

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد بدین بوم و پر زنده یک تن مېباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

SUSAN ROBERTS

27.05.2025

Red is Not the New Brown: Reflections on the Politics of Memory



Victory Day Parade on Red Square on 9 May 2025. Photograph Source: Kremlin.ru – [CC BY 4.0](#)

Nobody doubts the difficulty of counting the dead in war. Hence the omnipresent tomb for The Unknown Soldier which commemorates that sad reality. But sometimes deficiencies in counting are about something else. Look at Gaza's grim counter which seems to have got stuck at 52,000 when everybody knows the number is much higher. Given that by June 2024 over 39000 Palestinian deaths had been recorded, it is hard not to believe that the West has imposed its own moratorium on reporting fatalities; perhaps in some vain attempt to assuage sensitivities back home.

One death toll that is well-known, however, at least to an older generation, is 27 million. That being the number of souls the Soviet Union lost in the Second World War. And it is generally acknowledged, by historians if not by European politicians, that the fight against Fascism could not have been won without that Soviet sacrifice – their costly victory at Stalingrad

being the turning point that secured victory for the Allies. And to give the size of that death toll some historical perspective: the loss of 27 million people in 1945 would have equated to wiping out of the entire populations of Poland (24m), Lithuania (2.7m) and Estonia (1.08m). It is therefore beyond disappointing that Europe's current political representatives felt unable to show a modicum of respect for the horrendous suffering that preserved Western Civilisation. Indeed, Robert Fico, the Slovakian Prime Minister, who only last year was seriously injured by a far-right assassin, and Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian President, were the sole European leaders in attendance at the 80th anniversary of V.E. Day in Moscow. But whether in attendance or not, attempting to elide that immeasurable Soviet contribution brings nothing but shame on those engaged in such historical revisionism. It also serves to remind us that Fascism was not a movement confined to Nazi Germany.

Kaja Kallas, Vice President of the EU Commission, and well-known Estonian Russophobe, scolded the two leaders for breaking ranks, insisting that they should have marked the day in Kiev. Not wishing to take anything away from the suffering of the Ukrainian people both in WW2 and today, in the West's proxy war against Russia, but Kallas knows that it was the Soviet army that liberated Slovenia and Slovakia from both the retreating German Nazis and the Fascist Ukrainian Nationalists – the Waffen SS Galicja Division – who were then supporting them. None of us are responsible for the actions of our ancestors, but it is surely appropriate that commemoration day is spent on the soil of the liberators rather than in the country whose Fascist forces forestalled them.

Particularly on days set aside for honouring those killed in war, it is important not to besmirch their memory with political machinations emanating from the present, but unfortunately that is what is now happening. And it is happening because of European initiatives like the 2008 Prague Declaration which is a project aimed at reframing the narrative of WW2 along the lines of a 'Double Genocide' in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union are viewed as equally complicit in war crimes. Whilst such a revisionist proposal might seem far-fetched given that it is common knowledge that the Soviet army liberated Europe from Nazi Germany – according to historian Geoffrey Roberts 80% of all combat in WW2 took place on the Eastern front – the Double Genocide construct is being deployed in order to whitewash the fact that the war against Fascism was not fought by the whole of Europe. Not only were a number of European states allied with Germany, the so-called Axis powers, but in others, particularly in the East, there was active support for Nazi efforts to exterminate European Jewry. And it is the fact of Nazi collaboration that those

states, now liberated from Soviet occupation and part of the EU, are having to come to terms with.

According to the Simon Weisenthal Centre, [SWC] “the rate of Holocaust murder in the Baltics was the highest in Europe.” Many such murders were of individuals or families who were shot by their neighbours, often close to their home. Those neighbours were not criminals or thugs, but ordinary people drawn from all walks of life. Rather than acknowledging that painful reality, the governments of such states, particularly Lithuania, have chosen to downplay their complicity in the genocide by attributing the murders to the actions of a national independence movement seeking emancipation from Soviet occupiers and their communist supporters. The difficulty with that line of argument is that it implies that the murdered Jews supported the Soviet occupation of 1940, which is not true. But even if it were true, why would 220,000 Jews need to be slaughtered for their political views? Because most of these people did not die in battles, or street fights, or any sort of partisan confrontation. They were not even armed, and many were children. And what about the Jews who escaped being murdered and did join the partisans to fight the Nazis, would they be classified as war criminals, guilty of Soviet crimes? Unbelievably, under the Double Genocide dogma formalised into Lithuanian law the answer is yes.

+++

A further problem with this notion of Double Genocide is that in order to make Soviet killings symmetrical with the Nazi genocide, the definition of genocide has to be expanded from that contained in the Genocide Convention. The definition there was specifically drafted after the war to describe Nazi actions directed against ‘a people’, i.e., a genus; and in that case the people were Jews. In order for actions or inactions to be capable of constituting a genocide they have to be directed at ‘a people’ or part of ‘a people’, and not simply at people. And what constitutes ‘a people’ is defined in the convention as something ethnic or racial or religious or national, e.g., like the Palestinians. By expanding the notion of ‘a people’ to include Social or Political groups which is what the Lithuanian Criminal Code has done in order to incorporate Soviet killings, the definition of genocide has become so diluted as to be meaningless.[1]

The ‘Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism’ which, according to Wikipedia, is the initiative of the Czech government, was signed on June 3rd 2008 by “prominent European politicians, former political prisoners and historians.” It also received letters of support from a cluster of right-wing elder statesmen – Margaret Thatcher and Zbigniew Brzezinski, being two of them. So the project is a large one, involving politicians,

academics, historians, lawyers, European government institutions and NGOs. Its overt purpose is “to call for Europe-wide condemnation of, and education about, the crimes of communism.” Without any hint of irony, the Declaration states that its intention to create a “Platform for European memory and Conscience”, draws heavily on the conception of totalitarianism.

What is taking place here is more than the countenancing of an alternative interpretation of the past. Because what is emphasised in the Declaration is the need to forge a unitary view: ‘to consolidate .. a united European memory of the past.’ Apparently, “Europe will not be united unless it is able to reunite its history,” which is an idea that is both novel and dangerous. How many countries, parties, people have an identical view of the past? The Declaration goes on to put forward a wide range of tactics through which the desired consolidation can be effected, including:- “a Europe-wide overhaul of school text books in order to educate children about the dangers of Communism; the establishment of a new remembrance day – Black Ribbon Day – which would unite Nazi victims with Soviet ones; the promulgation of new local laws in order to punish and provide compensation for crimes retrospectively identified as ‘Communist war crimes’; the setting up of commissions of investigation within nation states in order to identify Communist war crimes comparable with Nazi ones – the so-called Red-Brown commissions and the co-opting of historians and academics to sit on them. The late historian, Sir Martin Gilbert, resigned from such a commission in disgust at the Lithuanian government’s treatment of Jewish survivors of the holocaust, who were being ‘excoriated’ as Communists and threatened with prosecution for war crimes because they had joined the partisans. Unsurprisingly, none of the octogenarians were actually prosecuted, but no public apologies were issued either.

Unsurprisingly, the Declaration has received a lot of criticism concerning its revisionism and holocaust distortion. The SWC described it as “a new and insidious combination of antisemitism and holocaust distortion”, “a well-coordinated effort to rewrite history and to persuade Western Europe to join in jettisoning the historic concept of the holocaust.” The SWC further suggested that “The goal of this sophisticated, new incarnation of extreme forms of local ultranationalism, antisemitism and racism, is to whitewash the massive Baltic nations’ participation in the murder of their Jewish populations.” It has certainly resulted in a number of historians, who have raised the thorny issue of local collaboration, being prosecuted for defamation, particularly in Poland. In the post Prague Declaration world, governments want their populations exonerated, not accused

The Declaration also serves to protect Nazi war criminals from prosecution, as historian and former Nazi Hunter Efraim Zuroff explains, “The lack of political will to bring Nazis war criminals to justice and/or to punish them continues to be the major obstacle to achieving justice, particularly in post-Communist Eastern Europe. The campaign led by the Baltic countries to distort the history of the Holocaust and obtain official recognition that the crimes of Communism are equal to those of the Nazis is another major obstacle to the prosecution of those responsible for the crimes of the Shoa.”

Coming to terms with your nation’s or, more precisely, your parents’ collaboration in a genocide must be unimaginably painful. When Anthony Eden, Britain’s war-time Foreign Secretary was asked by film-maker, Marcel Ophuls, what he thought of the Vichy government’s collaboration with their Nazi occupiers, he demurred, politely pointing out that ‘Britain had not been occupied.’ It was a gracious moment. But Ophuls’ 4 hour documentary about that collaboration: ‘The Sorrow and the Pity’ – was devastating for French society. In 1981, more than ten years after the film had been made and shown in selected cinemas, the French government finally permitted it to be broadcast on TV and the cocoon of imagined resistance was ripped away. Voices in the establishment regarded the work as a traitorous and damaging portrait of the French people, and had tried to block its screening. But ultimately the film had a transformative effect on French culture, especially on French film and literature.

Admittedly, French Liberal society’s comfort with Nazism was not as aggressively collaborationist as that of the independence-seeking countries of Eastern Europe – ordinary French citizens tended to ignore the genocide rather than aid it. Still, the very fact of Nazi collaboration by those nascent states raises an important moral question regarding a nation’s choice of allies in its fight for nationhood, as pointed out by Lithuanian philosopher, Leonidas Donskis, in his attempt to come to terms with his country’s collusion. Donskis does not seek to moralise and he resists dividing Lithuanian society up into Jews and Lithuanians, as is so often done. Instead, he blames his country’s crimes and moral failings on a lack of leadership; on the failure of the political elites of the time to delegitimize the rule of the occupier which was their task. In Donskis view, in failing to do that they became collaborators. When under Nazi occupation in 1941, the provisional government spouted the same racist rhetoric as their occupiers, as captured by an article in a contemporary news magazine, ‘The New Lithuania’, published in July 1941: “The New Lithuania, joined to Adolf Hitler’s New Europe, must be cleansed of Jews... Exterminating Jewry, and together with it Communism, is the first task of the New Lithuania.”

If, following the Prague Declaration, Nazism and Communism are to be conflated and some sort of criminal symmetry established, it is difficult to see what hateful ideological rhetoric Communism has produced that equates with the rabid racism above. ‘Workers of the world unite,’ doesn’t seem to hold quite the same menace as ‘Exterminate world Jewry’. That is not to say that the Soviet regime did not commit war crimes; they did. The massacre of 20,000 Poles at Katyn being, perhaps, the best known. What Stalin ordered to be done was horrific, but it was not genocide. It also was not inherently Communistic. Likewise, Liberal and Conservative states have carried out comparable massacres, often in the name of ‘the Civilising process’, which had nothing to do with Liberalism or Conservatism, or being civilised. The same cannot be said about Nazism.

If, as the Declaration states, “children are to be warned about Communism and its crimes in the same way as they have been taught to assess Nazi crimes,” that would seem to suggest that supporting Communist principles of egalitarianism and antiracism is as criminal as supporting the racist, ethno-supremacist ideas inherent in Nazism which does not make any sense. And actually the wording of article 2 of the Declaration exposes this obvious distinction between the two ideologies which tends to get ignored by those advocating for symmetry. For what that article actually conflates are ‘Nazi crimes’ and ‘Crimes committed in the name of Communism,’ which are obviously entirely different entities. Crimes can be committed through actions carried out in the name of anything: God, Religion, Civilisation – that does not mean that the entity the name is taken from is itself criminal. Whereas, the essential character of Nazism is criminal because it is an inherently racist, ethno-supremacist violent ideology. If you take the criminal elements of Nazism away, nothing is left.

Unsurprisingly, the Double Genocide movement has divided historians. Yiddish scholar Dovid Katz –set up a website www.defendinghistory.com to resist this revisionist history and was subsequently dismissed from his teaching post at Vilnius University. On the other hand, a recent history book that has, intentionally or not, been used to further that thesis is Timothy Snyder’s ‘Bloodlands – Europe Between Hitler and Stalin,’ which juxtaposes Nazi systems against Soviet ones. Omer Bartov – Professor of Genocide Studies at Brown admires Snyder’s analysis but finds the work biased towards Poland, lacking in new evidence, and failing to make sufficient reference to the widespread Nazi collaboration that took place. He also accuses it of “draining the war of moral content” and points out that it is reminiscent of the revisionist claims made by German historians in the 1980s – the *historikerstreit* – from which came the appraisal that apart from the gas chambers, Nazis were just fighting Communism. But what seems fatal to Snyder’s regime comparison is Bartov’s observation

that a Nazi victory over the USSR would not have prevented the holocaust, as indeed it would not. And, further, following such a victory it is highly unlikely, given Hitler's desire for lebensraum in the East, that there would have remained any East European states left to be liberated in 1991.

Postmodern thinking has dispelled the illusion of ideology-free narratives. The old idea that objective truth is obtainable in any of the humanities, or even sciences, untrammelled by social and political agendas has gone. And nowhere is that more apparent than in the study of history. Nevertheless, facts still remain – slender and isolated maybe, and awaiting the historian to gather them up and convey them to a wider public, but still, facts speak through the historian's chosen narrative which is available for analysis and critique – to be read, perhaps, more like a witness statement than a true story. E.H. Carr, a British historian of the 60s who wrote the classic, 'What is History?' is probably not much of an exemplar on writing history today, but his observation that once facts are found, you need a bag to put them in, captures the reality of any narrative. The point is to study the bag in order to discern whose interests are being furthered by that particular presentation of the facts.

All historical accounts, and even accepted definitions are essentially a mix of fact and ideology. And being aware of that – both as writer and reader – may bring us closer to the truth. Nowhere is this more apparent than with the definition of Fascism itself. Presenting it as a fixed ideological structure locked in the past and twinned with an expired counter ideology gives the impression that it is a spent force, when it is not. Such an interpretation prevents us from recognising its chameleon-like fluidity, and its particular relevance today. As Mussolini proudly declared, "The Fasci di Combattimento – [the fighting bands] do not feel tied to any particular doctrinal form."^[2] And as for there being a totalitarian equivalence with Communism, Mussolini would have denied it, asserting in 1932 "A party which governs a nation in a totalitarian manner is a unique event in history. Neither references nor comparisons can be made."^[3] Whether or not the Prague Declaration or the war in Ukraine or the fall of the Soviet Union, or perhaps even the stuttering of Capitalism itself has brought this odious mentality that promotes the basest impulses of human nature back into view, a re-invigorated awareness of Fascism's destructive capacity is necessary. For Fascism has the distinction of being capable of destroying more than regimes or even countries; it destroys a person's humanity.

In 'Anatomy of Fascism', historian Robert O. Paxton, who wrote extensively on the Vichy regime, introduces Fascism as "the major political innovation of the 20th Century." It is more of a force than a repository of ideas and is capable of working with Liberalism and

Conservatism, but its main focus is the destruction of the Left, particularly International Socialism – its primary enemy. Paxton dismisses the notion that Fascism is an ideology on the basis that unlike other ‘isms’: Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism, Fascism has no intellectual base. Fascism is not a viewpoint that debates. And the reason it lacks the intellectual content necessary for debate is because, unlike those other isms, it does not feel constrained by legality. As Engels presciently observed, “We (socialists) under this legality get firm muscles and rosy cheeks and look like life eternal. There is nothing for them (Conservatives) to do but break through this legality themselves.”[4] Though the mass approval that break through met with is probably something Engels could not have imagined. Thirty years later, however, the Communist International had woken up to that reality and described Fascism as “the open, terroristic dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”[5]

Whilst Fascism itself has no pretence of an intellectual bent that does not mean it holds no appeal for the intelligentsia, quite the opposite as history has shown. But intellectuals don’t just jump on the Fascist bandwagon, they are there at its inception. As Paxton explains “In the early days the intellectuals helped create a space for Fascist movements by weakening the elite’s attachment to enlightenment values – until then those values had been widely accepted and given institutional form in liberal society.” What the intellectuals, whether through the church or the cultural and political elites, provide is a kind of ‘cultural preparation’. In effect they open the door to Fascism. Fascism cannot do this for itself since it has only feet.

The proponents of political ideologies – of those other ‘isms’- have tracts and manifestoes ready to argue their cause and win support by showing their ‘truth’. Fascism’s relationship with truth is entirely different, “truth was whatever permitted the new fascist man (and woman) to dominate others, and whatever made the chosen people triumph.”[6] What Fascism has are slogans and sigils and style because Fascism dominates in the aesthetic realm; that space we all look to when everything else in society seems full and used up. Paxton describes Fascism as “the most self-consciously visual of all political forms.” Presumably it would have to be since it works by contagion, hiding its vulgarity beneath a stylised veneer. Jewish philosopher, Walter Benjamin, who killed himself in Spain in 1940 rather than be murdered by the Nazis, was probably the first to write about Fascism’s aesthetic essence, “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life.”[7] Benjamin regarded Fascism as a ‘violation of the masses’ since it denied them their rights and kept the property structure intact, but gave them the freedom to express themselves, primarily through violence, and particularly through war. Essentially, it used

them – it fed their senses, and emotions and then left them empty. Because in the spectacle of violence brought forth by Fascism, what is occluded, albeit momentarily, are the relations of power within society. In many ways it acts like a safety valve for the capitalist system, almost like a catharsis through which the masses could vent their frustrations and purify themselves – dominate and destroy other lives before returning to the servility of their own. As Paxton reports, although “early fascist movements paraded an anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeoisie animus, that rarely came to anything”, other than the destruction of the working class through the imprisonment of trade unionists and Socialists; it certainly did not alter the socio-economic hierarchy.

“The ultimate Fascist response to the Right-Left political map was to claim that they had made it obsolete” which in many ways they had: they were offering purgation in place of equality. Thus, they could claim to be “transcending that divide in the interests of the nation.” But then, as Donskis asked earlier, what sort of nationhood does Fascism offer? Because, as Paxton explains, ‘Fascism changes the fundamental nature of citizenship’. It is no longer about debate and party and representation – those aspects of the world of legality are left behind. Rather, it enforces participation in ceremony and ritual and violence, and ultimately enforces the most debasing forms of conformity – the contagion of the pogrom or the massacre or the race riot.

How individuals and communities come back from such depravity has been the challenge of modern nationhood. A challenge to which International Socialism believed it had the solution. Whether Israel can come back from the abyss of its own ultra nationalist ideology is perhaps the question more uppermost in people’s minds right now. Even if the Zionist state survives, which seems unlikely, what would it look like? ‘Soulless’ would probably be the single word most people would use. Thereby confirming Socrates’ warning to the jurors who unjustly condemned him that they had suffered the greater loss. Which makes you wonder what it is that lures us to risk so much. What cause is worth such tragic undoing? Tolstoy thought it was patriotism and he could be right, because what is patriotism but the velvet glove for virulent nationalism? Tolstoy interpreted Patriotism as meaning, “advocating plunder in the interest of the privileged classes of the particular state system into which we happen to have been born.’ And, if we accept his definition then perhaps we should hope that he is right and that in the future calling someone a patriot will be recognised as ‘the deepest insult you can offer him.’

Notes.

[1] It is worth noting that according to the Weiner Holocaust Library ‘the largest mass murder of a particular group in human history’ is that of Soviet prisoners of war, denied the protection of the Geneva Convention by the Wehrmacht. In total between 3.3m to 5.7m were murdered.

[2] Quoted in Anatomy of Fascism, pg 17

[3] Altro Polo – Intellectuals and their ideas in contemporary Italy, ed Richard Bosworth and Gino Rizzo, pg 17

[4] Friedrich Engels, 1895 Preface to Karl Marx, The Class Struggles in France (1848-1850) quoted in Robert O. Paxton, Anatomy of Fascism, 2004, pg 3

[5] Quoted in Anatomy of Fascism, pg

[6] Robert O. Paxton, Anatomy of Fascism, pg 16

[7] Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production

MAY 26, 2025

Susan Roberts is a lecturer in moral philosophy and animal rights.