

Auschwitz Conference contribution

Remembering World War II and Its Meaning for Today's Youth in Russia and Latvia

11-16 August 2021

Dear friends,

Thank you very much for the invitation to this conference and for a chance to share in your experience of repentance and reconciliation. We come from Riga, Latvia, representing the Transfiguration Brotherhood, which is an informal association of Christians in the Russian Orthodox Church. Most of the brothers and sisters of the Brotherhood live in Russia, but some of us also live in different post-Soviet countries, such as Moldova, Belarus, Latvia, as well in other European countries, for instance Germany. My task today is difficult because in a very short presentation I need to talk about memory of World War II and its meaning in Russia and Latvia, countries where the history of the war developed very differently.

It is also difficult to talk about war from the Christian perspective because our warfare is different, we battle in the spiritual realm. We are called to defeat the enemy – any enemy – with a different type of weapons – by the power of love and freedom. We understand that war is evil, yet sometimes people have no choice but to fight with military weapons and then it's about choosing the lesser evil. But how do people do it and why?



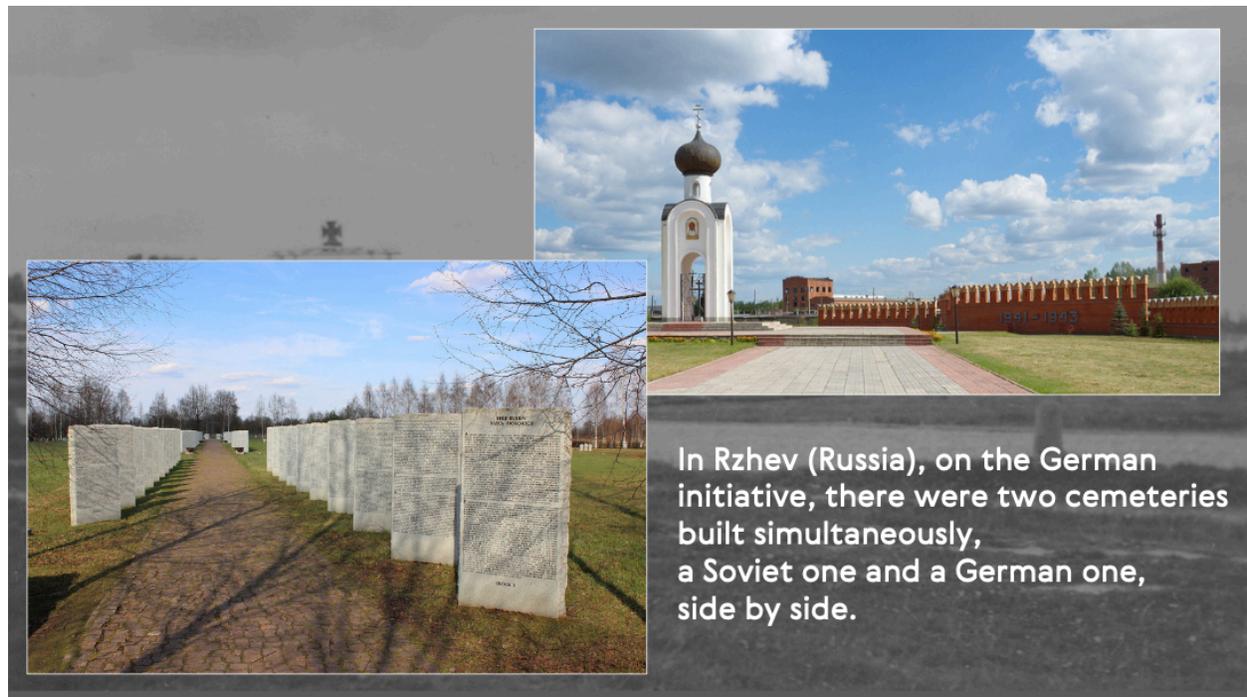
“The most horrifying thing about war is existing in a spiritual vacuum, in hideousness and vulgarity. Man stops being Human and turns into a fish on sand, thrown out of the water”.

/Nikolay Nikulin/

Nikolay Nikulin, who was a researcher in the Hermitage Museum, left a book of memoirs about the war. He had volunteered for the front right after finishing school at the age of 17, and in his words “the most horrifying thing about war is existing in a spiritual vacuum, in hideousness and

vulgarity. Man stops being Human and turns into a fish on sand, thrown out of the water”. There is still a long way to go for us before we learn to look at history honestly and speak truthfully about the war, not looking at military successes and failures, but seeing above all the human being.

World War II is a huge tragedy, a crime against humanity that has not yet been fully comprehended. We have not yet outlived its consequences, and its history is still full of blanks. Until recently, the most common approach to history in all societies was thinking and talking about it in terms of heroism. After World War II we have experienced a turning point there. For instance, monuments and memorials used to be dedicated to heroes, victors, but now the emphasis is shifting all over the world from those who were successful to the victims. It is the difficult memory of the past that is coming to the fore – memory of crimes, humiliation, suffering. In Europe, this second type of historic memory is already prevalent. In Russia, it is by no means a universal phenomenon. The first steps in this direction were taken in the early 1990s.



In Rzhev (Russia), on the German initiative, there were two cemeteries built simultaneously, a Soviet one and a German one, side by side.

Let me give you an example. The city of Rzhev in Russia is a place where there was heavy fighting during World War II with a lot of casualties on both sides. And, at the German initiative, there were two cemeteries built simultaneously in the city, a Soviet one and a German one, side by side. Initially, this was not met with understanding on the part of the local population, especially the elderly, because the wound had not yet healed.

In Russia, the official view of the history of the 20th century in general, and World War II in particular, is currently very much an ideological one. This is due to the fact there has been no official recognition and assessment of the crimes of the Soviet regime, which means that evil has not been called evil. In Latvia, there are also a number of issues with regard to the history of World War II that are not widely discussed. But the task of preserving our memory of the past and passing

it on to the next generations is always a crucial one. In this context, the role of family becomes especially important. A lot depends now on the older generation, whether they know their family history and whether they feel it as part of the history of their country.

In Russia and Latvia there are hardly any families today that have not been directly affected by the war. In many Russian families, there are family members who went to war and then went missing with nothing known about their fate to this day. Sometimes, there is not even a name because these people were not spoken of in the family. And the chances of finding at least some memorial places are almost non-existent.

In Latvia, during the Nazi occupation men were often forced to fight on the Soviet or the Nazi side not because they supported one or the other, but simply because they were drafted by whichever side, which sometimes meant that members of the same family were fighting against each other. During the Soviet occupation, it was dangerous to mention any family members who had fought in the German army.

Many aspects of the history of World War II make for a very difficult topic to discuss honestly and openly. There are a lot of conflicting points of view, a lot of things that we find hard to understand and to forgive. Yet, keeping silent about historic facts, promoting a limited point of view representing one's own people as either heroic or as victims leads to the younger generation being brought up with a false sense of patriotism. Because true patriotism is loving your fatherland and accepting its history in full, as it was, not represented in bright colours, which means that you need to know the real history.

Let me give one of many examples. This is Mednoye - a burial place for Polish citizens brought here from Ostashkovsky Concentration Camp. They were first transported to the city of Tver (Kalinin at the time) and executed in the local KGB (NKVD) prison in April-May 1940 under the so-called 'Katyn case', and then buried here. The Katyn case dealt with Polish prisoners of war whom the Communist Party decided to execute by firing squad on 5 March 1940. Ethnically, as well as Poles, some of them were Ukrainians, Belorussians and Russians. There was a total of 22 thousand Polish citizens executed in the Soviet Union under this decree, and 6,295 of them are buried here.



The Transfiguration brotherhood
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Our Brotherhood has been doing site tours of the place for 15 years now, since 2006. We make these tours open to all people, not just brothers and sisters from the Brotherhood. We seek to do everything in our power to make our history true and living, to make memory full and honest. So that young people can learn this kind of history. We raise painful issues, we try to look for answers together, knowing that we have a common Christian background and that, with God's help, we can deal with this history, we can cope with it. As Christians, we know that we live in time and space, which means living in history and being responsible for it.

In Russia, there are many graves of people shot during the repressions. The victims were representatives of all peoples. Members of the brotherhood take responsibility for the burial sites, regularly visit them with children and young people, pray, clean graves.



Dubovka. Mass Execution Site in the city of Voronezh



Levashovo. Memorial Cemetery in St. Petersburg



Kommunarka and Butovo Memorials outside Moscow

Also, we try to study family history, not just about the war, but learning about the before and the after to get a fuller picture. When we are serious about family history, we can learn facts that go against the official point of view, and this helps restore historic justice. For instance, in one family there was a man who had fought in the war, who had been decorated, was deemed a hero, and there was a lot of pride. And then, when they studied the archives, they suddenly found out that before the war that person had been involved in the repressive system, that he had been killing, destroying his own people, yet nobody ever mentioned it. When we find ourselves facing facts about our difficult past, when you find out that your relative was not a hero at all, what do you do about it? The only type of cleansing that is possible here is repentance that forms the basis for forgiveness and reconciliation.

In the current situation, when we have no consensus in post-soviet societies in relation to the history of the 20th century, there is a special role to be played by civil initiatives seeking to raise awareness and awaken people's conscience.



Memorial prayer. Riga

One such initiative of the Transfiguration Brotherhood is called Memorial Prayer. It is held annually on the 30th of October, which is a Memorial Day for the victims of Soviet repressions. We pray for all the victims of the Soviet regime in the 20th century including those who died in World War II. In Russia, the losses in World War II are enormous - 26.5 million dead people - at the front and in the rear, missing, starving to death. These countless victims - not only those who were killed at the front, but also those who suffered, who were destroyed in the occupied territories, who died in the rear, including in camps during and after the war - we need to remember and cry for their crippled, interrupted lives. On Trinity Saturday - the day when it is customary in the Russian Church to pray for the dead - members of the Transfiguration Brotherhood in different cities of Russia read the names of those killed during the World War II.

In Latvia, we have also held the Memory Prayer event for over 10 years now. In the past few years, the reading of names of Soviet victims has been taking place in the city centre in Riga, in the courtyard of the so-called Corner House, which used to be a KGB prison. Currently, it is a museum. There is a foundation which is called The Children of Siberia, which collects the memory of those who were deported from Latvia in the 1940s. Members of this initiative also join us during these prayer events. We invite everybody to take part in the reading of the names of victims, and some people bring their own lists with names of family members on them.

These lists contain not just names, but also a brief info that helps revive the person's image in our minds: his or her age, occupation, execution date and so on. This leaves a strong impression on the participants of the event. The lists and the names speak for themselves. This is the kind of truth that you cannot disbelieve, it helps you to see the scale of the tragedy. It is crucial for us that the reading is accompanied by prayer, that our memory becomes a reflection of God's memory, which

is merciful to all sufferers. Because those lists contain names of different people and not all of them are innocent victims. Sometimes – through fear or weakness – people may have found themselves involved in the crimes of the Soviet regime, which later on destroyed them together with other victims. What we don't want is to follow the motto that reflects a non-Christian approach to the tragedy, that says: we will not forget, we will not forgive. We try to make our hearts bigger, so that there is a place for everybody, and we hope that reconciliation can happen thanks to this prayer and through it. This year, we were reading the lists provided by the staff of the museum – lists of those who were killed in this very prison building during the 1940s, during World War II, when the Soviet authorities conducted punitive operations among the population of the border territories, and when the Soviets were retreating killing those whom they had had no time to deport.

What is important is that our initiative of Memory Prayer has been developing further. For instance, this year we have joined in the reading of the names of the victims of deportations in 1941 – an event that took place in different parts of Latvia on 14 June.

In the Transfiguration Brotherhood we believe that we cannot be reconciled to the evil that took place in our past, but that we need reconciliation with God and our own conscience. Which is impossible without a sober assessment of all that happened in the former Soviet countries and without recognising and naming acts of evil.

Another initiative of the Brotherhood is called the National Repentance and Revival Forum. It unites people of free will and conscience, people who want to join forces for the sake of healing and revival in our society, in our church, and in every human being.



Those who have a hope
A Forum for National
repentance and revival

Форум
Имеющие
надежду



Our Forum is an attempt to make a breakthrough in bringing about unity among people on the basis of freedom and responsible living

[The Forum has the following themes:](#)

- Gathering the People of God
- National heritage
- Living in brotherhoods and communities
- Revival of cultural, ascetic, aesthetic, and moral norms
- Liturgical revival
- Overcoming oblivion and repentance for the crimes of the 20th century.

In the Brotherhood, we have people of different ethnic backgrounds living in different countries, which makes our task even more complicated. On the post-Soviet territory different peoples have different perspectives on the historic events of the 20th century including World War II. Yet, we understand that geographically our countries are still neighbours, plus historically we have people of different ethnicities living in these countries. This means that we need to learn to live together, respecting each other's culture and traditions, developing a dialogue. This is especially onerous in the current climate, where we have so many crises – political, national, cultural, economic, crisis of human relationships.

This is why, in the 21st century, the topic of living together as good neighbours becomes important. This 'good neighbours' appeal is addressed first and foremost to the peoples of post-Soviet countries where we have a burdened past full of tragic events of the Soviet era. This common past breeds in us mistrust and lack of love, which often prevail in our relations with people of other nationalities. Insufficient knowledge of history poses a problem as well. Often, we don't know our own history and the history of neighbouring peoples, our knowledge is at best fragmented and some of it is missing altogether. Certain events of the 20th century have been distorted for

ideological reasons, which makes it difficult to get your facts straight. And historic myths create divisions rather than unite people, further complicating what is already a very difficult life.

The 20th century had an unprecedented number of crimes against humanity, and a large part of those happened on the territory of the Soviet Union. The Soviet regime was anti-human and criminal from the start, the Bolsheviks implemented a policy of terror and violence against whole nations. And while none of us want a repeat of that, we don't always know what needs to be done to avoid it. People today are often psychologically unprepared to face the truth, they are intimidated, broken. In this difficult context, we try to do our best to restore human dignity, respect and love for one's own country and nation, as well as in relation to other peoples, learning to live again as good neighbours.

To achieve that, we organise round table discussions and other meetings and seminars where we invite guests and seek to learn true history in an honest way, try to avoid error. Fr Manfred took part in one such round table talk where he shared his own experience. We understand that the hostility and lack of love that exists between different ethnicities is a consequence of the Soviet time and that this is the sort of heritage that we want to get rid of. To do this, we need to learn to distinguish between the Russian and the Soviet, we need to realise that the Russian people was specifically targeted by the Soviet system. And the World War II became the practical extermination of the Russian people after long years of famine and repression. Its extermination started from the very beginning, when the Soviet system was put in place. And at the start of World War II the Soviet terror policy started spreading further afield and reached Latvia. We understand that in the tragic events of the 20th century on the Soviet territory there is nobody who can be called wholly innocent. No nation can consider itself merely a victim. Therefore, we cannot shift or ignore our common responsibility and need to jointly find a way to reconciliation.

At one of our round table discussions, we had people from Moldova, Belarus, Latvia, and Russia talking together, and we came up with a 'prayer of good neighbours', which was then joined by people from other nations.

[Prayer of Good Neighbours.](#)

Involving young people and children in our initiatives, we hope to help them find solid basis for their own life. We help them learn true history through the best books and films that speak truthfully about the events of the past, as well as through meetings with real witnesses of the tragic events of the 20th century. We hope thus to bring them up as true patriots – people who love their country and take responsibility for it. We also hope to promote good neighbourly relations with people of other ethnic backgrounds both in our county and abroad.

Thank you all for your attention.