

THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF SOVIET TOTALITARIANISM: THE RIGHTEOUS IN AND OUTSIDE THE GULAG

Notes by "The Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide Committee"

IN BRIEF

EUROPE'S MORAL DEBT

Europe has a profound moral debt towards those who succeeded in upholding human dignity under the communist totalitarian system.

Firstly, because such people were often left alone, finding neither solidarity nor a sympathetic ear in western cultural circles, whose enthusiasm for the Soviet Union frequently blinded them to the harsh reality.

Jean Paul Sartre, for example, openly theorized that to safeguard the working classes' hopes in socialism it was better not to reveal the truth about the gulags. In the fifties, the intellectuals who did tell of their experience in the gulags, such as the writer Magarete Buber-Neumann, or those who tried to tell the world what was really going on in the soviet labour camps, such as David Rousset, were ostracized and their words given little credit.

The very few first-hand witnesses who managed to escape to Europe experienced isolation on two fronts: in the Soviet Union they were branded "enemies of the people" and were prevented from speaking out, while in the West they were accused of anticommunism (see the Kravcenko case).

Secondly, we are indebted to those who attempted to withstand the totalitarian rationale because they contributed to the gradual erosion of the communist system, multiplying and adding credence to the denunciations to the outside world about the real nature of that false and oppressive regime. If we consider the ultimate fate of these individuals, we can see that their acts of resistance were almost all performed without hope and, apparently, failed to produce any results, other than ostracism and death in extreme solitude and amid general indifference. In actual fact, however, despite only a few thousand people being involved, a *dissident* social conscience gradually did take shape and gain momentum and this constituted an upheaval which was open to prospects of change. If we think back to 1989, we see that these attempts at resistance had gradually built up a moral point of reference. Little by little, a secret groundswell of opposition developed and eventually managed to rouse people's consciences, after years of fear, connivance, complicity and hypocrisy.

One way of paying our debt to these people is by remembering what they did, by making an effort to gather up the traces they left behind and by handing down their teachings to the younger generations.

WHO ARE THE RIGHTEOUS?

Those who tried to rescue human dignity in those terrible circumstances can be defined as *righteous*.

This term, which identifies human behaviour of excellence in extreme situations, goes back to Jewish-Christian culture. With reference to a genocide, it was used for the first time to indicate those who rescued Jews during the Nazi persecutions.

The *Righteous* were those who had heeded the suffering of the persecuted, their fellow human beings, and had gone to their rescue even at the risk of their own lives. The Holocaust museum in Jerusalem decided to honour the gestures of those who rescued human beings from deportation and death in the gas chambers and to commemorate them for future generations by creating the *Garden of the Righteous*.

In Armenia too, the Yerevan museum, built as a memorial to the victims of the 1915 genocide, has created its own garden to honour the *righteous* for the Armenians.

Figures of this kind have no equivalent memorial in the countries of communist totalitarianism: it is difficult to find people who were able to act, in a context in which ideological brainwashing and tightly controlled terror were rife, not only in public life, but in private life too. Consciences were subjugated both by seductive means and with weapons of repression: on the one hand, the use of ideology as a deceptive instrument of cultural hegemony, on the other the unscrupulous use of terror as the ultimate guarantee against all forms of opposition.

Faced with the concentric forms of blackmail at work all around them, those who resisted had a hard job preventing others from being damaged by their efforts. Support for one's fellows was hardly ever direct or quantifiable. It cannot be said that there were neither rescuers nor rescued under soviet totalitarianism like there were during the Holocaust, but the mechanism was effectively triggered when someone managed to withstand the blackmail of power and not give in to corruption, when they refused to become links in the chain of violence perpetrated against their fellows. If a slogan could be found to distinguish between the righteous against the genocides of Jews and Armenians and the righteous against the gulags, we could say that the former rescued the persecuted in order to feel that they were still men worthy of that name, while the latter had to save themselves and their own dignity first and foremost, in order not to get caught up in the wheels of evil.

As Varlam Shalamov testified with his life and his literary works, Good in the gulags was not a value to be affirmed for its own sake, as a man's positive relationship with his fellows; Good basically consisted of refraining from doing or refusing to do anything that could harm a fellow human in order to gain an advantage for oneself.

With a singularly emblematic phrase, Shalamov turned to his jailors and yelled "No, you shall not have my soul".

Unfortunately, this particular human experience has still not been sufficiently documented; those who resisted Evil in soviet society deserve a memorial like the garden in Jerusalem, where a tree has been planted for every person known to have performed a Good deed during the Holocaust.

THE AIMS OF THE CONFERENCE

Who were the *righteous* in the soviet totalitarian state? Which mechanisms were used to withstand Evil in and outside the gulags in totalitarian society? Were margins of choice open to people, despite the repression, the camps and the extreme solitude in which they found themselves?

These are the questions we would like to answer in organizing an international conference, with the presence of European experts, researchers from Russia and from central and eastern European countries, and surviving witnesses of that era.

An initial element of analysis and acknowledgement concerns the people who tried to uphold truth in the face of the illusions and pervasive lies that characterized the totalitarian system.

Worthy of remembrance are the experiences of intellectuals and politicians who tried to inform the West about the reality of the repression and found themselves up against the incredulity and hostility of progressive circles.

The battles fought by people such as Rousset, Silone and Buber-Neumann now need to be re-appraised in a new light. Today, those who tried in vain to warn western political circles about the genocide of the Jews, such as Jan Karski, the messenger of Polish resistance movement, are extolled as unsung heroes. This is true of Armin Wegner too, the German officer who documented and denounced the Armenian genocide to the world at large. They are all examples of extraordinary moral courage and responsibility.

But the first people to reveal the horrors of the gulags, when the world was still labouring under the illusions of soviet power, have still not received the consideration they deserve.

Even more significant are those who dared to speak out within the communist system and who paid in person for trying to expose the deception lurking behind the false image of justice and democracy of totalitarian power.

A few great stories of dissidents and men of culture – from Andreij Sacharov to the Hungarian Istvan Bibo and the Czech Vaclav Havel – are well-known, but the thousands of people who ended up in the gulags not because they had made a political stand, but because they had expressed doubts about the efficiency of their factory, about the workings of the local administration or about the privileges of the party big-wigs, have never been justly acknowledged.

It is important to analyze how the politicians, militants and communist intellectuals, originally enthralled by the ideology, then managed to discern Evil and make a public stand, at the risk of losing not only their social status, but also their very lives. Such people, who often lived on a razor's edge of ambiguity, found the tremendous courage to actually do something, despite their creed.

Many of them became famous, like the writer Vasily Grossman, author of the novel *Life and Fate*, in which he compares soviet power to that of the Nazis and makes a strong self-criticism about his own past as a "slave" of the regime. Others, such as the Italian communist activist Edmondo Peluso, who paid with his life for refusing to confess and accuse others, have not received the recognition they deserve.

It is often forgotten that under communist totalitarianism Good was often affirmed within a vast grey area, in men who passed suddenly from situations of privilege to the status of victims.

Family, love and friendship were undermined by soviet power. Communism struck its opponents along with their families, required relations to repudiate their own kin if they were considered "enemies of the people", and expected party members to renounce their loved ones, if these were not considered politically correct. In such a climate, it was almost normal for those who ended up in the gulags to lose the love of the people they held most dear or for those aiming for a career in the party to be prepared to report their own friends and relations, if the revolution so required.

Moreover, those who managed to uphold the values of love and friendship often paid in person and deserve to be remembered, people like Elena Bonner, Sacharov's wife

who never left the scientist's side, or Nadezda Jakovlevna, wife of the poet Osip Mandel'stam, who fought a strenuous battle in defence of her husband.

What chances were there of upholding human dignity in the gulags, where the regime often encouraged ruthless competition among victims, where one prisoner's survival jeopardized the existence of one of his fellows?

For the time being, a partial answer to these questions can be found in literature, in particular in the works of Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn, Razgon and Herling. These writers tell of numerous episodes in which prisoners in the labour camps were forced to choose between an isolation cell, in which they often died, or reporting a fellow worker to their jailors as an "enemy of the people"; or to opt for "climbing" the social ladder of the gulag in order to obtain better living conditions, at the price of becoming their brothers' keepers, or to carry on as simple convicts.

For the prisoners, even defending their own bodies became an option. There were those who preferred to mutilate themselves in an attempt to get out of the harshest jobs, in freezing temperatures, or others who subjected themselves to backbreaking labour, which reduced them to a state of exhaustion, rather than accept a partial suicide.

These were the extreme and desperate ethical dilemmas that the detainees were forced to face in the gulags, where, as Primo Levi already pointed out as regards the Nazi lagers, the best people normally got the worst of it.

It will be difficult to reconstruct the story of millions of victims who vanished in the soviet re-education camps, but by going through the archives and carefully reading memoirs of the gulags we may succeed in remembering the desperate ways in which some men tried to preserve their dignity. We shall probably never know their names, but awareness of possible forms of resistance will help us to keep their memory alive and strong.

This too is a way in which we can express our gratitude for what they did. This is the mission of remembrance.