

Memory and Narratives about the Victims of the Soviet Post-WWII Totalitarian Regimes from 1945 to 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe

This project was motivated by the need to contribute to the global community (of the Central European University which I have joined over two decades ago) the academic freedom of which has been unfairly put at risk. Equally important, guided by the feeling of gratitude to this community for its amazing intellectual diversity and capacity to produce interdisciplinary synergies, it has become possible to bring this project to its current stage from which it could be developed further.

Totalitarian past at the Central and Eastern Europe of the 20th century did not end with the victory over fascism. Totalitarian crimes of the Soviet regime were taking place across CEE until 1989 and its consequences have not been fully acknowledged in any of the CEE states leaving those who had been carrying responsibility for the repressions of civil population not only unaware of their unhuman deeds and unpunished, but free to monopolize power, form corrupted industrial elites in post-1989 independent CEE states and deny the principles of transitional justice in order to implement the processes leading to the reconciliation of the totalitarian past and allowing victims to heal its wounds thus adhering to the fundamental principles of the modern democracies.

Emotional scars are often carried for very long suppressing the individual's emotional psychological, civic and spiritual development leading to individual's and groups' further harming themselves or multiple those around them.

There are multiple factors involved in the transformation from hurt, wounded and traumatized to **healed, empowered and secure**.

One of the cornerstone elements of human security is the ability to overcome traumatic past transgenerationally and build a resilient community and family where human dignity is front and center for each individual. When **humiliation and dehumanization** tactics are

employed victims are created and wounds and trauma not transformed is transferred.

How could we heal trauma and wounds instilled deep within the psyche of individual and even within whole communities? Acknowledgement is considered to be the major step towards reconciliation helping not only individuals and families but also nations to heal. Acknowledgement is also a major step towards honesty and honest conversation which leads to building and **restoring trust**, and with its help we must find here how to develop ways to heal the wounded so that we break the cycles of oppression, violence and mistrust and transform victims into victors and leaders. This project aims to contribute to this purpose.

Sadly, even with acknowledgment individuals, groups or nations may recognize or memorialize the historical wounds and become trapped in victim mentality only to justify revenge or wrongdoing against the new groups of victims. The example of it is the events of 9/11 when instead of acknowledging a loss so that greater understanding and **introspection** can occur, the victim narrative could be used by the ones suffered from them to maintain a certain degree of control. Especially when those who are victims are already in position of power like the United States and exploit their victimhood status for justifying attacks on countries like Iraq and Afghanistan post 9/11. Therefore, it is important to develop media literacy among people living in the states which use state narratives for manipulative purposes.

Theoretical components of the project include interpretative analysis of causal relations in socio-historical context (how state's justice-seeking and truth-establishing process determine its respective external and social policies) with its influence over people's identities, and an interpretative methodology in respect to the narrated experiences of the individual victims.

The social groups of the project include repressed and deported national minorities, women and children, prisoners interned into psychiatric hospitals, intellectuals and resistance movement leaders from the former Soviet Union, Visegrad countries, Bulgaria and the former GDR. The rehabilitation of these social groups was one of the most silenced and avoided subjects, and I look at the ways in which silencing took place in every country and analyze reactions of multiple stakeholders on non-

recognition and non-rehabilitation of the victims during and after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Taken into account the project's theme and interweaving the above mentioned theories into the respective parts of the project's canvas while linking them all with the modern problems of migration and the negative impact the technology factor plays in reconciliation of totalitarian past, professional journalism and reducing radicalisation, the OSA research for the project was focused on the materials consisting of background information, documents related to the personal and professional life of the victims before, during and after persecution and subsequent repression, documentation related to the functioning of the surveillance repressive system, materials from underground press related to the victims and their work as well as to the role of the underground media and Western stations in the repressed victims' personal and collective fighting against human rights 'violation. This range of resources and materials covering the periods of 1945-1989 and from 1989 onwards has been combined with the books written and diaries published by the repressed intellectuals and opposition movement leaders.

The books and diaries published by intellectuals were important for observing the changes that took place in the cities and villages across CEE, in the minds of the repressed victims during their imprisonment term; they reveal how relative understanding of the totalitarian regime by its victims and opposition fighters changed with the development of the opposition movement, how those of the repressed who had also survived WWII reflect on the human rights violations and the changes brought by the reactive measures of the totalitarian machine in response to the achievements and failures of the opposition movements, persecution of their intellectual activities and banning their publications and the right to exercise their professions, limitations regarding the freedom of the persecuted intellectuals to live abroad where they could continue their professional life and publish their works uncensored; what sources of moral strength helped them to support their arrested colleagues, survive intimidations of the surveillance machine with the sophisticated system of secret agents and informers, moral degradation and destruction of human values accompanying totalitarian mentality implemented through propaganda and coercion mechanisms, corruption, imposition of martial order, recurring food shortages, employment of conspiracy theories of anti-semitic states aimed at destroying opposition

movements; they explain how the relationships with their counterparts from the CEE neighbouring states with the textbook's histories falsified according to the taste of the respective communist elite and the absence of any self-critical introspection on behalf of those in power were evolving.

Studying the experiences of repressed and deported women from CEE countries namely – Visegrad, Ukraine, Baltic countries and Russia, is of importance in the context of supporting women's rights and encouraging women whose families were victimized in GULAGs to speak about their traumatized past in their families and communities. Their voices will correct the problem of under-represented and under-researched personal accounts of the repressed women during the communist regime. In particular, my research project focuses on the common accusations used by the legal system of the Soviet repressive machine to proclaim women Soviet traitors and enemies of the state, multimedial materials testifying social guilt of the women whose family members were repressed, the geography of their forced deportation before and after repressions, experiences of physical and sexual violence, tortures and psychological humiliation in the forced labour camps using the example of the Kengir camp. The materials revealing socio-economic discrimination of women who were released and relentlessly intimidated by the Soviet propagandistic machine with its key messages imposed and deeply embedded in the minds of the local communities to which the female prisoners were returning. At the same time, the project examines the formats and the ways employed by the female victims of Gulag in order to resist the totalitarian system, state propagandas, survive the dehumanization and slave labor in prisons, defend their rights and those of their families, protect their husband's intellectual works. It covers the stories of the women who never knew the fate of their families, women who were forced to silence their feelings and deprived of their rights to know, women defending their rights and opposing Soviet propagandas by all means, women trying to save cultural heritage of their repressed husbands. There are more and more reasons for which the research of women-victims of totalitarian Soviet past is important in modern CEE. In case of modern Russia, for example, where only a small percentage of population knows about totalitarian crimes and the state narrative about the Soviet traditional female holiday praises women while not mentioning any of the mass totalitarian crimes committed against women by the Soviet state, where major Soviet totalitarian crimes committed in CEE

states such as 1956 and 1968 invasions in Visegrad countries have not been accepted, included in education, while political persecutions and state propagandas remain usual state instruments, it would be crucial to include a study of the female victims of the Soviet regime in citizenship and cultural education to oppose the above mentioned trends, raise public awareness on silencing totalitarian Soviet past and support human rights of women and incomplete transitional justice processes.

In the modern-day Baltic States and Visegrad countries, the research project materials articulating Soviet crimes against people living in the territories of these EU member-countries could help raise civic awareness about non-existence of information about major Soviet crimes like 1968 and 1956 military invasions different from Soviet style propaganda which had been created 50-60 years ago in Russian education and state-supported media discourses. Such awareness will support resistance to Russian propagandistic discourses spread throughout the region by stressing impossibility of silencing Soviet crimes and the importance of knowing their real dimensions, strengthen women's rights and mitigate increase in radicalization trends constantly heated by polarized discourses across social media networks many of which are financed by the Russian state propagandists as well. Consequently, education events studying experiences of the female victims of Soviet totalitarian crimes developed across CEE could be included in Russian education and media literacy programs. As unfortunately the incomplete rehabilitation of female victims of the Soviet repressions is present across all of the above mentioned countries, and taking into account the fact that ex-representatives of the Soviet party elites occupy leading positions and form majorities in most of the countries, the research project materials could be used as a tool for detecting and unmasking modern populist trends (across CEE) resulting in continuous human rights violations and socio-economic discrimination. This could be achieved by connecting specific populist postulates of a given state with the methods of state propaganda and public influence used in times of Soviet totalitarian crimes and condemning them.

As for Ukraine, the study of the female victims could support women's rights and equality, highlight incomplete and silenced transitional justice processes regarding the Soviet totalitarian crimes and victims and in

particular – prove that there is a strong connection between the non-transparent reforms and deteriorating socio-economic situation of people and the superficial process of decommunization and condemnation of the Soviet past in which the methods used by the state elites closely resemble the ones used during the Soviet times.

As the overall aim of the research project is promoting reconciliation and encouraging victims of the totalitarian regime to share their traumatic experiences, and as the achievement of this purpose could be complicated by multiple factors including painful memories and experiences of state persecution of and adverse public attitude towards the victims following their deportations, information revealing state surveillance mechanisms of the Cold War period could serve a factor encouraging open conversations about the human rights' violations practices by the states and its methods. Therefore the project materials include detailed records of the surveillance strategies employed by a state-member of the Eastern bloc.

To begin the process of healing at individual, community and collective levels we should uncover the way in which **impartial transitional justice** of the Soviet totalitarian system contributes to modern state identities, international and local conflicts and serves as **source of propaganda**.

To achieve this it will be useful to examine biographical narratives of the state – a source of placement of selves of people who live in it – and employ theoretical argument that states risk to lose their material or physical resources by recognizing its biographical narratives.

Therefore if regime's transition threatens the state's security via Transitional Justice policies which will have destabilizing effect on its identity, examining Soviet-era state biographical narratives of Russia and its chosen set of TJ measures will allow understanding how Russia ended up where we see it in its bilateral relations with its CEE neighbours, in its political handling of the communist past, why its approach towards memorialization of its past is limited to the glorious memories at the expense of recognition of the victims of Soviet totalitarian regime and why attempts to revisit the state's totalitarian past threaten its continuity.

As Yuriy Lotman (1990) pointed out instead of extending Russia's morality law in Russia opposes it.

The project will be useful in addressing the following issues in MEDIA by contributing to the civic awareness and media literacy education in relation to the particular social groups: mistrust in media, resulting in excessive use of the social media, where judgements are substituted for facts and no journalism standards are being adhered to, the subsequent increase in social polarization and radicalisation, rise in hate speech and violation of the freedom of speech and the right of knowing.

Furthermore, the project explores the problem of technology being an object of political judgement and its negative influence over collective trauma of the Soviet totalitarian regimes - trauma caused by significantly growing volume of transnational digital memories that serve interests of leading state powers and which devalue and divert attention from quality research and resources available in the field while contributing to clashes between social groups sharing opposite opinions. This leads to distortion in multicultural post-socialist identity formation in CEE. In general terms, in countries where Red Terror led to hundreds thousands deaths and repressions and where modern schoolbooks describe Stalin as an effective visionary leader, spread of violence and dehumanization, wide usage of Soviet repressive methods by the state, low standards of moral and ethics contribute to the credibility of the Soviet myth about Gulags being a place where enemies of the state and other dangerous elements were kept. This project, as all of the materials of the witnesses and victims it contains, aims at preventing this unacceptable state of things which is a major source of and reason for violence in modern-day post-communist CEE.

OSA Collections used in the project

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HU OSA 408 Laszlo Varga Collection on Hungarian State Security Service

HU OSA 408-6-1/2 Records of and Exhibition on the Ministry of State Security (Stasi) in Budapest

HU OSA 297 Broadcast Records of Radio Free Europe RL/RFE Field Reports

HU OSA 300-5-170 Subject Files of Dzintra Bungas

HU OSA 314-0-2 Oral history interviews with communist party officials, their relatives and dissidents
HU OSA 300-85-9 Published Samizdat
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