt organizers if this could be one of the themes for the 2007 congress. This evolved into the keynote theme *Why larps can change the world*. Knudepunkt invited a host of organisations to showcase and discuss how they had gone about creating educational larps, with the explicit agenda of exchanging ideas on how to organise larps within the authoritarian regime in Belarus. Knudepunkt also invited an educational NGO from Minsk that had expressed interest in larps methods. Here we must note that we have chosen not to include the names of the Belarusian organisations and people who were involved in this article. This is a precautionary measure seeing that the Belarusian political environment is not a particularly forgiving one. We will return to this later.

Knudepunkt proved to be a fruitful arena to discuss the issues of educational larps. In the final discussion and brainstorming some 30 people, all of whom had worked with different larps projects, participated in the sharing of ideas on how to create a larps in Belarus. Two years down the line, quite a few of the ideas from Knudepunkt have been realized.

¹ Seeing that “Knudepunkt” has different spelling from year to year we chose to apply the 2007 host’s spelling when discussing issues that were raised there, i.e. in this text Knudepunkt with a d, refers to the 2007 Knudepunkt in Denmark.



- 1943 – “Liquidate the bandits. If you know anything, inform the German authorities.”

Photo
Erik Aarebrot

Initial contact and project development

Inspired by the suggestions and thoughts that emerged at Knudepunkt, the question as to whether a larp could be created in Belarus became one of “how” rather than “if”. A lot of ideas were floated by different people during Knudepunkt, but perhaps most importantly the Belarusian participants were very inspired. Their main field of expertise is youth and civil courage and they saw larps as a potential new way of conveying such civic education. Initially, however, the starting-point was an agreement between the participants and the Belarusian NGO that it would be an advantage for those who were interested in the Belarusian case to visit Minsk, in order to see the country, meet the people, conduct a workshop aimed at creating larps, and lay plans for the future. After some deliberations, a group of four Norwegians decided to go to Minsk. Egil Engen, Kristin Hammerås and ourselves travelled to Minsk in the summer of 2007, in order to conduct a two-day workshop with the Belarusians.

The workshop was based on simple theatre exercises and dialogue, and was greeted with persistent enthusiasm. The first day revolved around improvisation and creative exercises aimed at mapping topics, characters and settings. The second day was dedicated to creating a mini-larp that took its cues from the first day, and that would involve all the participants. It was scripted before lunch and played in the afternoon. While we might argue that this mini-larp was of a moot quality, it did serve its main purpose, namely as a reference point for further planning. Most of the participants had never taken part in a larp, and as they discussed how we could have improved the mini-larp they also started to realize the potential pertaining to this type of activities. This recognition was brought into the planning process, and as a part of the planning it was decided that a group of the Belarusians would visit a Norwegian larp in order to deepen their understanding and develop their experience. Thanks to Margrethe Raaum, Tor Kjetil Edland, Hanne Grasmø and Egil Engen, a group from Minsk was thus invited to the Norwegian larp *Sturlaria 2*. After the visit

to Norway, the Belarusians started in earnest on the task of creating their own larp in Belarus.

The aim of the project

Creating larps usually requires extensive preparation; this is even more the case when creating a larp in an authoritarian regime. In addition, the Belarusians had the expressed vision of using the larp for educational purposes. Specifically “[t]o develop new and effective mechanisms for involving young people into civic education, civic participation and democratization processes in Belarus.” They wanted their larp to serve as an educational vessel alongside their other initiatives. Their vision of using larp methods in conjunction with the approaches they already were using prompted them to formulate their specific aims for arranging a larp in Belarus.

The objectives of the project were as follows:

1. To use the memories and material about World War II in modern civic education programs for youth in Belarus for honest revision of national and European history of the 20th century.
2. To provide a comparative analysis of similarities and differences of Belarusian and Norwegian history and reach some effects of intercultural education and understanding.
3. To conduct an analysis of civil courage phenomena and behaviour both during World War II and nowadays as examples of responsible citizens’ position for young people.
4. To develop media-pedagogic approaches for modern civic education in Belarus.
5. To share experience between Belarusian and Norwegian specialists of civic education working with young people.
6. To develop larps and role-playing as effective educational tools for working with youth in Belarus.



■ Freedom of speech in Belarus

This image is part of a campaign on Belarus carried out by the Polish Amnesty International and was found at http://socialcampaigns.blogspot.com/2008_01_01_archive.html

The project formulation was done in cooperation with two organisations from Bergen, which contributed with their experiences of using larps in an educational context. The final text stipulated to create a project articulated in three stages. In the first stage, the Belarusian organisation would visit Norway for extensive workshops on larp planning and execution, development of educational content and contextualisation of larps. In the second stage, the Belarusian organisation would challenge their members to create and execute their own larp. Finally, in the third and final stage, the results of the larp would be analysed and subsequently disseminated. To achieve all these goals, the project was envisaged to last for almost a year, in order to allow sufficient time both for the project participants to visit each other, and for the thought process on the methods to mature in Belarus.

For this discussion, it is important to keep in mind that the settings in the Nordic countries and Belarus are quite different, both when it comes to the regime and to the experience with organizing larps. While larp has existed for about 20 years in the Nordic countries, it has been an unknown concept in Belarus. In the Nordic countries larps started out with small groups of people that combined scouting with tabletop role-playing. Using fantasy and action elements from role-playing, they changed and improved the outdoor activities of scouting. Scouting combined with role-play and simple costumes became the start of the Nordic larp movement. In these first years, larps mainly revolved around fantasy themes. The organisers created their own fantasy settings inspired by fantasy literature, films and a host of historical and mythical sources. Gradually the larp scene in the Nordic countries developed, and the first political larps in Norway emerged in 1997. Subsequently, numerous historical larps have been arranged and continue to be popular. The political and historical larps changed the view of what larps could and should be, and significantly expanded the perception that larps should only be recreational; the political larps acquired an emphasis on debating problems in our society, and the historical larps tried to recreate history as shown by historical sources and literature.



■ 1943 – Sleeping area from one of the village houses

Photo
Erik Aarebrot

Political and historical larps have blossomed on the Nordic larp scene. Such efforts pervade the entire larp scene, and many recreational larps include elements of history, societal critique or exploration of the human psychology in both their planning and execution. However, while political and historical larps have definitely made an impact, most larps are still created with the purpose of simply having a good time. Few larps are made with the exclusive purpose of education.

This, in turn, highlights the contextual difference between working in Belarus and working in the Nordic countries. While Nordic larpers enjoy the freedom to plan and execute the larps of their dreams, the Belarusians wanted to use larps to show what such dreams could look like. To state that the aim of their larp was “honest revision” of WWII within a present-day Belarus was a bold and ambitious proposition, but nonetheless an important goal in order to secure their intent of using larps as a means to improve the Belarusian society. In short, they wanted their larp to have a purpose.

	Nordic countries	Belarus
Societal context	Democratic	Autocratic dictatorship
Larp experience	20 years	Limited
Larp development	Gradual	None
Larp purpose	Mainly recreational	Educational

■ Overview of the differences between the Nordic and Belarusian larp scene at the start of the larp development

Directed larp – entertainment versus education

Most of the time, larps are intended to create a particular atmosphere, elicit a certain delight or even just some kind of respite. The Belarusian NGO wanted their larp to have a special focus on the educational application of these methods, which was reflected in the project formulation.

They wanted the project to encompass some of the ambiguities of the Belarusian society, and to leave room for the participants to reflect on their own position within this society. They intended the larp to serve as an arena for learning and reflection. In addition, they expressed the wish to create a framework for a larp that could be re-used, in the sense that they would use the same roles, setting and rules for different participants at later stages. This would ensure that the dividends of the efforts that went into creating the first larp would be multiplied over time as more participants were able to experience it.

However, given the nature of Belarusian authorities, finding a theme for the larp proved challenging. They needed a theme that could be at the same time acceptable for the authorities, and also yield possibilities for discussing how we wished our society to be.

The Second World War – as focus for historical critique and investigation

After thoughtful consideration it was decided to go for a Second World War theme. WWII fits the bill of a non-provocative theme perfectly. Belarusian authorities still treat it as the “Great war of the Fatherland”, intertwining the Soviet myth with their own modern state building. Therefore, creating a larp based on WWII would not pose a threat to the authorities as a provocative and challenging event. At the same time, it is the very myth of the WWII that makes it an interesting case to work with. Simply reading entries on WWII in Belarusian school books from different periods over the past 60 years yield a huge amount of material that is both contradictory and propagandistic. The Belarusian organisation wanted to deflate this myth by exploring the circumstances that were not perceived through the lens of the “Great war of the Fatherland”, such as the role of Polish partisans, the brutality of Soviet forces and the rampant despair of the civilian population caught between warring parties that did not consider their torment as part of the equation. These themes were at the core of how the Belarusian organisation saw the possibilities of

using WWII in an educational program to address the complexities and insecurity of the present-day situation in Belarus.

The Belarusians chose “1943” as the name for their larp, as it is a central year when delving into the uncertainties of the war. The war was still largely undecided and the population still had to relate to all the warring factions. As good fortune would have it, WWII has also been a theme that the Norwegian larp scene has acquired vast expertise on, through the *1942* and *1944* larps. The collective efforts of the organisers of these larps deserve ample appreciation for their contribution to this project, in form of inspiration to greater endeavours by their example of meticulous preparation and execution.

The final project applied for a total budget of some 400.000 DKK and this funding was allocated to the project at the end of 2007.

The build-up and the preparation for the larp

The first stage of the project started with a one-week workshop in Bergen. A core group of organisers came to Bergen to discuss and learn about different methods of larps and education. The focus for the workshop was the application of larp methods in an educational setting, with several different approaches, ranging from on-the-spot theatre performances to full-fledged larps, subsequently discussed in detail with the people who created and executed them. Special attention was given to the development of educational material and to what learning effects can be achieved when combining this with larps. In particular the long-term effects, such as heightened awareness, sustainability of learning through experience and the relationship between larp and schoolroom education were the object of discussion, both through observations and through data gathered from the various projects. In addition, there were segments on civic engagement through larps and how larp methods can be used in civic action. Furthermore, an entire day was devoted to presenting the work that had gone into creating *1942* and *1944*. Finally, a discussion on ethical matters was conducted, envisaging what possible scenarios organisers

can encounter in planning and executing an educational larp. The group of Belarusians took the experiences from the Bergen workshop with them back to Minsk and set about creating a framework for the execution of the larp.

The next stage of preparation was to gather in Vilnius for a second workshop. Vilnius was chosen for its relative good accessibility for both the Belarusian and the Norwegian groups. This workshop included two people from the Norwegian team², the core organisers from Minsk and some 20 interested youngsters that intended to prepare and participate in the larp. For this workshop the Belarusian organisers had recapped the input they had received during the first workshop; they now wanted to transfer some of their experiences to a new group of people, whom they envisaged as the key personnel in the forthcoming work. To this aim, they sought to recreate some of their own positive experiences.

From these premises, the workshop focused mainly on creating an atmosphere for creative development of content. The workshop participants were divided into three separate groups that worked with documentary, art and theatre based on the broad themes of civilian courage and WWII. The work of these groups was then presented in plenary sessions. On the basis of the content input, the Norwegian group tried to utilise some exercises that would delve into different topics of organisation, costume design and character development. While these sessions ranged from the general and creative (such as comparing historical costumes on the basis of photos from the time period) to the topical and detailed (such as listing and specifying *all* the different warring groups in Belarus during WWII), they were all organised with the purpose of giving inspiration to the participants. In many cases the Norwegian participants would emphasise different aspects of planning when asked the same question, but this was a conscious choice by the organisers, seeing that all preparations would be carried out in Minsk. It was therefore crucial that the Norwegian input would not be determining and setting a constraint on the Belarusian participants. Rather, the Norwegians should be more of a resource, a possible source of guidelines. Much of the time was therefore

² The article authors being the two Norwegians.

devoted to questions and answers, where the participants could probe whatever ideas or problems they fretted over.

As a point of discussion it can be mentioned that the Belarusian participants were as diverse, creative and engaged as any group of larpers. Nothing else was expected, but it is significant to stress this since any ideas, cues or directions we chose to share with the group were interpreted by the group. In the process they chose to heed some advice and reject other. While this was frustrating – in the sense that we felt we could not properly convey the collective wisdom of our experiences, it was also humbling to “let go” of such a project, and entrust the entire workload to these “new and inexperienced” people. In many ways, this was asking organisers *not* to do what they thrive best doing: organising. However, the entire *raison d'être* of the project rested on building the larp capacity of the Belarusian group.

Hence, the rest of the preparations were carried out in Minsk by the group of core organisers together with the interested participants. As a matter of special interest it can be mentioned that the organisers in Minsk chose to outsource a major part of the larp, specifically location and scenography. The larp called for a village setting around which the action would revolve. It was decided to rent a small 19th century housing enclave to provide the right frame. The people renting out the farm houses also provided authentic clothing, food and animals. Therefore, leasing this farm solution significantly reduced the workload of the organisers, who could then focus their attention on scripting roles, aiding participants and all the other general bits and pieces that need to fit together in a larp. Here we would also like to mention that the larp lost a fair number of organisers and participants through incidents imposed by the authorities. There is an ample amount of paranoia in the Belarusian way of government. The fact that the governmental secret service is still called KGB, some 18 years after the dissolution of the USSR, speaks volumes as to where they find their inspiration. Hence, events of any size are hard-pressed to avoid the government's glaring eye. This has a range of implications. Amongst them is the difficulty of proper gathering places (on our first visit we had to hold

our workshop in a office building during vacation days), and byzantine visa applications, both for entering and exiting Belarus (although we are told that the EU/Nordic visa regulations are not too agreeable themselves, either). Now, explaining and detailing the measures that were taken to accommodate the work with organising the larp in the Belarusian political environment lies outside the scope of our article, and can be explained more accurately by the Belarusians themselves, but it will suffice to say that this is an issue that needs certain consideration if one wishes to arrange larps in Belarus.

The larp

On the day when the larp was to be enacted, everybody got into cars and buses and drove some 3 hours out of Minsk through the seemingly endless forests of Belarus. After 3 hours we took a right turn in the middle of nowhere. This brought us on to a dirt and mud road for another half

■ 1943 - Larp scenery

Photo

Erik Aarebrot



an hour (including some local-style off-road driving) to a small group of houses in the middle of the Kamensky forest. Coming from the huff and gruff of the October Minsk, the silence of the scene was poignant: no sounds, crisp and clear air, beautiful autumn colours and a cluster of late 19th-century buildings. After a quick tour of the surroundings, in order to scout the area, the groups set about arranging their camps and positions.

The larp had four groups of roles. The villagers comprised some 20 roles and lived in the main village houses. They “controlled” the main resources of the vicinity, i.e. the housing and the food. Many of them had relations among either the Red or the Polish partisans and would help them during the night. The Germans consisted of a squad of 7. They moved into the village during the first night and occupied one of the village buildings to use as their quarters. Although they were mainly seen as a threat and as intruders into the village, the aim of the larp was partly to show the human sides of the German soldiers. The largest group of partisans were the Red partisans, who counted some 6 roles. While the Red partisans did enjoy the advantage of relations with the a number of villagers, it was the intention of the organisers to show also that the Red partisans were nevertheless at the fringe of reason during the war, causing considerable suffering to the local population. The final group was the Polish partisans. The story of the Polish partisans is by and large neglected in history-telling in Belarus, and part of the aim was to show that they were also a part of the WWII events. That is not to deny that they committed any acts of violence and cruelty. Some 5 roles were cast for the Polish partisans, who also had some relations in the village.

In addition, the participants were divided into two subgroups, according to their religious beliefs – Catholics or Orthodox – which was and still is a common scenario in Belarus. Their religious beliefs also had an influence on their status in the village, their standard of living and their attitude towards other subgroups.

As English speakers, we, the article authors, were cast in roles of English journalists who had joined up with the Polish partisans. The Polish commander addressed us in English and the rest of the troops

in Polish. The communication in and between the other groups was in Belarusian. We point out here that the members of the Polish partisans were not well versed in Polish, but that this was in fact an intended effect. Many members of the Polish partisans were recruited by Polish commanders through arguments of ancestry or association, which effectively recruited Belarusians to the Polish army. To keep up the impression of cohesion, the command language was Polish. The Belarusians had only a rough understanding of Polish, and a not insignificant amount of our time was spent drilling the troopers in addressing the commander correctly in Polish.

As the Polish partisans convened in the forest north-west of the village, our first priority became establishing a proper camp. The month of October is a unpredictable month and we wanted to set up our camp-fire and sleeping quarters before the daylight abandoned us. As night set, the camp had a hearty fire going and the first overtures of role-playing could commence. The Polish partisans convened around the camp-fire and were assigned their new Polish nicknames by the commander. Our squad consisted of “Speedy” (the commander, known for his apparent swiftness), “Whitey” (named after his blonde hair), “Comedian” (because of his keen sense of wit), “Paper” (on the basis of her close relationship to writing and reporting events) and “Little brother” (given his junior position in the group).

Commander “Speedy” set about instructing and organising his troops, and planning incursions into the village in order to secure ourselves food and water for the coming period. He included a general account of Polish history and chided both the reporters and his Belarusian troops for not knowing enough about the proud history of Poland. After this he moved over to planning the raid we would perpetrate on the village. He deemed us as having good chances on entering the village, since they were celebrating the day of the dead. This would ensure that they were all in one place and that they would have celebration food dished out and readily available. All his stories and commands were punctuated by doling out traditional partisan forest survival food; onion and garlic served on a thick

slice of pig's fat on bread, washed down with a hearty helping of vodka. Not only providing nearly excessive amounts of energy and the authentic war-time partisan breath, this also built up a direct and unequivocal motivation to rob the villagers of their – hopefully – more succulent and delicious food. At this point our group still drifted from being in-character to out-of-character without reservations.

Even though there had been clear instructions to “maintain” the character identity, i.e. be in-game as much as possible, it turned out that the concept of role integrity was a general problem. Many of the participants moved in and out of their roles, some times talking out of role, pulling out mobile phones, asking technical questions about the larp, and so on. This was made even more evident by the fact that the organisers' main means of communication was text messages. However, these lapses of performance can be readily explained by the fact that this was the first larp for all but a handful of the participants. Though they knew that they were supposed to be in-character, they had no experience in doing so for such an extended period of time. The problem was addressed and dealt with in the course of the larp, when role performance and continuation were encouraged by the organisers. This was also keenly discussed among the participants after the larp had ended.

The Polish raid of the village was successful. We returned to our camp with our pockets stuffed with stolen apples and bread. The lack of food was one of the fundamental driving forces during the war, and this was supposed to be replicated the larp. Historically, the partisans brutalized the farmers and the villagers in order to get food. Much of the historical ambiguity of the partisan heroism stems from this need to get their hands on food. However, the organisers had failed to consider an element of the Belarusian character. It seems that most young people in Belarus are well-schooled in forest life; most of the participants, anticipating a long, cold weekend in the forest had brought along plenty of food. In addition, almost all of them were skilled at picking mushrooms and other aliments from the forest.

With food more or less secured for the foreseeable near future, commander “Speedy” went about organising his insurgence. During the evening and night we received visits from “Whitey’s” relatives from the village, and eventually we got reports that a German squad had entered the village. The Nazis were played by a group of re-enactors who had exerted themselves to create authentic uniforms and haircuts. Later, in debriefing, we were told that they had also played the role of the oppressor in a convincing manner, giving a brutal and unkindly impression to the locals. Although one of the aims was to challenge the one-sided impression of the Germans, this proved difficult. Even though the Germans did try to show their human side, the natives did not want to see it and continued to have a very fixed stereotype of the German soldiers. This indicates how deeply this stereotype is rooted in the culture; even the participants themselves reported during the debriefing that they had been excessively positive to the Red partisans’ plight. As a reaction to the imposition of the Nazi regime in the village, commander “Speedy” chose to change tactics. A plan of observation and raids was adopted.

The Germans controlled the village during daytime without much resistance. The Polish partisans maintained a careful distance during daytime and, though not by our own free will, we neither encountered Germans nor Red partisans. We sneaked, crawled, observed and planned our strategies. When we could we got some sleep, maintained the fire, prepared food and thereby upheld morale and discipline. Our commander kept an impressive tempo, and there was no room for squandering time or resources.

At night-time the partisans had a more liberal reign. The Red partisans had extensive support from the villagers and managed to exploit this to their advantage. However, they did not succeed in uprooting the stereotypes that saw them as polite and servile in the meetings with the villagers. Again, the abundance of food might help explain this. The Polish partisans, on the other hand, managed to come across as more unpredictable and intimidating, at one point kidnapping two villagers in order to recruit them to the Polish partisan cause. As it turned out, this was actually a

ploy by the organisers, reintroducing in the play two participants that had been killed, but it worked well and the two were successfully introduced to the Polish partisan group.

The larp ended on Sunday, when the Nazis had finally had enough of the partisans' incursions and had achieved their main goal, i.e. keeping a set of secret documents from the partisans, moving these documents out of danger and assessing whether the villagers could be redeployed for work elsewhere. These three tasks were set for the German group at the very beginning of the larp, but also for the two groups of partisans, who were told that it was of the utmost importance to find and seize the secret documents from the Germans.

However, the partisans failed to secure the documents and, after killing some of the adversaries around the main house, the Germans gathered the locals to be taken away for transportation to Germany and burned down the house. Before marching through the woods they set the house on fire, which was technically solved by throwing in a smoke grenade.

After the larp, we gathered in the living room and for some hours debriefed on our experiences and what we had learned from them.

Lessons learned by the organisers

Larps are by definition free and unrestrained, in the sense that they are whatever the participants make them to be. This was demonstrated to the full to the organisers of "1943". They had planned a series of scenes and events that were to occur during the larp. However, they all obtained different outcomes than what was envisaged. This can be exemplified by their plans to show that the Germans were more human than they are normally pictured, and the partisans somewhat more grim. All participants were asked to consider their good and their bad traits and to portray them both during the larp. This was done in order to serve one of the major goals of the organizers: humanize the German occupation forces and differentiate the Red partisans. How the portrayal was to be carried out was largely left to the participants' own devices, but as the larp proceeded it became clear

that some of the factions did not want to, or were not capable of, portraying their bad traits. In order to facilitate the situation, the organisers decided to arrange some timed activities that would depict these participants in a worse light. The Red partisans were given instructions to be cruel and unpleasant with the villagers during one of their visits; screaming, yelling, being abusive and brutally stealing all the village food. Yet, despite such direct instruction, they did not manage to do so. Instead, they sneaked into the village during daytime and talked friendly to the villagers. When they were discovered by the Germans they had to be helped by the villagers in order to escape. This led the Germans to line up and execute three of the farmers for collaboration with the Red partisans.

This was of course not a problem in itself, but it did change some of the plans that had been made by the other player factions. Some of the women in the village had planned to ask the Germans for a dance during the afternoon, but naturally the execution created a very negative atmosphere around the Germans and as a consequence the dance was never organised. Consequently, the participants were hampered in their efforts to act out the facets of their characters and the project to humanize the German occupation forces and differentiate the Red partisans in some ways failed. This cannot and should not be attributed to any particular individual, but it does illustrate the difficulties that larp training should be able to tackle.

The fact that the local girls did not get to dance with the Germans because of the Red partisans' conduct shows that it can be difficult to provoke certain actions through sheer planning. The aim of trying to dispel the stereotypes of the Germans seen only as evil and the Red partisans seen as only decent and respectable during the war was not successfully met. The organizers wondered afterwards if it would have been better not to interfere in the game. The issue could then have been solved in different ways. If, in a prospective future game, they could for instance have given the parts of the German military leader and the leader of the red partisans to experienced and instructed players, who then could have coordinated these happenings in-game without any external help from

the organizers. By putting experienced and instructed players in key positions, the organisers would have the possibility of controlling the game more fluently. This is of course especially important in a game that aims at teaching specific knowledge.

In addition, there were some negative observations regarding how people played their roles. A number of the participants expressed frustration with what they perceived as cheating. Some players refused to act accordingly when they were shot or wounded, continuing to run, even when requested not to. Some others were refusing to take the role seriously, making jokes about present-day issues and removing the suspension of disbelief. One of the participants was so outrageous and belligerent in playing his role that the organisers choose to send him home in order to preserve the game atmosphere.

However, these examples are not representative of the feedback from the debriefing. The participants were exalted and engaged when they discussed the larp. The feedback commentaries ranged from the larp's ability to break with the stereotypes from the wartime, to the use of costumes, to the experience of living the character, but most, if not all, the problems were addressed with problem-solving points of view. A lot of emphasis was given to what larp had changed for the participants and what they discovered for themselves. Many of those who played villagers said that they now could better understand their grandparents, having had an experience of how it could be during the war. The emotions prompted during the larp were strong and realistic, an effect the participants had not fully anticipated.

A recurrent question among the participants was when there would be a new larp. It was evident that the larp process has been both rewarding and appealing. As one of the project's original goals was to "develop larps and role-playing as effective educational tools for working with youth in Belarus", one of the key missions was to establish larps as a work method. With participants evidently wanting more larps, the first step to reach this goal has been taken.

All in all, the feedback from the participants in Belarus did not differ very much from other feedback from larpers in the Nordic countries. Some ask for more focus on costumes, some on scripting roles, some on developing in-game rules, and so on. Rather more striking was how the experience of larp can be shared across borders. Obviously the political situation of Belarus makes organising more difficult, but once on site the participants lived inside the larp with the same intensity and determination as well-accustomed larpers would, in fact sometimes even more so, as the novelty of the approach triggered their imagination.

■ Overview of lessons learned

	Situation at the outset	Lessons learned
Larp experience	Limited	Character and game rules training is important for common understanding of the larp and leads to a better larp.
Larp development	None	A common goal is useful to organise work.
Larp purpose	Educational	Education <i>can</i> be entertaining. While a sombre backdrop is apt for serious topics, enthusiasm and energy can sift through even when dealing with such issues.

Conclusion

At the outset of this project there was much enthusiasm and curiosity; curiosity about the whole setting up in Belarus and enthusiasm for a project with an objective beyond enjoyment. As project participants, we can only conclude that the journey has been a challenging, invigorating and amusing one. It has been challenging in the sense that transferring and communicating our own ideas and projects across borders, both culturally, structurally and linguistically, requires more presence and improvisation than in more ordinary situations. It was invigorating to experience that collective ideas are used, rejected and improved through the process of creating the larp. Not least it has been amusing too, through all the laughs and stories we have been part of during the last year and a half. It has been absolutely remarkable to be part of a team that has put their efforts in doing something for the first time and to witness the nervousness, playfulness and creativity involved in making a larp from a spectator's perspective. It is wholly thanks to the group assembled in Minsk that the result on-site became a resounding success.

In conclusion it has to be said that the Belarusian political environment does not facilitate working with these kinds of projects, and many of the considerations we had to take have not been included in this article. Should anyone be interested in further information on these deliberations, we are available for dialogue and questions. Nonetheless, we can state that working in Belarus has been an extremely interesting and gratifying process. The people there outshine the authorities and remain a constant source of hope and optimism.