

The impact of World War II and foreign occupations on Latvia's population: human losses

Historians employ two paradigms to explain the human suffering in the 20th century. Firstly - war, especially World War II. Secondly – totalitarianism.

Combination of these paradigms could explain what happened, producing a single story of European history that would function equally well in different parts of this continent. Such a discourse could help prevent similar tragedies in the future. However, historical memory in Europe remains divided. A significant gap between historical narratives used in Western and Eastern Europe continues to exist. People tend to overrate their own beliefs and experiences while disregarding the grievances of others.

This reality stems from the fact that the prevailing interpretation of the past was shaped by the results of WWII. In 1996 British historian Norman Davies identified several assumptions that determine the historical narrative in Western Europe. These are known as the Allied Scheme of History which includes the following points:

1. The belief that the Atlantic community is driving the universal progress;
2. Persistent demonisation of everything German;
3. A generally benign view of Russia and the Soviet Union;
4. Assumption that the division of Europe in two unequal parts is natural.

These principles remained valid until the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine. Atrocities in the Balkans, Russian invasion of Georgia and annexation of Crimea were not met with adequate collective response. Unfortunately, the scheme may continue functioning much longer.

For example, the European Parliament has repeatedly called for a single European historical narrative and unconditional condemnation of totalitarianism – but to no avail. In 2008 the Parliament invited all EU Member States to designate August 23 as the European Day of remembrance for victims of Nazism and Stalinism.

Helas, only 13 countries in the EU have done so. The meaning of the Molotov- Ribbentrop Pact remains obscure for the majority of Europeans. Too many people believe that Germany alone started the war, and the Soviet Union should not be blamed for anything that happened between 1939 and 1945. Such ignorance allows President Putin to claim for Russia the laurels of the liberator of Europe and special rights in Ukraine or elsewhere.

This suggests that the paradigm of World War II prevails both in Western Europe and the former Soviet Union. Central European countries and the Baltic states have tried to invoke the paradigm of totalitarianism, but have succeeded only partially. Experience of these countries still has only secondary (if not tertiary) importance.

In such a situation historians promoting the Eastern European story should work even harder to explain the experience of this region to international audiences. This is what we are doing in the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia and this is the reason why I am giving this presentation today.

Let me briefly introduce my institution. Our Museum is a private institution that was established in 1993. Even though the Museum receives some support from the government, it is a non-governmental organisation pursuing the following goals:

- **Remember what happened to Latvia**, its land and its people during the Soviet and Nazi German occupations from 1940-1991;
- **Commemorate the victims** - those who were unjustly convicted and murdered, who died in foreign wars, suffered deportations and other repressions, had to flee their homeland and were scattered throughout the world;
- **Remind the whole world of the crimes committed** against the Latvian state, its land and people.

The Museum is financed predominantly by private donations. This year we moved into a reconstructed building in the very center of Riga and opened a new permanent exhibition produced at the cost of 2 million euro. We work simultaneously with domestic audiences and foreign visitors, paying equal attention to the fate of all victims regardless of their ethnicity, gender or religion.

The traumatic experience of Latvia's population is often interpreted through the prism of foreign occupation and World War II. The crimes and repressions of Nazi and Soviet totalitarian systems fit both frameworks. However, there are significant perceptual differences.

The concept of foreign occupation prevails in Latvian domestic discourse. It suggests that national independence is a synonym to security, prosperity and freedom or normality in a broad sense. Foreign occupation is the opposite. All the suffering experienced during 51 year of Soviet and Nazi rule was inflicted mostly by foreigners. Inevitably, such an approach focuses primarily on Soviet rule. After all, Communists ruled Latvia over 47 years and Nazis over only 4. Importantly, half of the contemporary population of Latvia still has personal experience and memories of Soviet reality.

It is not easy to use the concept of 50-year occupation when communicating with international audiences. Western countries never experienced Communist totalitarianism, therefore tend to associate the notion of occupation only with Nazi rule.

The concept of World War II is a much more useful tool for the purposes of cross-cultural communication. References to World War II exemplify the universality of human suffering. In addition, the press, literature, TV and cinema constantly reactivate the stories and images of that war.

The problem with WWII approach is the fact that Communist crimes and the evil nature of the Soviet system are not exposed, human suffering caused by Stalinism become seemingly marginal regardless of the actual scope of its crimes.

Let me show two short videos that interpret the history of Latvia through the prisms of foreign occupation and WWII respectively. The first one was produced by an independent American journalist, the second one by the Occupation museum. Essentially these videos cover the same story from two different angles.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PLihNoUwOs> History Hustle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5cC2nD6DUA> LOM

The Museum is working hard to reconcile these approaches in order to develop a single story of Latvia's history that could serve both domestic and international audiences.

For such a purpose we have to provide a new interpretation of human losses suffered by Latvia, following two guiding principles:

The bulk of human losses happened during World War II. Incidentally, most of the German-speaking community had to leave Latvia (and Estonia) by the end of 1939, half a year before the beginning of Soviet occupation. Less than 100 000 people were lost after the end of war as a consequence of Soviet arrests and deportations or in armed struggle between the resistance movement and Soviet security forces.

The lives of all citizens do matter regardless of their ethnicity, political convictions, gender, religion or social class. Moreover, the lives of soldiers who fell when serving with either Soviet or German armed forces are no less important than the lives of civilians.

Besides, human losses could be estimated in two different ways:

- Counting the people who perished;
- Assessing the number of individuals who had to leave the homeland against their will and could not come back – including refugees, exiles, deportees.

Of course, building hierarchies of victimhood may seem problematic in ethical terms. Nevertheless, without numbers one cannot explain what damage and suffering was inflicted on Latvia – a country with 1.95 million inhabitants in 1939.

In terms of lives lost between 1939 and 1945 the largest categories are the following:

- 85 000 citizens killed by Nazi execution squads in Latvia (at least 70 000 Latvian Jews, as well as Roma, mentally disabled and political opponents);
- 50 000 Latvian soldiers who died while serving with either German or Soviet forces;
- 30 000 Latvian civilians who were killed as a result of warfare;
- 12 000 individuals who were executed by the Soviets or perished in their captivity.

In terms of people who left during the war and could not return soon enough:

- 180 000 refugees and PoW who did not come back from the West after the war (including 45 000 German-speaking Latvians who survived the war);
- 20 000 survivors of deportations to the USSR;
- 12 000 Latvians deported to Nazi concentration camps in Germany.

The total number human losses suffered by Latvia during the war is about 400 000 – about 20 % of the pre-war population. Should one add to this almost 100 000 individuals killed or deported by the Soviets after the end of the war, the total figure of human losses under foreign occupation may exceed 500 000 – about 25 % of the pre-war population.

Of course, it is important to note that a significant number of foreigners were killed on Latvian soil as well. These included almost 25 000 Jews deported from Germany, Austria, Hungary and Bohemia. Soviet soldiers were sent to Nazi POW camps in Latvia, by 1942 their number reached 60 000. A significant part of them did not survive captivity because of hunger, disease and hard labour.

Several Nazi concentration camps were established in Latvia. None of these could be classified as extermination camp. The largest was one in Salaspils (Kurtenhof), it functioned between October 1941 and September 1944. The total number of people detained there could reach 23 000, almost 2000 inmates died in the camp.

A smaller camp functioned in Jumpravmuiža (Jungfernhof) between 1941 and 1943. It was used as detention facility for Jews deported from Germany. The total number of inmates could reach 4500 people. Some 800 of them perished in the camp, but 2000 later died elsewhere. Another camp was established in Riga (Keiserwald) in 1943, the number of prisoners reached 12 000 (including 5000 Latvian Jews relocated from Riga Ghetto). In 1943 - 1944 the survivors of these camps were transferred to Stutthof, Neungamme, Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

It is true that in 1945 also the Soviets organized concentration camps to sort civilians who had lived under Nazi occupation into those to be released and those to be prosecuted and punished. At least 100 000 civilians in Western Latvia passed through these camps, some of them perished from hunger and disease during the "filtration", many others were sent to Soviet prison camps for years.

To conclude, I would like to emphasise that the human losses inflicted by Nazi rule may indeed seem heavier than those caused by the Soviet occupation. However, it should be kept in mind that the national independence of Latvia and the norms governing a civilised society were destroyed by the Soviet occupation of 1940. For this reason 1940 is being remembered as the breaking point when normality ended and the cycle of unrestrained violence begun.

Moreover, Soviet occupation lasted for 47 years, entire generations lost freedom and human dignity, spending most of their lives under persecution, intimidation, coercion and discrimination. Therefore it is too difficult for us to accept that the Soviet Union, Russia and the Communist system are associated with the notion of liberation. For us – and many others - the liberation came only when the Soviet Union disappeared.