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## THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN KNOWING OURSELVES

How to approach the historical failure of communist utopia? And how do we apprehend the current period? These are the existential questions of the post-communist period that are raised in our societies. At the same time, people are eager for the justice. Justice here meets morality and history, or the morality of history. History, as the narrative of the past, is recognized as a pedagogical virtue in matters of morality. Drawing lessons from the past is not the least of the usages to which citizens and militants are likely to guide their choices and commitment. These choices and commitments, as the present is never liberated from the past, are also judgments about history, which are based on a moral and political critique of the past. The imperative of the moment is to clarify the links between justice, morality and history, but also the freedom to write about the past.

We, the people of Eastern Europe, remember great congresses when the working class used to applaud the decisions of the chief members of the party. They used to shout “Long life!” or “Down with!”, but it was easily forgotten that “Long Life!” and “Down with!” concepts had nothing in common with the concepts of personal freedom or personal greatness. It was proved that your own freedom was not guaranteed even if you put the others in front of the execution wall. Even though people used to live in wretched dirty houses, they were proud of the “Cultural Palace” and they were proud because they were governed by the “greatest leader of the world”. This is how the miserable part of the human beings was built. To better understand how this wretched part of the human beings was constructed allow me to bring two ideas.

Around the year 1920, two years after the October Revolution, ex-counselor of Alexander Kerensky, who later became a sociology professor at Harvard University,

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Pitrim Sorokin would warn the world about the consequences of military socialism that was being built in Russia, a model that was built in Eastern Europe.

In my understanding the idea of an ideal “military socialist” society is a mechanism characterized by:

1. An unlimited interference of government in all areas of life, throughout relations between the ones who are governed, starting with economical relations and ending up with religious, legal, esthetical relations, etc.
2. A very limited right to autonomy in all areas of life and in all relations with the world.
3. To a certain point equal despotism. In this type of society the power of government is unlimited. It does not determine boarder lines when it comes to interfering in people’s lives and in ordering them. When it comes to the autonomy of the ones in power they do not have any freedom of action. They are like soldiers marching one by one towards one obligation: to obey without any doubts those in power...

Therefore it is not possible even to think about individual rights. Simultaneously, the private initiative, the ownership rights etc. disappeared... So this is what the ideal military socialist society is about (Sorokin 1990, p. 90).

To conclude, I want to cite the author of protestant theology Paul Tillich. He tells us how the courage to be oneself is destroyed and at the very end civil courage in a totalitarian society is still in the form of a tribal collectivization. This happens because the essence of communism is the courage to be as a part, which is given to masses of people living under increasing threat of nonbeing and a growing feeling of anxiety. Thus “communism gives to those who have lost or are losing their old collectivist self-affirmation a new collectivism and with it a new courage to be a part. If we look at the convinced adherents of communism we find the willingness to sacrifice any individual fulfillment to the self-affirmation of the group and to the goal of the movement” (Tillich 1988, p. 185). Tillich sees this phenomenon based on the three types of anxiety. I would like to mention his all reasoning on how the individual takes the anxiety of guilt and condemnation into his courage to be as a part. Those who have lived under the conditions of such a regime can understand very well this truth.

It is not his personal sin that produces the anxiety of guilt but a real or possible sin against the collective. The collective, in this respect, replaces for him the God of judgment, repentance, punishment, and forgiveness. To the collective he confesses, often in forms reminiscent of early Christianity or later sectarian groups. From the collective he accepts judgment and punishment. To it he directs his desire for forgiveness and his promise of self-transformation. If he is accepted back by it, his guilt is overcome and a new courage to be is possible (Tillich 1988, p. 188).

Everything that was predicted above was realized in the most perfect way in our societies by spreading this way “the cholera of soul”. “The cholera of soul” is related with the type of the individual that comes out from a totalitarian regime. There are many agreements on what totalitarian regime is, but we can take as the most accurate the one that determines totalitarianism is the regime that works for depersonalization and

dehumanization of the individual. The influences of this regime are so visible in the behavior of human beings and in their nature. It totally distorts the consciousness, the feelings, and the actions. It destroys the freedom of thoughts throughout thousands of procedures. All these that I have mentioned above create the essence of the “cholera of soul”. Therefore, we should not be surprised to see the increase in crimes, plundering, horrible actions, paid killers, vile actions, the blooming of violence, the weakening of morale and virtue, the decrease in work and its productivity, false accusations, harshness, and increase in ignorance.

The dilemma that our society faces nowadays is how to get rid of the “cholera of soul”. Or, how can people be happy? Can it happen by deepening these vices or by manipulating people’s instincts, or by enlightening them and showing them how to use democracy? Alexis de Tocqueville has explained the problem of democracy consisting in the manipulation of the instinct of crowd, and charlatans profiting from politics (Tocqueville 2012). In Eastern Europe and the Balkans we see two kinds of manipulation; democratic and nationalist instincts of the crowd. Turning back to the problem of how to be safe from the “cholera of the soul”, we are left with no other way but to learn, to learn how to think. So freedom and democracy must be learned.

Having seen that the vice is turned into a virtue and the only inciting motive of the society is how to take advantage, then it is not a surprise that pessimism has invaded people’s souls and before they see how to get rid of these thoughts, they look around how to get rid of the country and find freedom somewhere else. These are the most delicate moments for a nation and only a regeneration of the soul can exhume the society from the mud where it has fallen. Isn’t Georg W.F. Hegel right when he says that a political community cannot be constructed without having a moral community? Wasn’t Edmund Husserl right when he talked about the crisis of Europe before the Second World War? He said that Europe could be saved only if it created a new spiritual community. Could we get closer to this new spiritual community without giving up the “cholera of soul”? At the beginning of the First World War, Stefan Zweig wrote: “We had to agree with Freud when he saw in our culture a thin layer that could die at any moment the destructive forces of the underworld emerged; we had to get used gradually to live without mainland beneath our feet, without law, without freedom, security” (Zweig 1993, p. 21). Words that sound very actual when we consider what is happening in the Eastern part of Europe.

Are we facing the process of organizing the spiritual chaos? Friedrich Nietzsche, referring to the Greek thought, wrote in “The use and abuse of history”:

The Greeks have gradually learned to organize the chaos by re-entering into themselves, in conformity with the Delphic teaching, by listening to their true needs and allowing their factitious wants to perish. Thus they regained possession of their proper personality; they did not long reclaim the heirs and epigones of the whole East. By the practical application of this motto, and

after a difficult struggle with themselves, they had even the happiness of augmenting and enriching the treasure they had inherited, and becoming the exemplary ancestors of all civilized peoples of the future. This parable applies to all of us. Each individual must organize their inner chaos by reflecting on their true needs. One day it will be necessary that one's honesty, one's strong and truthful character, refuses to always repeat, learn, imitate; one will then begin to understand that civilization may be something other than the decoration of life (Nietzsche 1990, p. 169).

Nowadays there are numerous books and articles that delineate the nature of a totalitarian communist society, but I brought up these quotations in order to show that our society had already been warned against the situation in which it was likely to fail. In other words, everything that happened was because the citizen had become a person who vegetated and threw away the freedom at the feet of despots. Now the problem arises how to elevate the human being to the level of the citizen who should be jealous of freedom and should never throw away the freedom that has gained. Montesquieu was right when he wrote: "The citizen can die, and the man can stay" (Montesquieu 1979, p. 275). We lived in a time when the citizen died. Now the democracy needs the citizen.

The shouts for the victory of communism should be replaced by a deep process of pondering in order to comprehend the situation of Eastern Europe not as a historical accident, but as having deep roots in constructing the modern individual, because the emphasized polarization that characterizes our societies, such as growth of corruption, can be the premise for other strange surprises in the future.

We should not forget, however, that nowadays we experience a deep moral crisis, which is manifested by the spirit of taking advantage, a distinguished characteristic of our transitional society. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French philosopher, leaves open two ways for the future of the humanity: liberal democracy or despotic democracy. According to him a desire to stop democracy is the same as to fight against God himself and the nations are left with no other choice but to adopt to the social state that their providence impose on them (Tocqueville 2012).

Which one of these dilemmas are we going to choose? Of course none of us wants the second, or we have to remind what Husserl said at the beginning of the Second World War:

The crisis of European existence can only have two outcomes: either the decline of Europe becomes alien and has its own rational sense of life, the fall in the spiritual hatred and barbarism, or the revival of the Europe from the spirit of philosophy, through heroism of reason that definitely overcomes naturalism. The greatest danger to Europe is lassitude. Fight as "good Europeans" against this danger of dangers with this courage that is not afraid of the infinity of the fight, and then we will see the nihilistic blaze, the barrage of despair of those who doubt the vocation of the West against humanity, the ashes of the great weariness, the Phoenix risen from a new inner life and a new spiritual breath, promise of a great and long future for humanity: for the spirit alone is immortal (Husserl 1976, p. 382-383).

These words deserve a deep reflection considering the challenges that Europe faces. In other words, the spirit that Husserl mentioned means *Human Rights, Democracy* and *Rule of Law*. The spirit needs to be constructed in our societies, and here is the main challenge for public and civil actors. Unfortunately, such meaning does not exist among our societies. Many consider Europe as source of money and not as a community of values. Considering the optimism that with the development of science and technology the world would become more rational, Husserl showed that even at the peak of science and technology irrationality could be introduced. Was not the invention of factories of death the highest mark of irrationality?

In short, when remembering and thinking of the past, it is an existential imperative to recognize ourselves for our present and future generations, so that they do not fall into a new barbarism. Hannah Arendt wrote “Thinking and remembering is the human way of establishing roots, of taking a place in a world to which we all come as strangers. What we ordinarily call a person or personality, as opposed to being a mere being or being nobody, derives in reality from this process of enraciment by thought” (Arendt 2009, p. 149). The work of thought is a necessary condition, so that the events that occurred have to be shaped in experience, rather than remain only in the realm of psychologism and refusing any reflection.

So setting the notion of duty of memory is a way to establish a relationship with our past. But even talking endlessly without saying the essence of things, does not contribute to our knowledge. Memory task would imply remembering. What does it mean to remember? Repeating some things? Knowing a certain number of facts? Taking into account a set of numbers, names? No. More important than simply being aware of what has happened in the past is to think. Only then will we recognize our responsibility. We should say “the truth of the truth”, even if it is a Herculean task and painful. Because, as noted in the Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann’s trial, there is a deep connection between violence and the fact of speaking through clichés. In both cases, no one makes any bad action and there is no victim.

To realize a spiritual renewal, it is worth remembering those landmarks in the recent history of Europe which testify about great acts of people, who, when the clock of history put into test their moral integrity, showed high virtues of morale and humanism. It is worth to mention what Johann Gustav Droysen wrote: “Thus, on hearing the cry of anguish we have a sense of the anguish felt by those who cry” (Hegel 1991, p. 106). In this perspective, oral history will help us not only to understand our past, but even to put new relation with the others, because “The human being is, in essential nature, a totality in oneself, but realizes this character only in understanding others and being understood by them, in the moral partnership of family, people, state religion etc.” (Hegel 1991, p. 107) and he concluded:

The moral world is to be considered historically:  
 In relation to the matter wherein it creates forms.  
 In relation to the forms into which it shapes itself.  
 In relation to the workers through whom it builds itself up.  
 In relation to the ends that realize themselves in its movement (Hegel 1991, p. 122).

Even today the relationship with the “other” becomes a clear indication of the humanity of our societies, both in the West and in the East. As Emmanuel Lévinas, remembering his experience of concentration camp, wrote: “The relation with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relation of communion, nor a sympathy by which we, in the place, recognize it as similar to ourselves, but external to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery” (Lévinas 1983, p. 63). He saw infinity in the suffering of others who sought refuge and salvation to all mankind. So, the basic task of being human means to do what must be done without having to be called a universal principle.

Memory task is to think about how Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism and Nazism were born in relation to the actual aspects of our lives. Having read and remembered about it, we recognize a relevant experience today, including liberal democracies. The totalitarian regimes that we experienced, represent the world of non-freedom, non-smoothing, a twisted world where God was withdrawn. Faced with the arbitrary, small-minded and unfair authority, the only way out was to follow its proper individual law, to reject the submission and to get over the prohibitive barriers. When systems refuse freedom, then periods of disasters come.

Often we hear that the past should be forgotten in order to look into the future. In fact the past has to be thought of if we want to understand what kind of people we are. For societies emerging from totalitarianism it is a fundamental duty for people not to continue being the victims of deception and illusion. “One of the discoveries of the totalitarian government, Hannah Arendt wrote, was the method of digging large holes to bury unfortunate events, a vast undertaking that could only be achieved by murdering millions of people who had been the actors or witnesses of the past. The past was condemned to be forgotten as if it had never existed” (Arendt 2009, p. 333).

We should not forget that totalitarianism, wherever it took place, including Albania, should be considered as the only significant risk of total destruction that threatens not only our political entity, but also the survival of our spiritual and moral substance.

When totalitarianism takes the power, domestic politics gives way to intrigue and violence replaces foreign policy. Although it seems to be a policy of dialogue and diplomacy, it refuses to follow any accepted rules of common interest. Totalitarianism is based on the separation of ties that bind the individual with some solid points of reference and it deprives of any reference, especially moral one, and pushes people towards lack of aspiration and anarchy. Totalitarianism promises every man what he wants in

order to attract the best. In this human chaos, that chaos is not understood as internal, because an external order exists, but there is consequently a deep sense of dissatisfaction and totalitarianism appears as an escape road. Totalitarianism does not require people to be themselves, but urges unconditional obedience.

Totalitarianism uses everything in order to include in its government apparatus everything to dominate the individual like the legendary serpent; it lures the victims to swallow them. Thus, people, deprived of any point of reference, who have no consciousness of themselves and their freedom, but aspire to be asserted blindly following imposed rules, let themselves fall into the clutches of this machine that treats them simply as a material and thus lose everything that they believed in or they won and possessed. Therefore, there is only one enemy of totalitarianism; one's own freedom, that is the truth, universities, places of free inquiry, art and literature, as they require us to penetrate the unknown lands of the spirit, everything is experience, everything that matures through intellectual excellence, everything that every human prevents guided by something else; conscience to be oneself.

History affecting the emancipation will affect a spiritual renewal, especially for newly emerging societies from totalitarian regimes. Therefore, every person that will not be able to think about the dangers that one learns from history and political action, will face strange surprises in the future. The duty of memory is to perpetuate freedom in a free country. In short, the history has to be clarified so that we do not forget who we are.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The oral history has no influence on our memory, but it has to affect thinking to understand our past better. In this way we can understand ourselves and understand others.

Teaching history must help the student and young people to acquire the essence of historical knowledge and they also need to adopt a critical attitude to historical facts and evidence and to develop and apply the thinking process essential to historical awareness and interpretation.

These attitudes and processes include understanding that historians, authors of history text books, journalists and producers of documentaries about events in the recent past are not simply reporting the facts, they are trying to interpret the available information and look at the connections between facts in order to explain events and developments.

Such attitude includes understanding that through this process the historian, author, journalist or television producer converts his or her selected facts into evidence (that is, facts which are used to support a particular argument or interpretation of

what happened). To understand that in this way the same historical facts can be used by different people for different purposes or to support different interpretations of the same events or phenomena.

These attitudes include distinguishing facts from opinions and detecting bias, prejudice and stereotypes in textual accounts and visual representations of a particular event. In this way students will learn how to analyse and use material from primary and secondary sources as well as understand and apply the key concepts associated with the study of history, such as chronology, change, continuity, causation, significance, sense of period.

These attitudes include recognizing that proximity to a historical event or happening (for example the eye-witness account) does not necessarily ensure that the account or record is more accurate and less biased. One has to bear in mind that any historical account is provisional and liable to reassessment in the light of either new evidence or new interpretations of existing evidence. As Benedetto Croce emphasized, history is based on a synthesis of two things which only exist in that synthesis: evidence and criticism. According to Croce, genuine history has no room for the merely probable or merely possible; all it permits the historian to assert is what the evidence before him obliges him to assert (Croce 1921).

The historical discussion needs to develop some understanding of the factors which have influenced and shaped individuals' lives and identities, which, in an important sense, and it revolves around the understanding that history is not just about wars, superpowers, diplomacy and economics. It is also about the changes which have taken place in the lives of ordinary people and the forces which have brought about those changes, such as science, technology, industrialization, urbanization, changes in community and family life and mass communication.

The historical discussion needs to develop positive attitudes and values which include tolerance, respect for diversity, open-mindedness, a belief that judgements, opinions and conclusions should be justified by reference to rational evidence. As with transferable skills, values and attitudes have to be developed through practising and that has implications for the selection of topics and themes and the approaches which teachers and students adapt for studying. As the Recommendation of the Committee of Minister of the Council of Europe (2011) emphasized, history teaching should contribute to the development of the knowledge and skills needed to establish open, productive intercultural dialogue by enabling all future citizens to gain a perception and understanding of the history of others, and thereby to perceive and understand their own better; the development of multiple-perspective approach in the analysis of history, especially the history of relationships between cultures; ... the prevention of tensions and conflicts in sensitive situation and to the furtherance of reconciliation process in conflict and post-conflict situations, above all where cultural

diversity in the broad sense is or has been exploited in conflicts of a political kind (Recommendation... 2011, p. 3).

History has to contribute to prepare good citizen for democracy.

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## The role of history in knowing ourselves

**Abstract:** The author discusses the role of the narrative about the past as a valuable lesson of morality. Drawing lessons from the past is the way of linking it with the present and the future. Judgments and opinions about history are based on a moral and political critique of the past. Therefore, clarifying the links between justice, morality and history is very important.

The experience of totalitarianism presented as the unlimited power of government in all areas of individuals' life restricted human rights, democracy and rule of law, and it also made private initiative and the ownership rights disappear. Totalitarianism is the regime that causes depersonalization and dehumanization of the individual. The idea of it can be called the "cholera of soul" since the results of it include the following phenomena: an increase in crimes, the weakening of morale and virtue, a decrease in work productivity, lack of trust, an increase in ignorance etc. Remembering and thinking of the past is an existential imperative to recognize oneself and to our present and future generations so that they

do not fall into new barbarism. One of the tools to understand the past more deeply is oral history. It can also support mutual understanding in the moral partnership between families, people, state, religion.

**Keywords:** history, oral history, totalitarianism, morality, philosophy

### **Rola historii w poznaniu siebie**

**Streszczenie:** Autor omawia rolę opowieści o przeszłości jako cennej lekcji moralności. Wyciągnięcie lekcji z przeszłości to sposób na powiązanie jej z teraźniejszością i przyszłością. Osądy i opinie o historii są oparte na moralnej i politycznej krytyce przeszłości. Dlatego bardzo ważne jest wyjaśnienie powiązań między sprawiedliwością, moralnością i historią.

Doświadczenie totalitaryzmu, przedstawione jako nieograniczona władza rządu we wszystkich dziedzinach życia jednostki, ograniczało prawa człowieka, demokrację i prawnorządność, a także spowodowało zniknięcie prywatnej inicjatywy i prawa własności. Totalitarianizm jest reżimem, który powoduje depersonalizację i dehumanizację jednostki. Jego ideę można nazwać „cholerą duszy”, ponieważ jego skutkami są następujące zjawiska: wzrost przestępczości, osłabienie morale i cnót, spadek wydajności pracy, brak zaufania, wzrost ignorancji itp. Pamiętanie i myślenie o przeszłości jest egzystencjalnym nakazem rozpoznawania siebie i naszych obecnych i przyszłych pokoleń tak, aby nie wpaść w nowe barbarzyństwo. Jednym z narzędzi głębszego zrozumienia przeszłości jest historia ustna. Może ona również wspierać wzajemne zrozumienie w moralnym partnerstwie między rodzinami, ludźmi, państwem, religią.

**Słowa kluczowe:** historia, ustna historia, totalitaryzm, moralność, filozofia