In this multilingual region, where every town’s name existed in several versions depending on which language one spoke, the spelling of places and names is always a difficult question. With the exception of names familiar in English (such as Moscow, Kiev, or Białystok), I usually use the official name that a town or province had at the particular time that I am referring to, for example Vil’na province (instead of Vilnius province) when it was part of the Russian empire, or Nowogródek province when it was part of interwar Poland. For Soviet Belarus itself, the situation is a bit trickier. Formally, the interwar republic had four state languages (Belarusian, Russian, Yiddish, and Polish), but the main languages in which residents of the republic interacted with the state were Belarusian and Russian. In the late 1930s, Moscow began to put a stronger emphasis on Russian as the lingua franca of the Soviet empire. By the time of the Second World War, Russian had become the primary language of internal party-state documents; in the postwar decades, its predominance in official and private communication further increased.

Today’s Belarus has two state languages, Belarusian and Russian. For a variety of different reasons, including a lack of state support for the Belarusian language, Russian has come to be almost the sole language of communication, at least in the cities. Still, for many people, it is no contradiction to self-define as Belarusian but to speak Russian most or all of the time, whether in private or in public. For these reasons (and because readers outside of Belarus will be more familiar with Russian than Belarusian town names, with, say, Mogilev instead of Mahilioŭ), I have chosen a pragmatic and yet hybrid approach, not quite unlike lingual reality in both Soviet Belarus and present-day Belarus. I speak of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) or, in short, of Soviet Belarus (Savetskaia Belarus’ in Belarusian) and not of Soviet Belorussia (Sovetskaia Belorussiia in Russian). I also translate the Russian belorusski into English as “Belarusian.” Otherwise, though, I use the
Russian names for towns and other geographical places. In the case of villages, I provide either the Belarusian or the Russian name, depending on the original source. The second map provides the Belarusian and Russian names of the republic’s largest towns.

In the case of personal names, I either use the one that is given in the source (which means that many Belarusian names will have been Russianized in party-state documents) or the one that the author self-identifies with. To give an example: in the case of the well-known writer Vasil’ Bykaŭ, I use his Belarusian name, as he clearly self-identified as a Belarusian who spoke and wrote in his first language. (In Soviet-era Russian-language publications, Bykaŭ’s name was often rendered as Vasil’ Bykov, in a Belarusian-Russian hybrid close to the original.) In other cases—for example, Vladimir Khartanovich, who grew up in a Belarusian-speaking village west of Minsk but published his memoirs in Russian—I decided not to Belarusianize his name, as that would have gone against his own linguistic choice and lead to confusion with the sources. For transliterations from Belarusian and Russian, I have used the Library of Congress system. All translations are my own.

A note on Soviet terms: In postwar Soviet Belarus, the oblast (voblasts’ in Belarusian, oblast’ in Russian) was the largest administrative unit below the level of the republic. It can best be translated as region. The next level down was the district (raion in both Belarusian and Russian). The Politburo (politbiuro) of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (since 1952 called the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) in Moscow represented the leadership of the Soviet Union. Its corresponding version at the level of the republic was the Buro (biuro) of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, headed by a first secretary. Subordinated to the Buro were the regional party committee (oblastnoi komitet, abbreviated obkom), the district party committee (raionnyi komitet, abbreviated raikom), and the city party committee (gorodskoi komitet, abbreviated gorkom). The Sovnarkom of the USSR (Sovet narodnykh komissarov SSSR, the Council of People’s Commissars), renamed the Council of Ministers in 1946, headed the executive branch of the Soviet party-state. Its corresponding version at the level of the republic was the Sovnarkom (since 1946, the Council of Ministers) of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Subordinated to the republic Sovnarkom were the regional executive committee (oblastnoi ispolnitel’nyi komitet, abbreviated oblishpolkom), the district executive committee (raionnyi ispolnitel’nyi komitet, abbreviated raiishpolkom), and the city executive committee (gorodskoi ispolnitel’nyi komitet, abbreviated gorishpolkom).

Over the years, the Soviet Union’s state security organs underwent many complex organizational changes and shifting divisions of tasks. In 1934, the
political police, the GPU-OGPU, was abolished and its functions transferred to the NKVD, the All-Union People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs. The NKVD was briefly divided into NKVD and NKGB in 1941, subsequently reunited, and separated again in 1943. In 1946, when the people’s commissariats were renamed ministries, the two agencies were renamed MVD and MGB. In the book, I usually specify which agency I am speaking of, but I also use the shorthand “state security organs” to refer to both NKVD/MVD and NKGB/MGB, as their tasks overlapped in practice. Following further organizational changes after Stalin’s death, from 1954 on most of their responsibilities were taken over by the newly formed Committee for State Security, best known as the KGB.
Map 1. Soviet Belarus in its post-1945 borders with some of the towns, villages, and other places that are important for this book. To this day, much of Belarus is covered in forests and marshes, but except for the Pripyat marshes and the Naliboki forest, these are not shown on the map. Map by Mike Bechthold.