

Victims of Totalitarisms – Have We Done Enough?

All of us, despite the generation gaps, we are children of the 20th century. We would wish that this period is remembered as a time of extraordinary growth, technical progress, crossing social barriers and a triumph of democracy. Nevertheless, we know perfectly well that it will not be the case. The 20th century was a time of mass murder, carried out on unprecedented scale. Most of the crimes, yet not all of them, were committed by the perpetrators adherent to one of the two totalitarian ideologies – Nazism or Communism. This period should not, however, be remembered as an era of criminals. The 20th century was the time of victims – millions of murdered and millions of those who managed to survive, yet their suffering have marked them forever.

We have met today not only to solemnly celebrate the European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Totalitarian Regimes . Our goal is also to reflect on what we have done so far for them and we can still do. We are not the first ones on this path. Already at the times of committing the crimes there were always people who tried to help the persecuted and their families, preserve the names of victims and places of executions. Lot of those brave people also became victims of repressions. Their deeds should become a source of inspiration for us.

The victims demand justice.

The first and the utmost task is to punish the perpetrators of crimes. In the case of the Nazi regime the numbers might be impressive at the first glance – thousands of criminals were convicted in numerous trials in several dozens of countries. Yet, if we compare these numbers with the scale of crimes committed and the victims we will clearly see that only a slight percentage of the criminals was punished. In the case of communist crimes the percentage is even lower. The reasons for such situation are numerous. In many cases there were no witnesses (also because, sometimes, there were all killed), the evidence had been destroyed, and few perpetrators confessed to the crimes. The tortures could exercise the rights, of which they deprived the victims. Undoubtedly it was and still is an expression of our moral superiority over them. This does not change the pain of the victims and their loved ones, when, for various formal reasons, the trial ended in acquittal, or abnormally low sentence.

We must remember that political reasons also contributed to this state of affairs. Under the circumstances of the Cold War, the former Nazi criminals often turned out to be useful for one or the other parties of the conflict. The peaceful fall of the communist system, on the other hand, together with the tens of years passing by since the commitment of the crimes, resulted in, and sometimes still results in, a belief that those crimes are not worth persecuting.

Therefore, in these circumstances it is even more important, that in many European countries the efforts to bring to justice the Nazi and communist criminals are still undertaken. Even if these trials, in most cases, do not end in imprisonment of the convicted elderly (perpetrators), they are a powerful symbol of our determination.

Mostly it is the direct perpetrators of crimes who are brought to justice, i.e. the officers of security system, of the army and the auxiliary staff. Rarely it is possible to give a sentence for the deeds of so-called “murderers at their desks” – the political principals and founders of criminal ideologies. It may result in the misleading and dangerous impression that the ideologies that led to the creation of totalitarian regimes, as well as their founding fathers are “innocent”, and that all responsibility goes to the lower-level executors. The outright exceptions are (this rule works equally for both totalitarian systems) bringing to justice the prosecutors presenting false indictments and judges convicting innocent people.

Here it should be stressed that justice requires also rehabilitation of the victims, of the executed and of the imprisoned on the basis of illegal sentences. Two models of rehabilitation were adopted when coming into terms with both totalitarian regimes. The first one is based on a single act rescinding all verdicts pronounced with accordance to particular “political” legal regulations. The second model provides for rehabilitation by means of individual proceedings, during which the victims or their relatives have to prove a particular verdict unjust. None of the models is perfect. The first one usually does not cover all the legal regulations in accordance with which the politically-motivated verdicts were pronounced, because often, in order to humiliate the opponents of the system, they were accused of alleged criminal offenses. The second model is often regarded by the victims and their relatives as humiliating and causing even more suffering. It seems that the major burden of the proceedings should be assumed by the state structures and not by the victims.

The problem of rehabilitation is related to the question of compensation. In general we must state that they are late and not satisfactory for the victims. One can say, of course, that the suffering which we are talking about today can be compensated by no damages. It is true. But is it not an easy way to escape from the problem?

The victims demand the truth

The committed crimes and illegal deeds need to be described. It is also necessary to get to know and understand the mechanisms of totalitarian systems. It is important though that the understanding does not lead to justifying, what is unfortunately sometimes the case. Getting to know the truth means also overcoming the lies about the victims, spread by the totalitarian propaganda. In the case of communist system the lies had been solidified for decades.

One might say that for satisfying such need academic community carrying out research projects in this field would be enough. Yet the scale of challenges and problems that must be investigated leads to the conclusion that there is a need for specialized institutions enjoying the state support. They are able to carry out long-lasting and systematic research. Sooner or later they were created in most of the countries that experienced the German or communist dictatorships. Lack of such institutions results in marginalization of the problem of victims as well as inability of getting to know the truth by those who survived and their relatives.

One of the basic conditions to carry out research on the history of totalitarian systems is free access to the documents produced in the times of dictatorship. The records must be available both for the researchers as well as for the victims and their relatives. Unfortunately, in recent decades the access

to the archives was not always possible, and even today not all the files created by the structures of totalitarian systems are widely available. This applies to some European countries, principally Russia. It is not only Central European problem after all. There is no single country in Europe whose citizens would not become victims of Soviet repression.

One of the major challenges for the institutions assigned to investigate the crimes committed by totalitarian regimes is to draw up list of names of the victims. Unfortunately, in most cases the task is far from completed. The victims cannot remain anonymous numbers – thousands and millions. At this aimed, after all, the perpetrators of the crimes, at ultimate dehumanization of the victims by depriving them even from their own names. Probably we will never be able to complete the list of all the victims, but as long as there is a chance to add even a single name, we should persist in our efforts.

The problem which arises in relation to strive for the truth about the crimes is the question of legal responsibility of those who deny the crimes. In several European countries denial of Holocaust or Nazi crimes is punishable. In other countries attempts to introduce such solutions have failed. There are few countries where the denial of communist crimes is also punishable. So far it was not possible to work out a common position in this matter at the forum of the Council of European Union or in the European Parliament. The disagreement in this matter results from the fact that, among others, the defending of the victims and the historical truth intersects with other values - freedom of the speech and freedom of scientific research.

The victims require remembrance

Remembrance is a multidimensional concept. One of them is a symbolic dimension. Monuments, names of streets and squares are testimony of our memory. They will remain signs to be read by our descendants. On the other hand, the memory about victims forces us to reflect on these cases when representatives of totalitarian regimes are the honored in a symbolic way, whereas sometimes they were directly responsible for the crimes. In most cases this situation relates to the communist system, nevertheless this is not only a problem of Central and Eastern Europe.

Remembrance requires also that we take care of the resting places of victims. There are still too many forgotten graves of anonymous victims. On the other hand, we still have not found the graves of many people whose names are known to us.

Remembrance has also more practical, yet vivid dimension. It is the education. Transferring knowledge about crimes of totalitarian systems to the younger generation is not easy. We have however already in our countries many great experiences in this field. It is worth to share and disseminate our best practices. We should also think about transnational projects, aimed at expanding knowledge of the totalitarian regimes and their victims on a European scale. It should be noted here that these projects aim not only at the transfer of knowledge about events, facts and people. This is largely a civic education, shaping the attitudes of young people.

Among many forms of historical education it is worth paying attention to the museums. For the last twenty years modern museums are being created in the world. By means of not previously used in such institutions forms and media they familiarize the public with the difficult truth about the totalitarian regimes and the committed crimes. Museums are no longer warehouses where dust covers the exhibits and they become important centers of education and living memory.

An important aspect is the action to preserve the experiences of the living witnesses of the history.

The reference point is of course a great program of registration of the Holocaust survivors testimonies. Witness' accounts are and will remain the best answer to the lies of those who deny the crimes.

The issue of remembrance undoubtedly gives the greatest potential for cooperation, especially in the field of education. It seems that one of the key challenges is the overcoming of existing and still distinct division of Europe. Along the former Iron Curtain, there is a new line that divides our continent –and its determinant is visible in different memory about totalitarian regimes and their victims.

These three basic values - justice, truth and remembrance are inextricably linked, neither can exist in isolation from the other two. For this reason, any attempt to act in selective and partial way is not only doomed to fail but can also cause new suffering. A similar effect may be caused by activities whose core is not to meet the needs of victims, but the political or economic calculations.

During historical, legal and political debates, we often differentiate crimes due to the circumstances of the offenses, the nature of the totalitarian system, the time and the place. But we must remember that from the perspective of the victims these differences are not visible. The mass grave always looks the same - the bones and skulls, remains of clothing, buttons, sometimes a ring or a symbol of faith, overlooked by the murderers. All victims are equal; they have the same right to justice, to truth and to remembrance.

The question posed at the very subject of my lecture is obviously rhetorical. We know that we will never do enough for victims of totalitarian systems; it is determined by the scale of atrocities and crimes. Nevertheless, such awareness cannot relieve us from continuing our efforts. We owe it to the victims of totalitarian regimes and their relatives who still demand justice, truth and remembrance. We owe it to ourselves, so that we could once submit a report of our work with a clear consciousness. Finally, we owe it to the future generations so that they can understand what seems incomprehensible and learn from the bitter legacy of the 20th century.