

Auschwitz in Russia's memory of today

Prof. Dr. Natalia Timofeva

The Second World War is an extreme experience of a dimension unprecedented in history. The central question is how this experience has influenced the feelings, perceptions and orientations not only of the war generation but also of the succeeding generations.

Neither history, nor sociology or social psychology have an answer to this question. Besides, the effect of World War II on the life of people becomes ever more evident with the time passed.

What role does World War II play in the historic memory of Russia? What do my fellow citizens know about Auschwitz, which for the whole world has become the symbol of the Nazi crime against humanity.

In the official discourse of Russia, the main symbol of memory of war and at the same time a factor of national integration is the Soviet Union's victory in the Great Patriotic War. A victory so many heroes paid for with their life.

Today there are relatively many groups in Russia which claim the right to a particular memory of war. Among them are those for whom war was a traumatic event: Eastern workers and prisoners of war, concentration camp internees of age and under age, children of soldiers and officers killed in World War II. And this list is in no way complete. Perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to an unexampled activity of representatives of the groups mentioned. Associations were formed that claimed their right to an exclusive memory of war. To put it another way, Russia as many other countries at present sees a kind of memory boom. In the context of war, the international organisation «Memorial» plays an important role. Why is the dictatorship of memory (as the French historian Pierre Nord called it) a characteristic feature of our time? Perhaps because people who are not sure of their future like to look back on the past at least in order to not forget what they once have been. But it is this slide of memory that destroys its entirety and makes it a

mosaic. Each group has a memory of its own. Those who fought at the front and lived under occupation have a different memory of war than those whose fathers had returned from war or those who do not know where their fathers were killed in war. It happens that people who claim their right to a special memory of war get militant and sometimes deny this right to other groups, especially in connection with official recognitions and the claim to higher pensions or accommodation. In present-day Russia, (war) veterans have a legitimate claim to this but not, for instance, concentration camp internees under age. The already cited historian Pierre Nora predicts the threat of a war of memory. One remedy for this is the internationalization of memory as a means to lessen the conflicts between groups resulting from different memories of war.

One example of the internationalization of memory of World War II is Auschwitz that has become both, a symbol of inhumanity and a symbol of the fight for man.

In the Soviet Union, Auschwitz was first mentioned in April 1945 in a list of concentration camps published in „Pravda“.

Professor Wassilij Peterenko, hero of the Soviet Union, took part in the liberation of Auschwitz. He reported that in January 1945 the forces of the 60th Army of the First Ukrainian Front had no specific information about Auschwitz. They had no particular instructions concerning the internees. What the soldiers and officers of the Soviet Army witnessed in Auschwitz was beyond the reach of reason, even for those men who had already gone through some years of this bloody war.

Only few people in contemporary Russia know that Auschwitz was an indispensable element of the Nazi violence and, as time went on, took a special position in the concentration camp system when it became the key place of the Holocaust. The Russian population, i.e. not only the average citizen but also scientists and journalists do not have any particular associations with Auschwitz.

I will give you some examples of the work of the Oral History Regional Centre in Voronezh. It was one of the most peculiar incidents when a staff member of the centre in a large international conference on the memory of World War II in

St. Petersburg was asked whether the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum was located in the Voronezh region.

In a historical conference at the Voronezh state university a university lecturer criticized the same staff member that the use of the German word Auschwitz was unsuitable for the Russian audience.

The regional Voronezh press called the museum sometimes Auschwitz Birkenau, sometimes Oswenbrück.

It must be mentioned that the groups composed by the Oral History Regional Centre in Voronezh are the only groups in Russia which visit the city of Oświęcim during a several days' programme that includes lectures on the history of the Auschwitz concentration camp as well as participation in seminars on the problems of memory, meetings with former prisoners, exchanges and discussions with groups from other European countries (зрит.ряд).

No tour operator in Russia offers travel programmes for tourists to the former concentration camps.

There is the danger of getting into a situation where the memory of the tragic events that claimed millions of lives is consigned to oblivion while, according to official statements, nearly 150 radical neo-fascist organisations have been founded in Russia. The rise of extremism is, among other things, due to the fact that the people have no clear idea of the Nazi policy of extermination in World War II. How could this happen in a country that made so many sacrifices for the victory over fascism?

Another important element is the fact that in Russia no comprehensive monographs neither on the history of camps in the Third Reich nor on particular concentration camps have been published so far.

The number of eye-witnesses decreases; witnesses of the times who can report on the situation in the camps, on the Nazi criminals and on the fight of prisoners for survival.

How could this happen in a country where so many fell victims of war and which did a lot for victory?

What dominates in Russia is a politicized version of history with an instrumental approach to memory disregarding all delicate aspects. The result is a dying of memory. When soldiers and officers talk about their experiences during official events they describe standard situations in a moderate language (for example: “How we gained victory, how we fought back”). Post-war generations without any collective memory face the problem of a ritualization of the war history and as a result are tired of it and sometimes even ignore the problems.

Schoolbooks are no help for the young. At the beginning of the 21st century a Russian book on history stated the following: “The concentration camps in Poland and in Germany became factories of death. The extermination programme was signed and this meant the final solution of the Jewish question”. Nothing else followed. The poor information and its impersonal character impart only formal knowledge and lead to indifference of the students.

The situation is complicated by the fact that up to now no generalizing monographs on the history of camps in the Third Reich or on individual concentration camps have been published in Russia. One exception is the monograph of L. M. Makarova „Ideology of Nazism“, issued in Syktywkar in an edition of 300 copies only. Pavel Poljan, PhD in geography, published many treatises on Auschwitz of which “At the end there was the word ... notes found in the ashes of the Auschwitz ovens” (Stern. 2009. №7), “Henchman of death. Special operations units in Oswenzim“ (Stern. 2008 №9) are particularly known.

But young people of today do not like to read thick books.

In 2010, S. W. Aristow and A. W. Konopatschenkow wrote their doctoral thesis on “Women’s concentration camp Rawensbrück (1939-1945): survival strategies of prisoners“ and “The Mauthausen concentration camp system in Nazi Germany (1939-1945): History, Structure, Resistance”. I think this is the beginning of a very important process to be continued in the research work of other scientists.

But we must hurry up. On the one hand because of the decreasing number of last eyewitnesses who are able to visualize the reality of war and in the camps which was not only marked by the Nazi crimes but also by the prisoners’ fight for

survival based on the Christian value system. On the other hand it is said that it is also possible to illustrate complicated identification problems and this would be the task of the generation which survived war. Our veterans were first taught the language to tell their stories and then they did not recognize themselves in this language which soon predominated and soon changed their role in social history.

The marginalization of the vanishing generation, socialized in the Soviet Union, will contribute to consolidate the mass culture of remembrance. It is nearly inevitable that the young people will increasingly dissociate themselves from this past event, i.e. from World War II. Only the memories of individual persons can make our society aware of the traumatic experience of Russia in World War II and afterwards. These memories can serve as a basis for criticizing contemporary wars and crimes against humanity and for complementing the history of World War II.

Why is the history of the Auschwitz concentration camp not included in the collective memory of Russia? I think for the same reason why Russia does not know much about Stukenbrock where 65 000 prisoners from the Soviet Union were buried. In spring 2011, the Oral History Regional Centre organised a meeting of Students from Voronezh with Professor Naumow Wladimir Iljitsch from Moscow. The scientist told about the tragedy of Stukenbrock and the German movement “Flowers for Stukenbrock”. The students were shocked to hear of this camp for the first time. Why does a more detailed analysis of the problems of Soviet soldiers and officers who were prisoners of war does not yet exist in Russia? The answer is obvious: the official Stalin ideology which considered captivity a shame and crime against one’s country has been predominating too long. It is no accident that exact figures of the number of Soviet prisoners in camps on the territory of the Voronezh region are not yet available. The interviews we had revealed the vast dimension of historic knowledge which exists only in the memories of the vanishing generation.

While we, the Oral History Regional Centre, were preparing a trip to Osvencim to the Auschwitz – Birkenau state museum, we quite often were asked: “What do you actually want in Osvencim? We, too, had many of such camps during war!” This

question needs no further explanation. On the one hand it reveals the ignorance of the special role of Auschwitz in the Nazi concentration camp system and on the other hand it shows that many people are not aware of the importance of educational work of which the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum forms the basis. But behind this question is a demand to study the cruel history of Nazi camps in the Voronezh region where the front line passed through in 1942-1943.

In the Voronezh region there are no more traces left of the Nazi camps. Many of the camps were only makeshifts: the prisoners were kept in holes in the ground – without any food, the prisoners did not even have a roof over their heads. The guards stood at the edge of the hole. The camp ceased to exist with the death of the prisoners. For a long time, not a word was said about it. Today, however, there is a desire and willingness to tell about it. Reasons for this are the collapse of the Soviet Union and the changes involved in Russia, the German compensation payments for Eastern workers, the creation of memorial cemeteries and individual graves for Germans, Hungarians and Italians. A thorough remembrance of relatives and fellow citizens on the part of the descendants of those who in 1942 came to Voronezh to fight with arms promotes an interest of Russians in their country's past. Our project "War and the occupation of the city and region of Voronezh in the individual and collective memory" has shown us the vastness of information to be digested after only 12 interviews. Our students heard of the tragedy of Jews who were deported to the eastern front together with the Hungarian army where they had to work in supply divisions or even had to clear mines. Nearly all prisoners were killed when the inexorably advancing Red Army, which did not know of these prisoners, marched in the area. The accounts of people from Voronezh who survived the German occupation allowed us to understand why traditional Jewish items can be found on the Hungarian cemetery. The accounts contributed to a better and clearer understanding of the overall context of the Hungarian cemetery near Voronezh – and hence of the whole region of the Voronezh.

The worldwide mutual influence of cultures and human beings is an objective process resulting in the internationalization of the collective memory. Against this background, one thing, more than ever before, becomes evident: the more parties are involved, the more complete will be the memory of war. To give you only one example: In spring 2011, a man from Hungary came to Voronezh. In 1942, his father was seriously wounded in the battle near Voronezh and died soon after he had returned home. Now the son was writing about the battle in which he lost his father and wanted to see the region where in 1943 the tragic event happened. This man took many photos and after the printing of his book he sent us a copy. To our surprise and much to our regret we noted that the photos in the book rather testify to the collapse of Socialism and not to the disaster of the Second Hungarian Army. This misunderstanding could have been prevented if the photos were talked over in time, i.e. during the final editing of the text before the printing of the book.

The developing new European community will lead to the development of a common European memory with common memories of World War II. And common memories will more and more determine our common future. What will be the role of Russia? What is the place of the Russian memory of war in the memory of Europe as a whole? I want my country to be clearly present in this memory and I want my country feel obliged to take part in this complicated process – the development of a common European memory. The course and progress of this process will undoubtedly depend on all parties involved.

I am very much concerned that the historically rooted memory policy in today's Russia and the resulting ignorance of the history of the home country will have far-reaching consequences. The reason is that the lack of knowledge of war will influence our present time and thus determine our future. To give you an example:

In today's Russia the term Eastern worker is sometimes used to refer to labour from Central Asia. These people indeed come from Middle East and Central Asia.

But only a few Russians today know of the history of Eastern workers from the Soviet Union who were forced to work in Nazi Germany. This was confirmed by an exhibition we had organized in one of the largest museums of our region in 2010 with the support of the regional administrative authorities. The exhibition was a great success and for my fellow-countrymen it was a discovery – even a revelation. Now I am sure that those who saw the exhibition will never again call a Tajik an Eastern worker. They now are aware of the associations connected with this notion. We realize how dangerous “plain” ignorance can be.

The former German president Richard von Weizsäcker once said: “Without memory there can be no reconciliation.”

What memory? Remembrance of what? What is indispensable in the 21st century in seeking good relationships with our neighbours? I am sure that it is essential always to remember and to keep in mind people and values – whether in times of war or in times of peace.

Finally, let me show you a picture. At a German cemetery near Voronezh there is a grave with the following inscription. We see an angel playing the violin. The cemetery is not far away from a village and many people go past this angel standing unfixed on the grave. For many years already. During all the years nobody has done this angel harm. Everyone understand why an old German woman came here. It is for the sake of this angel that we will have to cultivate the common memory.