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Paper Presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021

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Lidice Memorial: A symbol of Crime against Humanity at the Service of a State Narrative

Memorials and museums focused on the history of the Second World War are experiencing profound transformations in the millennium all over Europe. They remain centrepieces of the state policy and in most cases of the traditional commemorative culture. Museums and their exhibitions are visual presentations of historical narratives that are passed from generation to generation and stimulate the past, present and future interpretations of history. In Europe, the concepts of memorials differ in Western and Eastern Europe. The contradiction lies in the acceptance of negative societal phenomena such as collaboration with the enemy, informing and treacherousness mainly against the Jews for the origin myth of the European community. In a contrast, there are celebrations of the Great Patriotic War, i.e. adoration of victory and the related payment off the old scores, retribution, loot, occupation of foreign territories and their use.¹

In connection with the war, taboo topics and national symbols were broken gradually after the end of the Cold War in the individual participating states. Almost all states are experiencing it and they represent natural, though often painful settlement of the historical

¹ Ekaterina Makhotina (Hg.), Ekaterina Keding (Hg.), Włodzimierz Borodziej (Hg.), Etienne François (Hg.), Martin Schulze Wessel (Hg.), *Krieg im Museum. Präsentationen des Zweiten Weltkriegs in Museen und Gedenkstätten des östlichen Europa*, München 2015; Karin Stögner, *Erinnern und Vergessen. Zum Begriff des Eingedenkens bei Walter Benjamin*, in: *Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes* (Hg.), *Jahrbuch 2006. Schwerpunkt Erinnerungskultur*, Wien 2006, s. 37-48; Charles S. Maier, *Overcoming the Past? Narrative and Negotiation, Remembering, and Reparation: Issues at the Interface of History and the Law, in: Politics and the Past. On Repairing Historical Injustices*, Oxford 2003, s. 295-305.

facts. For the Soviets, this case involved the myth of the first female laureate of the Hero of the Soviet Union medal awarded in memoriam to the partisan Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya. The partisan hanged in the village of Petrischevo on 29 November 1941 became an icon of the propaganda and a photo of her half-naked body with a noose on her neck published in the Pravda paper in January 1942 flew around the world. This broke several taboos at once. From the murder of a woman, through the naked breasts to the story of courage. The propaganda showed a young courageous woman as a victim of raging Germans who set up a trap for her. In 1990, the story was updated to the point that the young partisan was denounced by her co-fighter and handed over to the occupiers with the help of the local residents.

The history of Wehrmacht whose legacy was followed by Bundeswehr in the 1950s, experienced a similar transformation from the legend of an abused and heroic army. The exhibition "Crimes of the Wehrmacht. Dimensions of the Extermination War 1941-1944" that was opened in 1995 broke the passed tradition of the guileless and fair Wehrmacht. The protests of the neo-Nazi scene and bomb attacks served as an accompanying phenomenon of the mental reversal.

The symbols and legends filled most of the museums mainly in the Eastern Bloc where they were perceived as conservative media of remembrance that had to fulfil a political function and on which the contemporary political elites were relying. The task lay in strengthening and unifying attitudes towards real or suspected culprits of the massacres at the expense of other groups of victims who did not fit the plot and were thus omitted. The communist view until 1989 and the almost militant nationalism of the subsequent years hampered the recognition of the past in other than black and white vision. This corresponded with visualization of the reverent areas and museum expositions. They did not tolerate that the fixed interpretation of the past should be revealed as manipulated. The scenarios suggestively presented politically understandable and acceptable national, class, moral and ethic stories free of negative or disturbing elements.

This is also the case of the Lidice Memorial in the presentation of modern Czech history. No other victims received as much attention from the media, political representation, cultural representatives or ordinary citizens as victims of the "Lidice tragedy" in Czechoslovakia during the Second World War.

The suffering of a village that was wiped out after the assassination of the head of the Nazi security office, Reichsprotektor and Holocaust originator Reinhard Heydrich on 10 June 1942 became a symbol of future victory and retribution. The shooting of 173 men, deportation of 200 women to a concentration camp and gassing of 82 children was a turning point in perception of the war by the Czechs and Western allies. The announced total destruction of the village changed into official justification of merciless retaliation with all war and postwar consequences despite the fact that the victims were also non-participating civilians including old people and children: *"Before the war is over, perhaps millions of Germans will die and they will experience the main retaliation at the moment of their own fall by joint effort of all of us, you and us."*² President Edvard Beneš declared three days after extermination of the village. The exile Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk went even further in his hagiographical description of the victims in his speech on the BBC on 8 July 1942: *The murder of the saint citizens of Lidice has become one of the greatest events in America since the outbreak of the war. Even the retarded have understood that the eye for eye and tooth for tooth is not just a biblical cliché, but an irrevocable, sober reality. The saint citizens of Lidice and Ležáky have irretrievably obliged all decent people around the world with their blood. The Lidice kids whose dads were killed and mums kidnapped have become the kids of all of us."*³

Besides the murdered men and children, attention focused on 143 women who returned to liberated Czechoslovakia from the Ravensbrück concentration camp in June 1945, exactly three years after their expulsion. During the following two years, 17 children who survived extermination of the village returned to Czechoslovakia. From the moment of their arrival, the Lidice plain became an extraordinary field of tension of meanings and symbols that significantly interfere with the contemporary Czech perception of the war and the political scene.

The remembrance process in Lidice was heavily affected by the volatile motives of political mobilisation in the individual development periods of Czechoslovakia. Commemorative culture in Lidice is in constant clash between adoration of the victims and realistic description of the war events and postwar birth of the symbol. The memories of the war and presentation

² Ibidem, p. 162.

³ Jan MASARYK, London Calling, Prague 1948, p. 181, speech from 8 July 1942 entitled "Return from America to England".

of the state-selected suitable victims became an intensively used symbol of a conflict between the East and the West during the Cold War.

The common enemy in the name of Lidice, already disregarding the civilian victims, was clearly identified. In connection with Lidice and five thousand other victims, the United Kingdom and France revoked validity of the Munich Agreement.

In Czechoslovakia, mainly at the time of communism, Lidice served as support of the Eastern Bloc principles in the building of socialism, which was put in deep contrast with the Western democracies. From 1948 to 1989, the Western democracies were presented as perpetrators of the war and thus suffering of the Lidice victims. The communist regime protected the remembrance of the dead and suffering of the living as an emotional principle, which could be applied in a political pressure. The clear image of Lidice as a cult of the Munich Agreement from September 1938 completely overshadowed collaboration of Hitler's Germany with Stalin's Soviet Union. The gradual liquidation of Czechoslovak resistance oriented to the Western powers was practically completed after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. Until the attack of the Nazis against the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Czechoslovak communist resistance was practically paralysed because it lacked support from the Comintern. The consequences of the assassination and destruction of the village with a strong left-wing orientation of the labourers and miners directly called upon the creation of a new symbol of the proletariat.

Geopolitically, the national monument was the westernmost internationally recognized remembrance site of the entire Eastern Bloc, but with its rhetoric, it was fundamentally oriented on the monuments. These facts predestined this area for extremely conflicting views of the past as regards the state historical policy. The Lidice Memorial does not simply reflect the state policy; it has directly been its tool in the past eighty years. Unlike European monuments of a similar type, there was not only a commemorative museum constructed in the contemporary architectonic concept in an immediate vicinity of the site, but there was also a whole new village built for the war survivors. The fusion of national narrative with everyday life created an unprecedented presentation of the history. Only one of the Lidice women who returned from the concentration camp is still alive. The monument is standing on a generational border that gradually opens a debate over our cultural and educational direction of the reverent space. For decades, it has been a central element of Czech collective

memory because it brings together transgenerationally and transnationally understandable emotiveness of nationalism and social equality. The torturous death connected all men regardless of their social status. The murder of the children gave a direct impulse to the creation of a hitherto unknown definition of "crimes against humanity" by the legal committee of the War Crimes Commission under the United Nations General Assembly. And the return of Czech women from the concentration camps symbolized a new beginning of the cleansed Czechoslovak society with the burden of irreversible loss of families.

The second life of Lidice

The Czechoslovak government decided to build new Lidice on 6 June 1945. Only four days later, the promise was announced publicly at the largest postwar peace rally directly on the Lidice plain. On 10 June 1945, selected supreme state representatives led by President Edvard Beneš and distinguished dignitaries sat on stands for the guests. For the first time, the promise to re-build Lidice was given to the broad audience by Václav Nosek, from April 1945 the communist Minister of the Interior. On this occasion, the Local Committee in Prague led by the communist and former Dachau prisoner Ladislav Kopřiva also opened a competition for ideas about construction of the new village and design of the reverent space. Appropriate media resonance was provided by the communist Information Minister Václav Kopecký, representative of hard-line Stalinist core of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ). Antonín Zápotocký, survivor of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Prime Minister in 1948-1957 and President of the CSR after the death of Klement Gottwald, supervised the construction of the new village. While the construction of Lidice was presented as the birth of a new village on the ruins of the old world of the war in 1948, all the mentioned representatives of the Central Committee of the KSČ were deeply involved in political processes of the Stalinist era in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1953. During the commemorative events in Lidice, guests who were sitting side-by-side changed into the perpetrators and victims after 1948. General Heliodor Píka, a representative of Czechoslovak foreign anti-Nazi resistance who was executed after the communist coup in 1949, sat on the same stand. Dr. Milada Horáková, a prewar politician and prisoner in a concentration camp, became vice-president of the Union of Liberated Political Prisoners and was mother of an adolescent daughter. She was executed in a political process in 1950 as the only woman. The

communist leaders did not hear pleas for mercy from Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt or Winston Churchill. We can even find a request of female representatives of the Local Committee in Lidice among the six thousand request for her exemplary punishment, which was organized by the KSČ. The Lidice remembrance ceremonies were also attended by a high-ranking member of the KSČ Rudolf Slánský whose parents, brother and relatives died during the Holocaust. Rudolf Slánský was executed after a fabricated anti-Zionist trial in 1953.

The Lidice tale also omitted direct citizens who did not fit the story of the saints of Lidice. Both Czechoslovak RAF airmen Josef Horák and Josef Stříbrný whom the Nazis mistakenly considered Heydrich's assassins were not considered Lidice citizens after 1948 and were practically excommunicated. Mr. and Mrs. Mařík with their two sons were allowed to leave the village on the fateful night of the destruction. However, they were not allowed to return to the newly built village. František Seidl was in prison for the murder of his son at the time of the burning. He could not return to restored Lidice either.⁴

Victims of the communist regime also include the judicial service general Bohuslav Ečer. Referring to the Nazi crimes and especially that in Lidice, he implemented the definition of "crimes against humanity" at the Allied Council in 1945. The Czechoslovak Security Service intended to sentence him to many years in prison in a monstrous process, but he died of a heart attack a day before the arrest.

The visual image of the reverent area and architecture of the new village were crucial for the understanding of the social divide, which was represented by May 1945, for the future perception of the restored village as a symbol of "New Czechoslovakia". The winning design of the reverent area was minimalist modification of the commemorative site where external walls of the church, school and Horák's farmhouse where the Lidice men were executed were revealed. In the terrain, the men's grave and the restored original Lidice cemetery were highlighted by greenery. In 1955, the Orchard of Friendship and Peace was established. It was initiated by the British politician Sir Barnett Stross, founder of the "Lidice shall live" movement. The architectonic memorial – gloriolite with lateral wings and a terrace was built in 1962. To the west of the original village, 150 new houses were constructed and gradually handed to the surviving women and children.⁵ The architectonic design of the new village fully

⁴ National Archive Prague, Ministry of Interior, Referat-L, C 6179, Sg. 524-23-14.

⁵ State District Archive Kladno, Local National Committee Lidice, 1950, p. 95.

corresponds to the postwar socialist realism that is based on the Soviet socialist architecture. The Soviets built this architectural style on the heritage of Russian architecture of the 19th century and the French Empire of the Napoleonic era. This is why we can find ancient elements that enthralled the French dictator. Lidice was constructed in the spirit of rural socialist realism. The newly built towns had a boulevard lined with double alley terminated by a prominent building.

No other village in Czechoslovakia received such generous financial means as Lidice for its rebirth. Facades of the modern houses were decorated with reliefs and sgraffiti. Rusticwork, plastic cornices and balustrades were also used. This entire concept allowed the architects and artists to include ideological messages into the public space. The buildings as well as the alley connecting the centre of the village demonstrate the rural type of socialist realism in Bohemia. The church was never restored in the new village although Catholic Church with some of the local citizens considered beatification of the executed local priest Josef Šternberka. According to the original plan, farmsteads were not restored in the new village although some of the local women wanted to restore their farms for their livelihood. On the contrary – the land was confiscated for the construction of the village and the monument. Presentation of the village to the domestic and foreign public was assumed by the "Lidice women", members of the Communist Party who served support to the regime.

In 1972, an extraordinary press conference took place where the Czechoslovak government announced criminal prosecution of Nazi criminals living in West Germany directly in Lidice. The regime rightfully accused West Germany of its unwillingness to prosecute perpetrators of the post-Heydrich terror. The regime medially presented one of the Lidice orphans who had already appeared in the Nuremberg trial against Lebensborn in 1948. In 1972, this victim held an important political function in the village. During historical research in 2015, it became clear that one day before the Gestapo raided Lidice in 1942, this orphan's mother denounced her Jewish tenant. The denounced woman died in Auschwitz two and a half months later. This information was secret from 1945 until now. The publication of this information not only in a book, but also on Czech television resulted in a political scandal triggered by communist and far-right-wing parties. Incidentally, also the last surviving Lidice woman published information

about the denouncement in her book *Jako chlapce by mě zastřelili* [They would have killed if I was a boy] in the same year. This situation resulted in the dismissal of the Lidice Memorial director at the beginning of 2020. The book *Lidice. Zrození symbolu* [Lidice. The Birth of a Symbol], which had been recommended by the scientific community among the important works of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, was withdrawn from the offer of books at the Lidice Memorial.

The difference between the East European and West European concepts of the Second World War memorials is the contrast in their message. While the West European monuments lead the visitors to understanding and reconciliation with the war and its consequences, the East Europeans perceive the museums as tools of coercive politics. Instead of accepting responsibility for all the injustice on the people of Lidice brought about by the Nazi and later the Communist regime, the Czech public accepted "national amnesia" by some groups of victims.⁶

⁶ Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*, Boston 2001, p. 19.