

## ON THE NEED FOR HISTORY

Ján SZELEPCSÉNYI

University of Sts Cyril and Methodius, Institute for Social Communication,  
Ulica J. Herdu 2, 917 01 Trnava, Slovakia

The transformation of a post-communist society is mostly regarded as a change in proprietary relations and the principles of economic life. Changes in the thinking of citizens are more relevant. And a new attitude to the history of their country is needed. Without this evaluation and re-evaluation of the history it is impossible to revive the basic social and moral values conditioning the introduction of democratic principles in all areas of the social life. Some basic questions and tasks of the contemporary historiography in Slovakia are discussed.

### Introduction

I think that I should first formulate the aim of our meeting today.<sup>1</sup> The topic is very simple and factual – “On the need for history.”

What kind of a need is the need for history?

Is this need similar to a biological need, for example physiologic hunger? Or, is it rather a need that we acquire in the process of upbringing, education, and life experience?

Is it a need of the individual, or does it rather concern society as a whole and the common interests of people who live together in a certain geographical and spiritual space?

What does it mean for us to satisfy this need? What would happen if this need were not sufficiently met? Lack of food causes malnutrition, fatigue, deterioration of the organism, total exhaustion, and subsequent death. What can a similar lack in the form of a certain “absence of history or longing for history” cause? What can a lack of historic conscience cause? Do black holes in our history have any influence on our spiritual life or social organism?

These and similar questions arise in connection with two substantial subjects in the topic of our meeting – need and history. These questions also outline the direc-

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first time publicly presented on March 21, 1995 at the Slovak Catholic Academy in Bratislava.

tion of our considerations – we will be dealing with the philosophical and psychological meaning of history in the life of the individual and society. It is obvious that, above all, these considerations will reflect the needs of today's man and society, because the present (regardless if we call it post-modernism or post-communism) tests us every day in situations that have a radical existential dimension.

Now we have defined the topic of our considerations, outlined their direction and meaning. First of all, I should define what I understand under the term history in order to avoid any misunderstandings.

Many people might object, saying: "We have lived through so much! There have been so many dramatic and historic events! I do not feel any need for history"!

The events that my imaginary partner has in mind are not history yet. If we arrange all events into a sequence according to time we shall obtain a chronicle of events. Individual events will acquire their historical meaning only when we identify their value, and when we cease to arrange them by time, but according to criteria that are derived from certain individual and/or collective moral consciousness. I know that a historian would not be satisfied with this definition, because it does not contain a precise specification of the aim of the methods of study. However, this definition will be entirely sufficient for our meeting today.

The knowledge of historic value and historic context does not get its form only in the process of some academic study, analysis, or rational discussion that seeks to discover the substance of some phenomenon or event. The knowledge of historic value and historic context is formed in the process of man's active participation in social development. When I say activity, I do not mean fighting on the barricades or the clanging of keys in city squares, but first of all, spiritual and moral activity that brings me to the point when I do not only perceive all events, but I also rationally and emotionally evaluate them. In other words, when I recollect or reconstruct them (in the case of the past), or when I watch them or perceive (in the case of the present), I engage all my life experience and mental and physiological skills in their evaluation.

History is a drama that decides not only the fate of the protagonists, but also the fate of the spectators. We cannot view history as "a story about others", but we must view it as a story about ourselves.

Unlike events, rationally sorted into a chronicle, history is a sequence of events, whose value has been recognized by man and that have been included into his spiritual make-up. Since time and new events continuously shed new light on history, the forming of history is a process that never ends.

Someone might object, saying: "What is history good for? We have done so much and we will do even more! Let us talk about history after that!"

The meaning of history, or more precisely – the meaning of historical knowledge in the life of the individual and society is manifold. If we define history as a collection of events, whose moral value and meaning is clear to us, then for us historical consciousness is something which serves us as a compass in the whirlpool of the present. This compass steers our perception towards events and enables us to

make a primary selection, without which we would become drowned in an ocean of information. Ultimately, it lets us evaluate things that somehow prejudice our individual or collective fate. Without historical consciousness we are like a ship with neither a compass nor rudder. Without historical consciousness we are unable to even evaluate the meaning of our plans and the value of the chances that life offers us.

Without historical consciousness we would not be able to appreciate our own nation and state, our own state sovereignty, and our right to participate in the efforts of the international community of nations.

Before I continue with the body of my talk, I would like to answer one question that you have not asked so far, but that would sooner or later come up in your mind. My scientific specialization is as a musicologist and music historian, but in my scientific study I have dealt rather with musical philosophy and psychology. You might want to ask why I started to deal with problems of our national history – the need for it, i.e. problems of philosophy of history. This is my answer.

I could say that thinking about our history and present was my duty. Everyday as the Ambassador of Slovakia to Turkey, I had to deal with the question “In which form and through which economic and cultural facts should I introduce my homeland to the host country”. Often, this task was very unpleasant, especially, when I had to counter sheer lies, half-truths, and malicious fabrications about the past and present of Slovakia.

Of course, there was another aspect that further cultivated my interest in the question whether we need history.

Life outside Europe in an Islamic environment introduced a certain distance in my view of European problems. As soon as one is not overwhelmed by a number of details, often unimportant daily news and rumours, one will more easily identify the main factors of political and social culture that have an impact not only on one’s behaviour, but also on its meaning; the meaning that foreign observers attribute to it.

I have come to the conclusion that the absence of the historical dimension in our consciousness, decision-making, and behaviour is a factor that immensely complicates our domestic social development as well as our standing abroad.

Someone might object, saying: why should we care about others? They are for the most part just nations, similar to the characters in the parable about the log and the splinter from the New Testament. Believe me, it does not matter whether the splinter in our eye is a log or vice versa! The attitude of the international community is what matters. The real dimensions of our sovereignty depend on its evaluation. The territory of our state in the international context has been staked out by our deeds in the recent history of mankind. We must convince those who judge us that we have staked out a path of truth.

As we are a small nation with a small economic potential, we do not have any other means besides honesty, morality, mannerliness, friendship, good will, Christian compassion, readiness to help those in need, strong character, self-confidence relying on the knowledge of clean hands, and all other attributes of a moral being

and a moral society that we acquired in the process of the development of European civilization. We cannot rely on the power of arms, economy, natural resources, or similar factors, on which large and wealthy nations can build their international position. We are so poor that we have no other means but honesty in thought and deed.

Someone might think that this is not enough. However, those who know the history of mankind, know that development has never been ensured by material goods alone, but always and above all, by the power of ideas. Our poverty forces us to rely on resources that are available to all, and that do not require any special “luck” or effort, only life according to the laws of God, or if you want, according to the rules of proper conduct, where good takes up a central position.

This is nothing new. It is already in the proverbs incorporating the life experience of our parents and grandparents which say that the needy never lose their honesty. This is our true chance!

If I were to define our position in the consciousness of the European public, I could not say that Slovakia had already lost its honesty. However, there are too many doubts connected with Slovakia that nobody except us can refute.

How can we refute the suspicion that Slovak statehood is closely connected with fascism when our historians have not been able to objectively evaluate the creation and fate of the first Slovak state?

How can we convince somebody that our country is not rebuilding a totalitarian regime when we morally and politically have not yet dealt with the period of Bolshevik tyranny?!

How can we build our international relations when each normal step our foreign policy makes is misinterpreted in unbelievable ways – so monstrous and depraved that many countries hesitate whether to deepen cooperation with us, because they do not want to become suspicious on the international scene that through Slovakia they want to recreate their former sphere of influence?!

The first condition for improving our position in the family of European nations is to process our most recent history (I mean the history of totalitarianism), and the second condition is the ultimate acceptance of the moral code that is expressed by our more than one thousand year-long history – the opinion that protected our severely tested nation from obliteration and at the end of this century empowered it to come across as a nation state and to become the source of all power in this state.

### **What we would not find in our most recent history**

A glance at our political and social process, our newspapers, as well as publications in the human sciences will inevitably lead us to a surprising conclusion: we behave as if the last 60–70 years had not happened. And if some of the years happened anyway, somebody else lived through them. And if we lived through them

anyway, then our Slovak fascists and communists were extraterrestrials and the Communist Party was the starship Enterprise, which took them away after the Velvet Revolution to another galaxy. After that only those aggrieved and seduced remained, in short, a nation of victims.

However, it is odd that these victims start to feel some kind of nostalgia for the recent past. Instead of identifying those who are responsible for the misery of the present days, those who are responsible for our exclusion from the family of dynamically developing nations, those who blocked us off from the top ranks of intellectual, scientific, and technological competitions, more and more people (and perhaps voters) long for modest “rations” on a regular basis, which are scraps from the rich tables of the nomenclatura, instead of the cornucopia that offers itself in the distant future.

This situation is more dangerous than the destruction which lasted for decades and which kept damaging the natural core of society. The reason for this statement is that the lack of freedom has become a habit and freedom evokes a sense of helplessness in us.

On the other hand, this situation is understandable like any human behaviour connected with basic questions of existence. Freedom, which we longed for so much has brought more problems to each of us than the problems we had to cope with during the hated totalitarianism. For many people freedom has become some kind of luxury that they cannot afford if they want to survive.

What or who is to blame? Freedom? We or totalitarianism?

Totalitarianism is to blame. It took from us the knowledge of our capabilities, the capability to perceive the dimensions of being free, and the freedom of personality, as well as the capability to realize the responsibility that we accept.

The Slovak nation is marked by many peculiarities. One of the most unique ones is the struggle to escape from its history.

We are strangely quiet about the first Slovak State and about the four decades of Communist oppression as if we had already forgotten about them.

If we concentrate on the study of the history of totalitarianism in our society and the history of totalitarianism in each of us, we would discover the surprising fact that the black hole of oblivion is much deeper than we at first glance thought.

The period of the first Slovak State has not been processed yet. When reevaluating the Slovak National Uprising, politicians and historians were not able to do anything more than make several simplifying invectives.

If we disregard a few items that appeared after November 1989, we still do not have any deeper analysis of the period of communist totalitarianism, which lasted four full decades. For historians the history of totalitarianism is a taboo, which they avoid at all costs. One may wonder; what else remains for them to study?!

Except for the short period of time between the end of the Second World War and the Communist putsch in February 1948, Slovakia was for half a century under the rule of political systems that had several elementary antidemocratic features.

This return to totalitarianism in such a short time inevitably indicates a certain chronic impairment of our social consciousness, which gives way at the first opportunity to any attack by antidemocratic trends and forces.

Slovakia borders on five different states, each of which has its own position in the history of Europe and therefore also has a certain influence on its surroundings. For this reason Slovakia as a small country will be subject to continental or at least regional tendencies. Therefore Slovakia has the right to ask and answer the following question: had Slovakia any, at least theoretical chance, to stop the wave of fascist expansion to the East or stand up against the proletarian revolution aimed at the Atlantic?

This single question points out how complex the study of the history of totalitarianism in Slovakia is. This study must identify to what extent an inclination towards a totalitarian system is a part of the Slovak national character and to what extent totalitarianism was forced upon Slovakia.

In order to evaluate the previous epoch and the moral image of communism it is important to compare communism with the national socialist, that is, Ludák regime, too.

Communism and fascism had several completely identical features: they were both systems, where only one party ruled, both sought to control all components of the social process, and both promoted an ideology of hatred (in the case of fascism it was racial hatred and in the case of communism it was class hatred), which were grounds for mass deportations, mass detention, and mass killing. Subordination of the interests of the individual to the interests of the collective, the claim to an exclusive position of one truth, the claim to the exclusive right to interpret this truth, and the absolute subordination of man to this idea were attributes of political perversion that were presented in both cases as a hope for mankind.

The most convincing proof of the similarity, or even identity of various kinds of totalitarianism – fascist and communist – was their relationship to the notion of order. It is remarkable that although the notion of order was identified with society (social order), the organizational aspect (social order as an arrangement of a certain set of social elements, phenomena, and relations) kept disappearing and the aspect of discipline, or even blind obedience kept gaining importance.

While a pluralist society organizes around several social and moral pilot programmes, which are connected by several indisputable elementary moral and social standards (respect for life, truth, tolerance, etc.), a totalitarian society seeks to build its internal organization through hierarchies of social consciousness around a single aim, notion, ideal, or program. These were the unity and victory of the international proletariat.

This programme needed to be personified by a single person in the role of a leader, so that it would be convincing. For the Bolsheviks such a person was Stalin and for the Fascists Hitler.

Communist leaders were dangerous because of their capability to mask their authoritarian behaviour with some democratic image, emphasized folksiness, inclination towards the masses, etc. The present stuffing of their own pockets in the privatization process best reveals their antidemocratic orientation, their contempt for the true creators of values, and on the other hand their obsession with power, which they are now trying to gain through capital.

Denying any similarity between the communist and fascist systems is usually the first step on the way to the absolution of communism for all crimes that it committed against the people.

Our study of history should lead to a diagnosis of which elements from the fascist and communist past of our nation have survived in our thinking, behaviour, and establishment. I am deeply convinced that the number of "trace elements" of totalitarianism that we will find will be unexpectedly high, because we cannot deny that totalitarian simplifications have become a part of our thinking and behaviour.

Many citizens considered real socialism a legitimate attempt at building a new society. As more time passed after the putsch in February 1948, fewer citizens in Slovakia realized that communism achieved power in an absolute contradiction to the will of the majority of the nation, expressed in a parliamentary election.

If we really were aware of the antidemocratic character of the February 1948 putsch, we would be more wary of changes in the proportional representation in parliament achieved by pulling representatives from one faction to another or from one party to another. And certainly we would not let a party that had not taken part in any election take part in the ruling coalition.

The question of legitimacy is one of the most important questions that keep a regime and its representatives in check. The Communists kept avoiding this question or tried to answer it using attributes like people-democratic, etc. We should learn to ask the question of the legitimacy of a regime whenever substantial changes in the structure of power occur. We should use this question as a democratic means of control of not only the attainment of power, but also the execution of power.

The process of reevaluating the past and our behaviour in this historic test should contribute to preventing fascism or communism from ever coming back in any form and on any historic or social pretext. A reevaluation of the past must create in the consciousness of the people the determination to never again acquiesce in any totalitarian deformation of the social system.

This is not only about the identification of the community of the oppressed on the one hand and the group of moral cutthroats on the other hand, but mainly about the identification of the community of democratically thinking people, who claim the natural right to truth and freedom, the right to a free life in truth, and those who want to provide such life for future generations. Without this process all proclamations about the democratic orientation of the individual or society are just non-binding statements paying tribute to the new era.

The functioning of truth in the role of a factor of power must be a characteristic feature of democracy. A search for social and individual truth strengthens society and its defence mechanisms against any totalitarian inclination and temptation. Exercising identified truth increases the effectiveness of political decisions as well as individual and social effort.

The newly born Slovak statehood must rely on the nation's evident and historically confirmed desire for political freedom. Identification of this desire and determination of its influence on the historical development of the nation can be done only by an analysis of its own history.

Tradition plays the same role in the social organism as a genetic code in a biological structure. Those who can identify traces of indelible desire for freedom and disseminate this knowledge to fellow citizens in the state and within the continent acquire an indisputable claim to self-determination and sovereignty.

If I were to answer the question that I posed at the beginning of this introductory chapter – What we would not find in our recent history – then it is a term for the evil that has deprived us of almost any chance to seek a dignified future for the individual and nation.

### **Subjects and Objects of History I: The Citizen under Control and a Subjected Society – or the Phenomenology of Hardship and Decay**

From society's point of view the history of totalitarianism is mainly the history of disillusionment, injustice, and oppression.

Despite the meaning of the historic context and geopolitical place in the history of Slovakia, the history of totalitarianism in Slovakia is the history of the controlled individual and manipulated society. This means that the first topic of investigation must be the individual and his/her life as well as the society and social life.

The most important question to ask when studying the history of totalitarianism will be what the psychogram and sociogram of a person living under fascist or communist totalitarianism was like. What the ratio between his/her free will and his/her actual behaviour was, to what extent the totalitarian ideology represented an integral part of his/her personality, and to what extent his/her soul and thinking were held tight in the shell of totalitarian ideologies.

Further questions follow this one. What was the degree of adaptation of the Slovak citizen to the pressure from the structures of power and environment? Did he/she adapt spontaneously or under pressure? Where were the thresholds of individual and collective pain after which the enforcing mechanisms of the totalitarian regime started to work? Was a little sufficient, or were yet more ingenious mechanisms of control, enforcement, violence, or even terror necessary?



What was the protection of the individual against this pressure? Did he/she defend himself/herself just by pretense, did he/she grow some kind of hidden or open resistance to all ideological deformations, or did he/she opt for internal exile, often combined with resignation towards all democratic values?

These and similar questions should lead to a formulation of a certain phenomenology of political oppression and violence, which is closely connected to the question what was the response of the psyche and behaviour of the individual to the deformed stimuli from the regime. A search for tangible forms of suffering undergone by those generations is not a kind of sadomasochist game, but rather the first step towards realizing why many people acted in a given situation as they did, and to duly appreciate their suffering, heroism, or cowardice.

The most pressing question arising in the social area is whether we were a normal society like any other, or we were a sort of emergency community, which had to react to the unnatural conditions with emergency measures, some kind of “war communism”, or “state of emergency” in all areas of social life.

Extensive social pretence prevented any creation of a monolithic society, so much celebrated by totalitarian propagandists. In the same way as the shadow economy, which was often the only mechanism that provided people with food and consumer goods, existed alongside the normal economy, certain shadow formations and substitute structures, which had an interesting interaction with the official society, existed alongside the officially accepted and defined social structures.

As far as I know, there is not a more precise scientific study describing this unique phenomenon. We need such a study as a lesson to all people, who will be tempted to present their lust for power as a social reality. Nothing was so far from society and socialism as the very socialist society itself!

A clear definition of differences between the so-called socialist society and the real structures of power and relationships in the totalitarian period will help to identify the true position of the state party in the social process and organization of the state. This identification is necessary to find out who actually ruled this country.

An important and at the same time exciting question is why a nation of five million permitted a minority of half a million to impose its will upon it. Which historical fact, which feature of our character, and which aspect of our pre-communist development led us so far that we did not have enough internal resources to refuse the fascist or Bolshevik manipulation, unmatched in our history as far as magnitude, meanness, and depravity are concerned.

If we do not precisely identify those factors that weakened our social organism before February 1948, the probability will increase that we will either never or far too late recognize the danger of brown or red totalitarianism coming back in some slight variation today or tomorrow.

The following question is important too: What was the community of people that was formed under these dangerous conditions like? Was it normal? Was it temporary? What kept people together? Was it the knowledge of a common “cheerful” goal, or was it common suffering, oppression, and violence?

It would not be correct to blame just the small group of nomenclatura cadres for everything. Two lifelike terms appeared already during totalitarianism. They were political over-work and an anticipated anxiety of the cowardly citizens.

Fear or careering of many petty townfolk led to situations where their “contribution to building socialism” was higher than that required by the circumstances. Other people walked around on tiptoes so that they would not stumble thus providing for the future peace of the body and soul.

The common background, however, of such behaviour was fear of oppression and suffering that people were unable to bear and under which they could have failed much more than by choosing a path full of compromise.

There were people who praised something even when there was nothing to praise. There were people who beat their chests even when the communist functionaries themselves were embarrassed at the remains of something that did not work and never had any chance to work. Each history is a history of great heroism and great cowardice. There is no reason for the history of fascism during the Slovak State and the history of socialism during the post war period to be exceptions from this rule.

History is not only the history of political bullies and their victims. It is also the history of millions of simple people, who were able to live an honest life despite the despotism of politics. Our history must be written in such a way that it will fully reflect the fate of these people and so that their nationality will not show as a black mark on their biography.

It would be incorrect to identify the value of the communist system with the value of the life which people in this system lived. Not every person who grew and lived under communism automatically acquired the stigma marking him/her for the rest of his/her life. Although the communist party sought to exercise control over all aspects of life, this does not mean that life under communism was not productive and had only negative features.

Life under bad dictatorship does not mean a bad life.

Social consciousness is a special problem. Those who were able to “fit” into the social process, received more recognition than those who resisted. Has anything changed? Does not the behaviour of a friend or neighbour of yours remind you of yesterday’s models?

If adaptability, compromise, and submissiveness are socially more appreciated than resistance, then it is just a question of time until we will wake up to a new dictatorship, in which everything will be so beautifully simplified...

## **Subjects and Objects of History II: Rulers and Their Means – or the Phenomenology of Evil**

While studying the history of totalitarianism we must take into account the fact that a certain psychogram and sociogram of the ruling nomenclatura corresponded to the psychogram and sociogram of the ruled individual, and a certain structure of power and its internal relations corresponded to the structure of the controlled society.

Do we know them at all? Do we know at all how the profile of a future member of the party nomenclatura was formed? What was the proportion of life experience and the proportion of the system of party schools and education which were aimed at systematic brainwashing on different educational and professional levels?

Who formed the thinking of the nomenclatura and its style? And where did its actual revolutionary determination, and its aspired “revolutionary” determination come from? Was it just a system of prepared, academically dry rules of control and rule, or did the examples of more distant or recent “heroes of the proletarian revolution” play any role?

Did anybody believe this red cadre of holy forefathers and their testimony, or was it a question of just mechanically repeated political rituals (for example mandatory visits to Lenin’s museums throughout the Soviet empire) which long ago had lost any sense of content and meaning?

Of course, not all rulers were despots, not every ruler enjoyed a ruthless enforcement of power. Another question arises: How could sorrow find its place among party leaders when there was so much cruelty? Were their despotism and occasional mercy only various forms of elation by power? Or, did the hidden human side of the man, who did not cease to be a man even in the position of a party leader, present itself to the public?

Or, did the considerateness and mercy of the party leaders increase proportionately with doubts about the durability of the system, because when the system collapsed it would be good to have your “own Jew” to prove that one’s cooperation with the system was not perfect and party discipline was not so unconditional as one might have thought. Were occasional acts of considerateness or mercy a part of an effort to humanize the regime, give it a real human dimension, or were they just buying indulgences for their own conscience and future judges?

Undoubtedly, an interesting topic in the study of totalitarianism will be the relationship of the political leadership and membership, the system of political education, and the systematic stupefaction of the masses by eternal truths that would not have been able to outlive their creator.

It will certainly be necessary to distinguish between political centres and their executive machinery. However, the infrastructure of the mechanism of power cannot be explained only by discipline and obedience. It would be naive and unmaintainable to claim that the whole party machinery consisted of a number of abused people, who

became a means of political crime naively thinking that they were doing good. This problem as well as all others is much more complex and will certainly lead to a definition of personal profiles ranging from naive collaboration to purposeful and creative development of criminal ideas on lower levels closer to the citizen.

A special goal of this study will be the identification of the mechanisms of rule and means of control.

One of the most important topics of the historiography of totalitarianism will be the investigation of the function of lies in the social organism. Lies appear in historical studies in a number of forms: as a means of evaluation, as a means of propaganda. Lies served as a means of recognition and control of the “known” reality as well as a way out of a bad situation, as a life belt for a violated individual. Lies more and more often kept appearing as a means of feedback, which gave an impression of control over social processes.

The role of lies was to reaffirm the chosen direction and conceal hopeless prospects. Lies created a virtual reality, which was to replace the social justice of the more and more distant communist system.

All these are unique topics that historiography may have never dealt with to such an extent before, because lies had never played such an important role in any political system as in socialism.

In 1970 upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature Alexander Solzhenitsyn expressed a wise thought: “Violence can be concealed only with the help of lies and lies can be kept alive only with the help of violence.” And he prophetically added: “When lies become disputed, the nastiness of violence will be completely revealed. And then violence will become useless and corrupt by itself.” Prophetic words, indeed!

During the building of a socialist society the fate of the truth is connected with the role of lies. For example, there is an interesting question, how the truth was distributed in a socialist society – who had the right to it, how it was determined, how it was communicated, who could learn what and when. Under which circumstances the system “suspended the function of truth” and purposely, in a controlled way replaced it with a lie as an effective substitute.

The victims of the system’s fraudulent practice were not only simple, average citizens, who were the object of rule, but also communist leaders themselves. The more perfect their system, which was built on manipulation with lies and the truth, was, the more their political room was limited.

Therefore the following question will be crucial: What was the actual manoeuvring space of the powerful in the world? Could they have acted in a different way, did they have any radius of action, or were they just remote controlled puppets whose self-realization was only fulfilling the ideas and wishes of others?

Corruption was an important factor during the building of the socialist society. Here we do not mean corruption that a citizen could have used to buy some of his/her basic rights (for example to get a talented child of his/hers accepted to a school,

i.e. the right to education), but we mean the system of social consumption, which was in fact a huge corruption mechanism. The state used this mechanism to ensure the loyalty of wide segments of the population, especially manual labourers.

Evil is not all-inclusive and should not be considered all-inclusive. Forms of evil are various: evil may represent injustice and license too. Certainly, many rulers and autocrats committed evil with no apparent reason other than to try to prove to themselves and others their power or just to humiliate simple human pride. If in reevaluating our past we identify injustice from malicious licence, we will be able to determine the limits of human perversion beyond which begin forced labour camps, military penal units, gulags or concentration camps and gas chambers.

Identification of depraved wilfulness probably most concerns the dignity of a man exposed to pressure from a regime. Wilfulness realizes itself mainly through the humiliation of an opponent. Besides paralysation wilfulness also adds insult, humiliation, and liquidation of human dignity, which often results in the loss of self-esteem. Divorces for ideological reasons and marriages falling apart after ideological inspections, whose results led to the loss of position and income, were inconspicuous indicators that pointed to what extent the regime interfered with the essence of being of its citizens. What still remained ours?

The educational system also belonged to the regime's means of power. The educational system programmed the young individual for life in socialism with a level of obedience and discipline which put the state above the individual. This was organized defilement of conscience through a system of half truths and lies, promoting non-freedom on the level of social commitment and codification of antidemocratic principles as the principles of social organization opening the way to the "shining prospects of tomorrow". The educational system was a means of mixing reality with irrational fictions that were supposed to arouse the consciousness to achieving new goals of the socialist revolution...

The study of power and the powerful during the period of totalitarianism should lead to the identification of the extent of depravity and wrong that the previous regime committed on the people and society, and not only on the victims but also on those who were willing to participate in the ruling machinery. A list of all forms of oppression, pressure, manipulation, intimidation, and blackmail will be an eloquent testimony to the perversion of the system that used this arsenal of psychological and physical terror in the name of a more just tomorrow for all of mankind.

The definition of oppression and its means is closely connected with the definition of suffering and its consequences. The regime that came after November 1989 tried to compensate the discriminated ones. However, it came out that it is very hard to set criteria for assessing damage and evaluating its extent. We lack a phenomenology of damage, a description of pathological changes to the psyche and social being caused by totalitarian oppression.

While evaluating the consequences of the previous period we are inclined to take into account only such damages that can be expressed as provable financial loss.

However, how can we evaluate damage inflicted upon the family and society, how can we evaluate damage caused by the fact that a talented young person could not study at a university or a capable scientist could not carry out his/her profession?

**The Lesson from the Most Recent Critical Development:  
Crime, Guilt, and Punishment...**

Reevaluation of the period of totalitarianism is connected with the question of responsibility and guilt. A situation in which everybody is a victim and nobody is guilty undermines people's trust in justice and inevitably deprives them of the will to do something for the future.

Responsibility is connected with the extent of guilt. This guilt will surely be different in the case of a communist leader, who for decades enjoyed fame, power, material goods, and political primitivism than in the case of a simple man who did not have many options, because the regime took his children hostage: the opportunity for a normal education or for relatively normal conditions for personal development was a means of systematic blackmail, and everyone of us had the feeling that we did not have the right to pay for freedom with the future of our children or to give up their creative or scientific plans.

Of course, determining guilt should be connected with the duty to compensate for inflicted damage. However, how many lives would a communist functionary, who with haughty statements "decided" the fate of hundreds and thousands of people, have to live in order to undo at least a fraction of the suffering and losses caused by him/her?

Under the term compensation we usually understand financial compensation for damage that can be evaluated. But who can financially express the extent of psychological suffering that deformed the character and destiny of its bearers?

Who can come up with a numerical equivalent of disillusion, humiliation, or injustice, which so quickly and easily turn into feelings of helplessness, resignation and bitterness?

Of course, if the damage inflicted by the communist regime cannot be financially evaluated and compensated for, it does not mean that we should be silent about it and maintain the impression that there was no damage at all and that actually nobody made any sacrifice nor was victimized. The mere identification of damage itself, and its public acknowledgement brings a certain feeling of moral satisfaction and compensation. And at the same time it is a condemnation of those who caused this evil either directly or indirectly. The anonymity of the wrongdoer and indifference towards damage belong to the most malicious attacks on the morality of society, because everyone who submits to the temptation to engage in filthy politics can claim impunity.

The morality of the then ruling class and its ideological party framework are best shown by the fact that those responsible for inhuman crimes have not yet ad-

mitted guilt. They have not shown any sorrow for their deeds regardless of whether they committed them out of conviction or ignorance. In many cases they even present themselves as victims of some victorious mob that deprived them of social dignity after November 1989.

Neither the Communist Party of Slovakia nor the Party of the Democratic Left, nor party collectives or individuals have yet apologized to the nation. Not only have they not admitted political responsibility, but they keep avoiding it.

This cowardice is not inherent only to totalitarian parties and their pseudo-democratic followers, but also to individuals, who have never admitted that they were too cowardly to help those in need, to prevent apparent wrong and injustice. The obedient silence was the basis of a social consensus that was built on the principle of fear: if others have been harassed, hopefully, I will be spared.

Nobody was spared.

Public denunciation of this evil as well as acknowledgement and sympathy for personal suffering of individuals and whole groups and identification of the injustice that the regime committed on a given victim are the best ways to alleviate the impact of the cruelty of the previous period and to evoke a feeling in the people that their pain has not been left unnoticed. This moral redress would convince corrupt rulers that none of their injurious deeds would be left unnoticed.

In the same way as the legal system of Germany contains the term of the so-called Auschwitz lie, we should introduce the notion of the so-called Katyn or gulag lie into our legal system. In the same way as the Germans call a conscious denial of Nazi atrocities committed on Jews the Auschwitz lie, we should use the term “Katyn” or “Gulag lie” to describe any conscious and intentional denial of the millions of victims of the wanton wilfulness of totalitarian rulers in those countries that for four decades aimed at a building the brighter tomorrow of a communist society on the ruins of destroyed lives.

The German Criminal Code punishes the Auschwitz lie with a 3-year unconditional prison sentence.

What should be the punishment for the downplaying of the tragic consequences of the communist regime, which already starts with a sigh: “Why, things were not that bad then ...” These few words that we hear every day imply the amount of work ahead of us that we have to do before people realize WHAT REALLY happened then and that NOTHING LIKE THIS must ever happen again.

### **Several Notes on the Method**

The task that I have outlined in the previous chapters may frighten many people by its extent, by its organizational and moral demands, and the resistance that the former representatives of the bright socialist tomorrow and today’s representatives of the sad post-communist present will put up against any investigation.

Is it possible at all to make our way towards the truth through this mass of evil, filth, meanness, and lies?

In my opinion, the processing of the history of the totalitarian period in our society does not require an especially sophisticated approach. The basic attributes of this period are well known to all of us. The history of totalitarianism is the history of fear, dependence, seduction and lies, and the history of ideological fraud and psychological manipulation are the history of small and big lies, which have completely exhausted the moral and material resources of society.

However, the seriousness of this task should not discourage researchers from the primary collection of data. If this gathering of data is carried out at a later date, it will inevitably bring much more modest results. Conscious or unconscious destruction of archives will go on, the human memory will slowly give way, and many facts may be concealed with ingenious masking manoeuvres by those who would like to put historiography to sleep for all eternity.

The first phase of the processing of our modern history should be the collection of all documentary material while it exists, or, more precisely, while the victims of this system are still alive. The collected facts themselves will represent a considerable moral force, because nobody will know when and from which point of view they will be evaluated. Facts do not represent only testimony, but they are contemporary witnesses to crimes that can be a reason for historic protest or social resistance.

One could argue about individual observations and opinions. However, all people that will work on this – scientists, historians, journalists, or deputies, must agree on one thing: that the principles of totalitarianism are unacceptable to each of them. An anti-totalitarian and pro-democratic spirit is the moral and political compass that must lead people towards finding the truth. This path will lead through a jungle of facts and legends, as well as truths and half-truths.

Under no circumstances should the processing of our most recent history become a weapon against anyone who cooperated with the communist regime in any way. Processing and reevaluation of our own history is a process of self-reflection, in which the individual as well as society identify what happened, what happened to them, and what they did to others. Reevaluation of one's history is firstly an intensive process, not an extensive one. This process does not cover a wide area, but it reaches in to the depths of individual and social knowledge.

Reevaluation of history is not a fight in mud and with mud. History must not be a cane to be used against an opponent or as a means of self-flagellation. The goal of this work and process must be the reestablishment of self-confidence and the dignity of the generations that have been dishonoured by being drawn into this criminal experiment and made responsible for it in some respect.

During the processing of the collected data it will be important to distinguish between reality or facts and opinions about reality. Our historiography is inclined to present opinions as facts and vice versa.



History should be evaluated according to how it actually was and not according to how we would like it to be.

It would be incorrect to understand this effort as a preparation of some academic laws explaining the depravity of the recent past. This effort should end with a true picture of the everyday life, the average day, and common man's daily fight for dignified survival. Hope for more democratic conditions undoubtedly was an important driving force of this effort.

It is obvious that during research of this type, citizens will appear who just want to cultivate their own image.

Although historians will have the last word in the whole process, reevaluation of our most recent history is and will be a task for all of society. Each one will have to participate, because each one was either an object or a subject of this history. Everyone's participation may be either direct – by providing basic information, personal memories, or archives, or indirect – by creating a social atmosphere that will prevent this process from stopping halfway and ensure that it will not turn into a witch-hunt, but will remain what historiography above all is – a passionate hunt for facts and their correct interpretation, i.e. a permanent striving for historical truth.

For the sake of thoroughness we should emphasize that the idea of concentrating all documentary material and engaging in a purposeful study of the crimes of communism is not new. This idea was brought forward by the last federal Minister of the Interior, Ján Langoš. The result of his initiative is the Office for Investigation of the Crimes of the Communist Regime, which remained in the Czech Republic when the federation dissolved. On occasion an article about various common committees or even common projects of historians appears in the media. However, up to now we do not have any output that we could use in social or political practice. These projects do not possess such a scope and public awareness that they would create something we could call a nation-wide society.

The Slovak nation and non-Slovak citizens of Slovakia underwent a long and terrible historical experience – half a century of two totalitarian regimes. These 50 years checked their desire for freedom and democracy. If they have set out on a course towards a just democratic society, this does not mean that they have won the entire fight for a democratic tomorrow. Historical experience as well as the current development in the political life of Slovakia indicate that totalitarianism in us and outside us has weakened the social organism to such an extent that a return to totalitarianism is still entirely feasible.

For this reason it is necessary to process and evaluate the experience from the previous period and draw conclusions that will be motivated by an effort to undo the wrongs and damage committed by the previous regime on the common people and above all to make the return of totalitarianism, in any form and for any reason, impossible.

Processing the most recent history of Slovakia is necessary so that we will know the social and historic basis on which we want to build a new democratic order as

well as the international political context in which we will pursue our goals. The countries of the former socialist bloc have similar problems. Our worries are also their worries and vice versa. We could not imagine that the monster of communism coming back to life on any side of our borders would not have an influence on what is going on in our country.

For these reasons we should make a sort of an alliance of truth about our recent past with our former partners in the socialist bloc. This truth will necessarily imply certain obligations like our sincere remorse about our participation in “the Final Solution of the Jewish problem” or the ethnic purges that took place in Slovakia and neighbouring countries in the form of various deportations and expulsions. Based on this truth we will request an apology from our southern neighbour for the occupation of the Trans-Carpathian Ukraine as well as the occupation of southern Slovakia by Horthy’s troops.

Historical truth and historical consciousness will increase our reception of such signals that should have been sent – again from our southern neighbour – in 1990 during the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Trianon Treaty in Hungary, or the re-burial of the mortal remains of Admiral Horthy, which in doing so, Hungary indirectly approved his anti-Slovak policy – even in the presence of some Slovak political representatives. The application of the consequences of this historical truth implies clear conditions for everybody who wants to build good neighbourly relations. Their acceptance will be the best proof of their intention to build relationships of cooperation, understanding, and mutual respect.

From the international point of view the fight against communism was a fight for the reunification of Europe. The fall of communism removed another factor that divided our continent into two parts already then having not much in common.

When the wall of non-freedom collapsed, a precipice of differences appeared. Bridges should be built over this precipice, but they should not be bridges of one-sided help of the West to Eastern countries, but bridges of solidarity, that rely on the same system of democratic values. We should not restrict ourselves to the envious statement that we do not have everything the West has and we want to have, but we should purposely work on recognizing our common cultural, spiritual and ideological roots characterized by the common will for democratic rules of social and political life.