

Historical truth and the manifestations of humanism in the past – the key to prevention of evil today

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We are here together to pay homage to the victims of Auschwitz and of the concentration camps for mass extermination. These ghastly killing factories were created by totalitarian Germany in the territory of occupied Poland.

Why here and not in the territory of Germany itself or somewhere else where there were also concentration camps?

This is a cardinal question. This is the key to understanding how it became possible to carry out the Holocaust, so I will come back to this question in just a moment.

First of all, however, I would like to thank the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation for bringing us here and for giving us the opportunity to commemorate the victims and to share our thoughts and concerns.

Why should we bother to study evil?

The answer is simple: so that we can identify it in time and possibly prevent it.

Have we made any progress?

Apparently not. The victims of today's Russia: Chechens, Georgians, Ukrainians, etc. are the proof of the West's failure to identify the new Russian totalitarianism in its infancy.

Of course, we as historians and researchers of totalitarianism, together with the Russian human rights activists from Memorial, the Russian journalists from Novaya Gazeta like Anna Politkovskaya, sounded the alarm to the world to the best of our ability. Our concerns though were faced with disbelief, and we were even accused of exaggerating.

Why did Western politicians and even Western media – otherwise so sensitive to human rights violations – fail to recognize the new Russian totalitarianism?

The reasons are not one or two, but one of the main reasons is rooted in the compromises with Soviet totalitarianism.

After all, the victims of totalitarian Germany were far from the only victims during the Second World War.

Regrettably, the victims of the war's other instigator, the Soviet Union, were no fewer either.

Historical integrity requires admitting that the Second World War had not one but two instigators – Hitler and Stalin. Hitler would hardly have dared to invade Poland had he not previously agreed with Stalin on its division.

Looking at the various reasons for the outbreak of the Second World War, Bulgarian historian Prof. Plamen Tsvetkov was categorical about one point:

However, there can hardly be any doubt that the key to the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe was held by Stalin without whose encouragement and complicity Hitler would have never started his small 'blitzkrieg' in September 1939.¹

It is a fact that just eight days after negotiating with the USSR, Germany invaded Poland, and only two days later, on 3 September 1939, Ribbentrop sent a telegram to Schulenberg, insisting on a response from Molotov as to when the Soviet side was planning to enter Poland to occupy the Soviet sphere of interest according to the preliminary agreement between the two countries.²

On 17 September 1939, The Red Army invaded Poland and almost immediately afterwards the fearsome NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the USSR) undertook ethnic cleansing, mass killings and deportations.

Of course, in the USSR and in the countries occupied by it during the Second World War, where the communist system was imposed forcibly, history was rewritten and all inconvenient facts were thrown out of textbooks.

The unpleasant surprise for Eastern Europeans has come from the fact that even in Western democratic countries there might have been practices of bypassing sensitive issues.

Laurence Rees wrote that in British historiography the role of the Soviet Union in the Second World War was, *to a large extent, denied a proper place [...] because it was easier than facing up to a variety of unpalatable truths.³*

One quickly learned, wrote British historian Norman Davies, that the Soviet Union had invaded and occupied one half of Poland in September 1939, just as Germany had invaded and occupied the other half. Yet Western historians continued to write exclusively about 'the Nazi invasion of Poland'. The Soviet zone of occupation was simply not regarded as a zone of occupation. Nazi propaganda on such matters was dismissed out of hand. Soviet propaganda was not questioned. One knew that mass deportations and murders were carried out by the Soviet occupiers, alongside other atrocities perpetrated by the Germans.

¹ Пл. Цветков, *Светът на мегамитовете [резюме]*, [Pl. Tsvetkov, *Svetat na megamitovete*, abstract], New Bulgarian University [website], <https://proftzvetkov.nbu.bg/bg/publikacii-i-rezjumeta?fbclid=IwAR0cHxTvFHigkohhEIOqasAuUxgkowQ2NR0a9E-RcNnF-6OdIPMLtEptAMc> (accessed 22 November 2023).

² *Telegram No. 253 of September 3 BERLIN, 3 September 1939–6:50 p.m.*, The Avalon Project at the Yale Law School: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy [website], https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/ns061.asp (accessed 15 May 2022).

³ *Ibid.* p. 7.

Yet, increasingly, Western awareness focused on the Holocaust alone. One read about thousands of villages razed to the ground, and of their massacred inhabitants. Yet the only one that Western commentators could ever name was Lidice, in Bohemia.⁴

Particularly outrageous, according to Prof. Davies, was the West's treatment of the 25,000 Polish POWs killed on Stalin's orders, who were mostly reserve officers:

Around 25,000 Allied officers had disappeared in Russia in 1940. But apart from 4,500 corpses uncovered by the Germans in the Katyn Forest, near Smolensk, in 1943, most of the missing men had never been found. There was no absolute proof, but the probability was high that the remaining 15,000 or 20,000 were lying in other mass graves, and that their deaths had been ordered by Stalin not Hitler. Yet for decades, British officialdom refused to comment unless to point a finger at the Nazis. British officers were forbidden to participate in Katyn memorial ceremonies. Plans for a monument in London were squashed. And the British public showed no signs of interest in recognizing either a major crime or a reprehensible cover-up. The stance seemed to be: what does Eastern Front do to us? Finally, in 1990, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary, President Gorbachev came clean and admitted that the massacres in Katyn and at two other sites had been the work of Soviet security forces. President Yeltsin later produced a document bearing Stalin's signature and recording the execution order dated 5 March 1940. A British Foreign Office spokesman praised the Russians' candour. But the British War Crimes Act (1991) was carefully framed to exclude events like Katyn from its remit. And the Foreign Office, lacking all fortitude, did not release a selection of its documents on the subject until 2002.⁵

For Norman Davies, the treatment of the Katyn massacre could serve as a litmus test of historical honesty, and Laurence Rees did not hesitate to call unworthy the behaviour of the Western Allies towards Poland:

The Western Allies' treatment of the Poles was unworthy: from the cover-up over Katyn to the secret deal at Tehran that eventually shifted Polish borders without the consent of the Poles; from the meeting in Moscow when Churchill accused members of the Polish government in exile of being 'callous people who want to wreck Europe', to the exclusion of Polish troops from the Victory Parade in London in 1946.⁶

Perhaps the strongest myth shared with a particular strong bias by Americans and Russians, is about the just war in which Good united to defeat Evil.

There is no dispute about the Evil, of course. But who was the Good? Stalin?

In fact, a political or military alliance that has legitimate aims and is concluded willy-nilly is more or less justified. After all, politics is the art of the possible. The

⁴ N. Davies, *Europe at War 1939-1945: No Simple Victory*, 2007, p. 13.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 13-14.

⁶ L. Rees, *World War II Behind Closed Doors: Stalin, the Nazis and the West*, 2010, p. 446

problems stem from a double standard against the defeated and victorious countries, and from simplistic thinking.

It is political hypocrisy to justify the alliance of the United States and Great Britain with the totalitarian Soviet state, i.e. with one of the two instigators of the Second World War, and at the same time to condemn the alliance of the small European countries with totalitarian Germany, although it is known that all these countries, which were satellites of Germany during the Second World War, *were squeezed into that most uncomfortable of zones with Hitler on one side and Stalin on the other.*⁷

The war started for the sake of Poland. But after the war, it was relinquished in the hands of one of the two arsonists – Stalin. And together with it, dozens of other East European countries that fell victim to Soviet occupation and a forcibly imposed Soviet totalitarianism.

Bulgaria was one of these victims – a victim of the war ignited by Stalin and Hitler and of the Soviet occupation after the autumn of 1944.

When the war broke out Bulgaria tried to keep neutrality.

Let us recall that starting in August 1939 till June 1941, Stalin and Hitler were allies, as Soviet ports were used by the Third Reich, the USSR supplied its German ally with key raw materials and assisted in arming it in every way.

In Bulgaria, the only ones who insisted that the country join the Tripartite Pact were the Bulgarian Communists, who, under instructions from Moscow, flooded Sofia with slogans reading: *We want a military alliance with the USSR and with a socially progressive and heroic Germany.*⁸

Despite massive pressure from Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, Bulgaria had as many as four refusals to join them. That these refusals were not at all easy is evidenced by the fact that one after another Romania, Hungary and Slovakia were forced to join the Tripartite Pact.

Unfortunately, once Mussolini, who had ignited the war in the Balkans, got into trouble in Greece, Hitler had to come to his aid.

The Wehrmacht deployed a 600,000-strong army on the Danube, so Bulgaria no longer had any choice and could not keep neutrality. It had to either join the Tripartite Pact or be occupied with all consequences that occupation would entail.

However – even at that point in time, Bulgaria managed to sign an agreement with Germany that it would not engage in military operations against anyone, unless it was attacked on its own territory.

⁷ N. Davies, *Europe at War 1939-1945: No Simple Victory*, 2007, p. 51.

⁸ **Горчева**, Д. Комунистите са единствените, които искат България да влезе в Тристранния пакт, [D. Gortcheva, *Komunistite sa edinstvenite, koito iskat Bulgariya da vlezhe v Tristranniya pakt*], Debati.bg [website] [Комунисти искат 1940 г. България да влезе в Тристранния пакт](http://Debati.bg) (accessed 9 August 2024).

And indeed, until the autumn of 1944 (when it was already at war against Germany), Bulgaria did not wage any offensive actions against any country.

It was the only one among Germany's satellites not to take part in the offensives against Greece and Yugoslavia and did not even send a volunteer corps to the front against the Soviet Union. Moreover, despite mounting pressure from Berlin, the Kingdom of Bulgaria did not sever diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.

As renowned German historian Dr Hans-Joachim Hoppe wrote, the Bulgarian King Boris was Hitler's Self-willing Ally (see: Hans-Joachim Hoppe. *Bulgarien-Hitlers eigenwilliger Verbündeter*).

In the interview I took from him in 2013, Dr Hoppe, whose doctoral thesis is on the subject of Bulgarian-German relations during the Second World War, said:

Had Bulgaria not signed the Tripartite Pact, Hitler would probably have treated it the way he treated Yugoslavia. That is to say, he would nevertheless have invaded it with his troops and would have established a regime which would no longer have any inhibitions against the Jews.

As an ally of Germany, Tsar Boris was able to retain a degree of independence, and it was this position that enabled him to save the Bulgarian Jews and to keep out of the war with Russia.⁹

Little known to the general public is the fact that Bulgaria was the only country in the orbit of the Third Reich which resisted the monstrous pressure from Berlin till the end, and from within whose state borders as the Kingdom of Bulgaria not even a single Jew was deported ever – whether a Bulgarian or a foreign subject.

This fact was proven at the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem during which documents from the German archives were carefully examined with witnesses still alive, and during which the Holocaust was reviewed country by country.

Thanks to this trial, the world became aware of the feat of the Bulgarian Tsar Boris III who had resisted the pressure of a powerful totalitarian Germany and had refused to deport (expel) outside Bulgaria the Jews who had been in the territory of the Kingdom of Bulgaria.

Therefore, leaving the courtroom, Israeli prosecutor Yaakov Bar-Or stated the following to the assembled Israeli and American journalists, and his statement was published in dozens of American and Israeli newspapers:

Boris was a hero. He absolutely blocked Eichmann and protected Bulgaria's Jews – Eichmann 1961. See also: The News and Courier, 22 May 1961, and reports in other US newspapers from the same date.

⁹ **Горчева, Д.** Цар Борис успя да запази известна самостоятелност на България, [D. Gortcheva, *Tsar Boris uspya da zapazi izvestna samostoyatelnost na Bulgariya*], Mediapool.bg [website] [Цар Борис успя да запази известна самостоятелност на България](#) (accessed 9 August 2024).

Opposing Hitler's policy, especially on the question of the Jews, required not only courage but also great tact and ingenuity.

And, as it transpired only after the end of the war, the Bulgarian head of state had thus saved the Jews in Bulgaria not only from deportation/expulsion but also from inevitable death.

And here we must return to the question I put at the beginning: why were these mass extermination concentration camps established in the territory of occupied Poland and not somewhere else?

The answer is: in order to keep the secret; to camouflage the real purpose of deportations.

The strict coverup of the real purpose of deportations was essential in securing their success. Otherwise, if the word got out, riots and disorder would break out, and Germany would be unable to allocate bigger resources to security. All serious Western historians who are Holocaust researchers invariably contend that the secret was strictly guarded until the last moment, including inside the camp itself.

The well-known researcher of the Holocaust Prof. Yehuda Bauer says:

YEHUDA BAUER: The deportations were always sort of camouflaged by saying the Jews were either going to some other place to work or they were going to be transported to another place...

This is confirmed by Prof. Martin Gilbert:

*MARTIN GILBERT: Secrecy was essential for the maintenance of Auschwitz, for the continuation of Auschwitz as a killing factory. The moment it became known; then there would be revolts and riots at every railway station on the way to it. The deportations were the greatest confidence trick in history because we now know that it was a total deception... (see the documentary *Escape from Auschwitz*).*

Incidentally, deportations were practiced widely during the Second World War including by the Allies. Stalin deported about 40 peoples and ethnic groups. A democracy like the United States sent to camps a 100,000-strong allegedly hostile population of Japanese descent. Great Britain did the same with British citizens of German descent. And after the war, some 12 million German civilians were expelled from their home countries or deported to the Soviet Union for forced labour thus accounting for the largest forced migration drive in Europe's recent history. Nowhere in Europe were local authorities able to prevent these deportations. Moreover, they took place with their help and with the help of the Jewish Councils of Elders that Eichmann had set up.

Most importantly, at that time, almost no one was aware that deportation actually meant not just physical relocation but in fact physical extermination of the Jews.

Of course, all sorts of rumours were in circulation, but they were considered propaganda or crazy talk. During the war no one could penetrate occupied Poland and information came from fugitives from the extermination camps. This happened very slowly because they hid for months first, then only passed on their information to Jewish communities or to the Polish resistance. Trying to convince the Allies in the veracity of these reports was particularly slow and painful. It was only the report of Vrba and Wetzler, who had managed to escape from Auschwitz, that was taken seriously by the Western Allies in the summer of 1944.

Thus, by rescuing nearly 50,000 Bulgarian Jews from the hardships of an exodus into obscurity, Bulgaria also saved them from imminent death. In the meantime, Bulgaria also saved many foreign Jews who had gone into hiding in its territory during the war. Among them were German, Austrian and Polish Jews, as well as many children of Jewish descent. Bulgaria was the only country which had more Jews after the war than before it.

In 1939 they numbered 48,000; after the war and prior to their emigration to Israel following the establishment of communism they came to 56,000. The same is valid for the Roma, none of whom was either deported out of the country or killed for racial reasons: before 1939 the Bulgarian Roma numbered 149,000 and in 1946 – 170,000.

In fact, what Tsar Boris had achieved was astonishing. Let us, however, give the floor to Hannah Arendt:

Bulgaria had more cause than any other of the Balkan countries to be grateful to Nazi Germany...

And yet Bulgaria was not grateful, neither her government nor her people were soft enough to make a policy of "ruthless toughness" workable.

This showed not only on the Jewish question.

The Bulgarian monarchy had no reason to be worried about the native Fascist movement, the Ratnizi, because it was numerically small and politically without influence, and the Parliament remained a highly respected body, which worked smoothly with the King.

Hence, They dared to refuse to declare war on Russia and never sent a token expeditionary force of "volunteers" to the Eastern front.

But most surprising of all, in the belt of mixed populations where anti-Semitism was rampant among all ethnic groups and had become official governmental policy long before Hitler's arrival, the Bulgarians had "no understanding of the Jewish problem" whatever.

And the result was that not a single Bulgarian Jew had been deported or had died an unnatural death ...¹⁰

Indeed, under pressure from totalitarian Germany, Bulgaria, like the rest of the satellites and occupied countries, was forced to introduce anti-Jewish laws. They however were introduced to blunt the pressure of Nazi Germany. This was admitted by the prosecutor at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem who told the court that the documents made it perfectly clear that the Bulgarian government had moved the Jews from Sofia to the countryside to avoid German pressure and to protect them from deportation outside the country's borders.

As to the Bulgarian Law for the Protection of the Nation, Hannah Arendt terms it *ridiculous from the Nazi viewpoint: The government had also agreed to introduce some anti-Jewish legislation, but that, from the Nazi viewpoint, was simply ridiculous.*

And this is precisely so, because that law permitted a lot of exceptions. The German reports provide evidence of Berlin's irritation and dissatisfaction with the Bulgarian Government *which now openly supports the Tsar's opinion about the Jews.*

In fact, there was no xenophobia in Bulgaria as a result of two factors: the historical diversity of the Bulgarian nation and the fact that during the era of the struggles for a national state in the 19th century Bulgarian nationalism was created as civic nationalism of the European type, and this was enshrined in the Constitution and the laws of the modern Bulgarian state, in the political and social norms and traditions, so ethnic division had never seen approval in either political affairs or everyday life. This led to the lack of and to avoiding propaganda inciting one group of people against another, and as far as such exotics rarely appeared in print, they were imported from the Russian Empire. This was the case until Sovietization which began with the occupation in 1944.

The rescue of the Bulgarian Jews and Roma by the Bulgarian state with the participation and support of Bulgarian society, as well as the rescue of hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews by the Żegota and the Polish Underground State, with all the risk and sacrifices involved, are extremely important events both for saving human lives, and hence the thread of generations of people, and for the extraordinary humanitarian example they provide for today and the future.

¹⁰ **Arendt**, H. Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil