

Commemorating communism's victims

Imagine two walls, each 120km (75 miles) long, set at right angles and tapering to a height of three metres. They are covered in names, each inscribed in letters 1.35 cm (0.53 inches) high. That is how big a monument to the 100m victims of communism would be if it were designed on the scale of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, which commemorates the nearly 60,000 American military personnel who died in that war.

Nothing of the kind exists. The American capital's monument to the victims of communism is a modest bronze statue. Determined travellers in Russia may find the Mask of Sorrow in Magadan, or a small monument in the Komi capital, Syktyvkar; both commemorate the millions who died in the Gulag. Bucharest has a rather kitschy monument to those who died in the "uprising" (perhaps more accurately described as a coup) against Nicolae Ceausescu, Romania's long-time dictator, in December 1989.

Museums in Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, Warsaw, Prague and Budapest, among other places, do a good job of reminding people of the historical background to communist rule and the details of daily life, as well as the terror that enforced it. The Vilnius museum—in the former KGB headquarters—has the names of executed resistance fighters carved in the stone panels outside. A Bulgarian history project is collecting fascinating memories from both victims and perpetrators.

Now Estonia's president, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, has come out with a challenge to his country: to commemorate by name all Estonian victims of communism. "Unfortunately, we still do not know the names of all the victims.... Our job is to find out and chisel them in stone. By name."

He was speaking on one of the many forgotten anniversaries of the 20th century: of the shortlived government of Otto Tief, which tried to re-establish the Estonian republic for a few days in September 1944 in the wake of the German retreat. Some of its members escaped to Sweden and formed a government-in-exile that lasted until 1992; the rest were arrested by the

Soviet forces and killed, deported or otherwise punished. Arnold Susi, the education minister, befriended Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the Gulag. The symbolic importance was huge: it disproves the Stalinist version of history that the Baltic states were "liberated" in 1944. But few in Estonia, let alone outside, remember their names.

The issue is trickier than it sounds. Who are the "victims" of communism? Is it those sentenced to death by a communist court? Certainly, but not only them. What about those post-war resistance fighters in Poland, the Baltic states, Romania and elsewhere who died on the battlefield against the occupiers? And restricting it to those who died from bullets or the noose seems too narrow: what about those who starved or froze to death while being deported? They need to be listed too.

But it also would be unfair to exclude those who survived. Maybe it should be all victims of the Gulag. But what about those who suffered other kinds of repression, such as incarceration in a psychiatric hospital, or interrogation under torture?

Even trickier is that not all victims were unquestioned heroes. Would the Russian memorial include Andrei Shkuro and Pyotr Krasnov, both Cossack generals who opposed communism but collaborated with Hitler? Never Soviet citizens, they were handed over by the British at the end of the war and executed. And if it includes them, what about General Andrei Vlasov, a Soviet general who switched sides to fight with the Nazis?

In trying to commemorate the victims of the 20th century, each country would find different answers to these questions. And in doing so, each may also find greater understanding for the suffering of its neighbours.

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