Forgiving or Forgetting:



Twelfth International Sakharov Conference



Romas Kalanta

Forgiving or Forgetting: Dealing with a Painful past Conference report

Written by Letizia Santhià
Edited by Robert van Voren
Photographs by Jonas Petronis
Layout design by BADE Design Studios

Approved for printing 25 10 2022. A run of 150 copies. Issuance by Order No. K22-045.

ISBN 978-609-467-539-3 (Print) ISBN 978-609-467-540-9 (Online) https://doi.org/10.7220/9786094675409

Published by Vytautas Magnus University K. Donelaičio g. 58, LT-44248, Kaunas www.vdu.lt | leidyba@vdu.lt

Printed by UAB "Vitae Litera" Savanorių pr. 137, LT-44146, Kaunas www.tuka.lt | info@tuka.lt



Foreword

Organizing conferences in the time of war is a challenge. Not only because the geopolitical sityiuation changes so rapidly and planning ahead has become a difficulty, but also because war returns in a wirlwind of emotions which makes the planning process particularly difficult.

When organizing the Twelfth International Sakharov Conference, we were suddenly confronted with a full-scale genocidal war on the European continent, in which the last imperial state in Europe thought it could impose its will on a neighboring country. The resulting conflict quickly spilled into one in which all of Europe became involved, with a real risk of turning into a global disaster, and with the longlasting trauma caused by the indescribably horrors of a war of destruction.

Within that volatile situation we tried to meet and discuss the aftermath of such events – the time when nations are being rebuilt, economies again prosper, people get on with their lives, but the scars of what happened remain painful, sometimes even open, and continue to affect our lives. How to seek closure, how to come to terms with what happened to us or what we did to others, how to find a way to live again in peace and be able to digest.

We tried to do this to the best of our abilty at a conference that was at times very emotional, but at the same time informative, instructive, and helped create plans for our future work. We did not solve issues, but I hope we contributed to that goal, and laid another stone to the always shaky edifice of post-trauma life.

Robert van Voren, Executive Director

3

Introduction

On May 13-14, 2022, the Andrei Sakharov Research Center for Democratic Development organized the Twelfth Edition of the International Sakharov Conference, centered around the theme, "Forgiving or Forgetting: Dealing with a Painful Past." The event gathered together professors and experts from different fields to present their research and share their experiences.

It is important to keep in mind that, when the program of the conference was first drafted months ago, the geopolitical situation in Europe was significantly different than it is today. The main purpose of the Sakharov Center, with its multidisciplinary approach, has always been to engage with both the past and current political developments in Eastern Europe. Therefore, in light of the dramatic events unfolding in the region, the conference had to adapt to present circumstances quickly. Indeed, dealing with a painful past does not only mean debating historical events but reflecting on their connection to what is happening currently. In this case, it was imperative to address the alleged "liberation" of Ukraine at the hands of a – once again – imperialistic Russia. **Robert van Voren**, executive director of the Center, pointed this out clearly in his opening speech: "We will be talking about the past while at the same time a different future is being created before our eyes." He went on to say that nevertheless, "it is important we discuss elements from the past, even today, because I believe the future is on our side, and there will be a day when we can build again [...] a free and democratic future."

Lithuania's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mantas Adoménas, agreed on the importance of dealing with the past to open new perspectives for the future, remarking how an untreated wound, passed down from one generation to the next, makes it difficult to break free from the vicious cycle of conflict. In his estimation, all nations and states should find the strength to shine a light on the darkest corners of their history to lay the foundation for mutual reconciliation. Referring back to the words of Belarusian author and Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich, Adoménas pointed out how Russia, facing a dark future, has had its share of difficulties and until these wounds are treated, it will be impossible to create a state based on human rights and democracy.

The purpose of the Sakharov Conference is to analyze the delicate issue of historical memory from a theoretical perspective as well as through valuable eyewitness testimony recounting direct experiences. Through presentations and exchanges, participants examined how the historical memory of traumatic events, either through the eyes of a community or an individual, influences the present and the future. In addition, speakers noted that the work of creating a collective memory is intrinsically connected to the importance of defending human rights and maintaining amicable international relations, fundamental values on which democracies are built and which Andrei Sakharov promoted his whole life.



The following report summarizes the main idea expressed during the conference, organized by theme. First, Andrei Sakharov's most important precepts and the theoretical background of memory and forgiveness are recalled. Next, specific cases are presented, beginning with Ukraine and Russia, exploring the idea of contested memory and distorted narratives. The psychological consequences of the collective trauma of war are then discussed. To add further context, the dramatic case of Srebrenica is analyzed from a different perspective. The second part of this report is dedicated to the memories of two emblematic figures whose ideals have become essential to present day democratic Lithuania: Romas Kalanta, who sacrificed himself protesting against the Soviet regime in 1972, and the recently deceased intellectual Irena Veisaitė.



Andrei Sakharov: lessons from the past

The first speaker of the conference was Tatiana Yankelevich, daughter of Andrei Sakharov and an expert in post-World War II Soviet history and human rights movements in the Soviet Union. She bore valuable witness to Andrei Sakharov's main principles, focusing on the central tenet of morality in connection with intellectual responsibility, ideas which require courage, honesty, and integrity. Indeed, by combining reason with ethics, Sakharov developed a morality that, according to Yankelevich, was defined by the activist Sergei Kovalyov not as something new, but as "the most ordinary morality, only very consistent [...] based on reason and nothing else." This form of intellectual responsibility shaped Sakharov's vision of the world, where ideological differences are set aside to find a common ground around the universal principles of human rights.

Taking a further step into the core of Sakharov's doctrine, Yankelevich outlined the intersection of human rights and international security. For Sakharov, respect for human rights also ensures democratic oversight of a country's foreign policy, safeguarding the free exchange of information and ideals, fostering rapprochement, and reducing the likelihood of conflicts. In other words, if a state becomes a threat to its own citizens, then it will likely be a threat to its neighbors too, and vice versa. For this reason, it is the duty of the international community to compel authoritarians to respect rights that are currently being denied. For instance, insisting on disarmament, especially now that nuclear weapons are – once again – a real threat to humanity.

With all that the global community can learn from Sakharov, these last principles are especially vital as the world comes to terms with what Yankelevich poignantly calls an "evil that today has taken human form." Since the fall of the Soviet Union, a part of Russia

has been working to create a civil society following Sakharov's ideals. However, this dream is now being strangled by an authoritarian regime led by a man whose delusional behavior brought about the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, launching one of the most violent conflicts since World War II.

As in the past, a part of Russian society supports Putin's crackdown on human rights. But we cannot forget that many scholars, scientists, and cultural and public figures have also spoken out in protest. The international community should stand against Belarusian governmental repression, the unlawful dissolution of Russian NGOs, and the treacherous assault on Ukraine. Not only we should learn from Sakharov's history, but we should also recognize and condemn Putin's distorted interpretation of the past. Indeed, assertions about Nazis in Kyiv are baseless, whereas there are striking resemblances between the way the Soviet Red Army operated during World War II and the way the Russian army is shamefully operating today in Ukraine.



Remembrance and Forgiveness

The act of remembering historical events is not merely related to the individual but consists of a collective action that imbues large groups with a common identity. Professor **Andreas Maercker**, clinical psychologist, and an expert on trauma, provided some theoretical tools to understand what a "culture of remembrance" is and how it relates to past traumas. According to Professor Maercker, a culture of remembrance is a manifestation of collective

memory proposed by social groups or individuals using a set of unofficial tools to commemorate historical traumatic events, with special attention given to the victims (as opposed to official commemoration politics, which tends focus on celebrating heroes). In a recent study, Professor Maercker demonstrated there is a direct correlation between the values that characterize a government and society, from security to benevolence and universalism, from openness to self-enhancement, and the number of deaths they have experienced during conflicts. For instance, countries with a higher number of deaths during World War II are today more focused on security, while the values of universalism and self-direction are deemed less important.

Yet it is actually these humanistic values that facilitate an active remembrance culture. Universalism and openness, rather than a need for security, are the conditions which allow a society to critically reassess its past and its trauma. The content of remembrance culture should therefore be focused on historical reappraisal and sharing responsibility, avoiding unproductive comparisons, and fostering a multitude of perspectives that keep the discussion alive. An open and ongoing dialogue is extremely important as it moves society away from the dangers of automatized memory, which can become a ritual devoid of content.

Memory and past trauma are by their nature delicate and thus can easily be manipulated by governments, influencing the commemoration politics of a nation. As illustrated by professor Vamik Volkan in his address, authorities (particularly in non-democratic regimes) can exploit historical narratives to promote a sense of victimization. This creates a sort of "time collapse," instilling the feeling that the trauma is very recent or even still happening; the leader makes it appear as if he is the only savior who can protect the identity of the larger group, which is more important than any individual identity. This phenomenon can become the basis of a larger ideology, materializing in violent, vengeful actions and the expansion of borders.

This theoretical sequence of events was recently carried out in practice by the leader of the Russian Federation who, through a slow and steady manipulation of history and society, has come closer to realizing his project of expansion, his dream of Russkij mir, by invading Ukraine. By constantly referencing the war against the Nazis and by citing his personal experience as example to his people, Vladimir Putin has kept alive the distorted narrative of the "Great Patriotic War." This framing insists that the real victims who suffered (and are still suffering) are the Russians – or rather the Soviet people. We know from history that a large group with a strongly shaped identity is capable of terrible things, and today's violence against Ukraine is proof. In this way, the collective memory of trauma not only involves psychology but is also connected to the practical, legal, and economic aspects of a society's evolution. Professor Volkan concluded by underscoring an idea he has been focusing on for the last decade: the importance of creating the conditions "for more dialogue among people from different backgrounds and different professions in order to understand world affairs."



There are cases in history where the profound trauma stems from a conflict within a society, which must be healed before facing the outside world. Establishing social justice through understanding and forgiveness is a task that requires great effort and firmness. An example of this is the end of apartheid in South Africa, where the injustices perpetrated against the indigenous people permeated every part of life, including access to wealth, resources and, most importantly, space. The fact that the majority of the South African population was relegated to a tiny geographic area is what inspired Zahira Asmal, urbanist and entrepreneur, to engage in re-thinking that space from a new perspective. She soon realized this task was impossible without actively engaging in the history that had affected the country so drastically.

In her research and personal experience, Asmal had the opportunity to interact with exponents of the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, funded, among others, by her uncle Kader Asmal), and therefore had an insider's view of the difficult path toward reconciliation. Now South Africa is a country where every ethnic group tries to live peacefully with one another, but the memory of apartheid is still cultivated and present. The work of the TRC was made possible through dialogue – as a way to "humanize the dehumanized" – but most of all through forgiveness. Indeed, forgiveness is a tool that can elevate the victim above the perpetrators, a kind of retribution practiced at a very subtle level. In this case, "revenge" is the act of reconstructing a society based on respect, which Asmal defined as "empowering" because it leads to a better future for all.



Ukraine and Russia, traumas of the past in the present

Ukraine, suspended between past and future

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched what the Kremlin called a "special operation" to "liberate Ukraine," resulting in a full-scale invasion. The world witnessed a repetition of horrors of the past, a revival of the kind of violence committed in Europe in the 20th Century. The question that most of us are asking ourselves today is, how was this possible? Some possible answers came from **Svitlana Markova**, director of the Holodomor Research Institute, and Olesya Stasiuk, head of the Museum of Holodomor in Kyiv, who brought a historical perspective to the topic. Stasiuk resolutely affirmed, "the answer to this question is obvious: evil can come back only because it was not punished in its time." And indeed, in Ukraine, great evil has been perpetrated over and over, more than in almost any other European country. Already at the dawn of the Soviet Union, the Bolsheviks caused an artificial famine (disquising it as a natural phenomenon and prohibiting the word "famine"). As Stasiuk recounted, "the goal of the genocidal Holodomor was to eliminate the very foundations of the Ukrainian national liberation movement and to prevent the restoration of the Ukrainian state." Crimean Tatars became victims of the Kremlin's policy of violence and deportation. Moscow alternated periods of killing Ukrainians with so-called "peaceful periods," which nonetheless perpetuated spiritual and cultural genocide.

Today, Vladimir Putin is repeating this history, beginning with an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign state and aiming for the complete annihilation of Ukraine. But instead of creating an artificial famine, the regime now threatens to use nuclear weapons, and genocide is com-

Forgiving or Forgetting:

10

mitted through the murder of civilians, mass rape, the destruction of monuments and culture, and other atrocities. Worse still, a large part of the Russian population supports the cause, misled by the Kremlin's propaganda. According to statistics reported by Stasiuk, most Russians would even be in favor of a war against Europe. The message that the Kremlin wants to convey is that Ukraine cannot exist independently but only as part of Russia because they share the same culture, language and history. To counter this, Markova underlined how Ukrainian culture differs from Russia's, and how the paths taken by the two peoples diverged centuries ago, leading to very different levels of social and economic development. It is important to recall that even if the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union forcibly took control of Ukraine, the Ukrainian people have always nurtured their own culture and national identity. As Markova said, "the features of the national character of Ukrainia are a love for freedom, courage, equality, democracy. And they are still strenuously fighting for those values today."

Russia, a war of memory

While Ukraine struggles on the battlefields and intellectuals fight to keep an accurate historical narrative alive, Russia is imposing its own distorted version of events. As explained by Professor Volkan, the exploitation of trauma by an authoritarian regime is a long and gradual process. In the case of Russia, a crucial step towards this was the arbitrary closing Memorial and other NGOs that were working to establish a fair, collective memory never acknowledged by the State. In his address, Professor Andrea Gullotta, president of Memorial Italia and an expert in memory of the Gulag, clearly explained how in the 90s, the memory of violent Soviet repression and of the Gulag were not priorities for the newborn Russian Federation hit hard by economic and social crises. Despite the difficulties, a movement sprang up from below – everyday people, the relatives of the victims and the few survivors began to speak out the truth about Soviet repression. Nevertheless, without the support of the State and lacking documentation, this remembrance work was understandably fragile, and the new Russian State did not take these past traumas into account when rebuilding.

When, in the 2010s, Putin finally decided to bring to the forefront the issue of historical memory, the focus was exclusively on a distorted narrative of World War II and on the great sacrifices made by the glorious Russian Army in the fight against Nazism. Only at a later stage did Gulag memory become central. Yet the Kremlin has never willingly acknowledged the important research undertaken by Memorial's activists. Indeed, many of the State's actions in the field were aimed at discrediting the association and silencing the "opposition." At the same time, new efforts carried out at State level were ambiguous and treated the topic in very narrow terms, as if it "should be remembered without coming to terms with the past but rather aiming at a pacification that guarantees the 'stability' and unity of the country,"





as Gullotta pointed out. This controversial "war of memory" has been used by Putin to justify the invasion of Ukraine to his people, just as his hatred for Western democracies has been presented as Russia defending itself against the threat of a menacing Europe.

It is precisely Europe that Ukrainians invoked in 2014 on Maidan Square, as the Russian author Mikhail Shishkin recalled in his "letter to Europe": "The EU was a synonym of dignity. [...] That is something that the Kremlin still cannot forgive." In response, Russian propaganda depicts Europe as the cradle of Nazism, willing to destroy the Russian world. Since February, despite all the conflicts faced in the past years, Europe has confirmed its fundamental values. Shishkin went on to write: "it is important for me that even after the war, after our common victory, you remain as united, strong, wise, young, and beautiful; recognizing and correcting your mistakes, understanding who you are and what you want." The picture of Europe that Shishkin embraces is in stark contrast to the behavior of the Russian community, constantly reverting to violence, determined to help their own without questioning whether they're in the right. The most upsetting note of Shishkin's speech, however, concerned the damage that Putin has done to Russian culture, no longer connected to great literature but only to violence: "when a war starts, culture is always the loser. [...] Maybe after the war, literature could help because hate is the disease, and the only medicine is culture."

Petras Vaitiekunas, a Lithuanian politician since the time of the Declaration of Independence, was less charitable about Europe's actions. He condemned the many concessions Europe has made to Russia, giving it too many chances without demanding that the government fulfill its obligations. He argued that the West made a mistake giving too much space and power to Russia, and therefore when the war started, it was too late to backtrack. According to Vaitiekūnas, the most severe problem in Russia is the people's unquestioning support of power, now represented by Putin. The only possibility of breaking this cycle of violence is to somehow break this tradition. Vaitiekūnas concluded on a more positive note, affirming that "Russia is strong, but Ukraine is stronger, especially in its patriotism."

12 Forgiving or Forgetting:

The psychological consequences of war

This ongoing war, as with any other violent conflict in history, has taken an enormous toll on the mental health of the people involved. Clinical psychologist and expert on trauma, **Jana Javakhishvili**, explained that when a natural catastrophe strikes a country, the consequences can be severe, but there is no one directly to blame. However, in a man-made catastrophe like war involving both victims and perpetrators, trauma must be dealt with differently.



She pointed out that any society living with post-war trauma is fragile and, therefore, easier to manipulate by those in power. As mentioned in previous sections, Russia has taken advantage of this phenomenon, especially in the last decade. Indeed, during Putin's presidency, war has become a ubiquitous element of daily life, intruding everywhere from pre-schools to fashion shows. This ongoing reality creates the conditions that make it easier to accept and even support violent conflict.

On the other side are the Ukrainian victims, who continue to suffer from serious mental health problems – a significant dimension of collective trauma – despite their strength and resilience. In this regard, the direct experience of **Inke Hansen** provides valuable testimony about the present-day situation in Ukraine. Only a few weeks after her trip there, she reported on three main issues connected with mental health struggles in times of war: displacement and the difficult living conditions in shelters; destruction and the signs of occupation; and associated violence. Faced with these, victims of trauma can react in two different ways. Some may feel the urge to constantly engage in activity or aid, and some may become incapable of acting or making any decisions. Hansen added that the community dimension of shelters can be a positive factor for



some. If basic needs are met, there is the opportunity "not only to feed people but to nourish them", allowing them to bond and helping them to start rebuilding their lives.

There is no denying that providing psychological aid for those directly affected by war is one of the most urgent tasks. Yet poor communication and societal instability represent significant challenges for professionals. In response, the Federation Global Initiative on Psychiatry (FGIP), represented at the conference by Robert Van Voren, created a psychological aid program to train people from remote areas, reproducing a project already put in place in Belarus in 2020. The project's website

is divided into three main parts: one with instructions on how to maintain mental health; a second with suggestions on how to deal with cases of anxiety, panic attacks, and depression; and finally, a third providing professional help free of charge. The website and the social media pages connected to it already have thousands of views and are used on a daily basis by ordinary people struggling to go on with their lives, as well as by mental health professionals. In addition to this service, FGIP provides medical aid to mental hospitals, delivering necessary materials wherever possible.

Often, the psychological consequence of war manifest in the moment, both as individual trauma and collective trauma, but they also have long-term repercussions. Dealing with trauma at every phase is vitally important not only to help individuals facing difficult situations but also for the community to begin reprocessing events and establish a robust collective memory. As has been demonstrated, in countries founded on democratic values, this work is indispensable in order not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

14 Forgiving or Forgetting:

Srebrenica

If history sometimes offers us inspiring figures and positive examples of ideology, this is not always the case, as the following sections will show. Over the last century, horrible massacres have been perpetrated, without a clear explanation of what exactly happened or how. One example is the genocide that took place in Srebrenica during the Bosnian War. In July 1995, thousands of Bosnian Muslim men and boys were killed by the Bosnian Serb Army led by Ratko Mladić. The area of Srebrenica where this occurred had been declared a safe zone under UN protection and was guarded by a Dutch Battalion. Who bears the ultimate responsibility for the massacre has been widely debated among scholars and the international community, and many questions remain: Could this massacre have been prevented? Was there prior knowledge of the attack? Who is to be blamed? Are the bystanders as guilty as the perpetrators?



When Joris Voorhoeve became Minister of Defense in the Netherlands, he had to deal with an already compromised situation. As he explained, after the Cold War, his small country was without any kind of intelligence service, relying only on information provided by allies. It was in this context that the Dutch army took on a mission in Bosnia beyond its scope. Years later, Voorhoeve carried out a thorough research project to learn more about the massacre, reading official documents from the UN and other intelligence services, interviewing people involved in the decision-making, and participating in a documentary. In the film, even if some questions remain unanswered, it emerges that the massacre resulted from a failure of the chain of command and a lack of communication between the involved parties. Indeed, too much hope was placed in negotiations with the Serbs, who were not actually interested in negotiating.

Moreover, information about the possibility of a Serbian attack was not forwarded, and crucial air support was not provided by the UN as promised. All in all, a series of mistakes committed by different parties led to the death of thousands of people. Voorhoeve commented, quite harshly, that we often learn the wrong lessons from history. In this case, policy mistakes were made on all sides, and yet the current situation in Ukraine shows how the same mistakes are being repeated by Western countries and, especially and unsurprisingly, by Russia, whose past traumas were never duly processed.



So once again, we see the necessity of finding a productive way of dealing with painful past events. It is not about blaming one side or the other but understanding the chain of events that can lead to a catastrophe and recognizing the usefulness of creating a sensitive collective memory. In this regard, the work carried out by Monique Brinks has been fundamental. A Dutch historian focused on dealing with contested narratives, Brinks spent years working with different parties for the creation of a museum in Srebrenica, a project that helped dialogue and understanding. Previously, she had studied not only the experiences of victims and perpetrators but also of bystanders. However, this case was different, especially concerning the Dutch Battalion, who were neither entirely responsible nor simple bystanders. Accounts were often contradictory, which made establishing a narrative acceptable to all particularly challenging. Through great effort, and thanks to the cooperation of various actors, she finally found a way forward by acknowledging that different versions of events exist and keeping open the question of what exactly happened. This is a valuable lesson in accepting that sometimes insisting on one complete and objective truth can be counterproductive. Instead, an experience can be seen from multiple perspectives that may be equally valid.

16 Forgiving or Forgetting:

When considered from a historical perspective, this dark and complex page of history can teach a lot about how to deal with the past. Revisiting trauma is not the occasion to blame your enemies but the time for everyone to accept their part of responsibility. It is an opportunity to clarify, open a dialogue, and reach for a better understanding. Most importantly, it is a chance to acknowledge the dignity of the victims who seek recognition, and possibly compensation, in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Romas Kalanta, the ultimate sacrifice

Collective memory does not only relate to the discourse surrounding historical events but is often connected to specific figures and actions whose influence can still be felt today. This is the case of Romas Kalanta, a young Lithuanian student who set himself on fire in 1972 in protest of the Soviet occupation of his country. His dramatic sacrifice led to days of unrest and riots in the city of Kaunas, which was subsequently sealed off by authorities. His act inspired the opposition movement and remains today a symbol of the fight for freedom. Romas Kalanta, however, was not the first person to choose self-immolation as a form of protest and certainly was not the last. In 2020, Russian journalist Irina Slavina burnt herself to death, posting on her Facebook page:

"For my death, please blame the Russian Federation," just like Kalanta wrote in his notebook, "blame the system for my death."

Petr Blažek, a Czech historian, has dedicated his academic life to the study of "living torches." He was inspired by previous research on self-immolation as political protest carried out by the English sociologist Michael Biggs. Blažek decided to focus his study on politically motivated cases of self-immolation in the Soviet Bloc where, according to his study, more than fifty cases have been registered. He has identified two main categories. On the one



hand, there is the premeditated, politically motivated act aimed at mobilizing society. The most famous of this case is Jan Palach, a widely known Czech student who protested against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. Romas Kalanta belongs to this category as well. Of a different nature are the actions of individuals who could no longer bear living under cruel and repressive conditions, in combination with other personal problems, and therefore decide to put an end to their lives. As Blažek justly pointed out, even if every case of self-immolation is unique as the conditions of the country where it occurred, the common feature of all these deaths is opposition to totalitarian rule.

Another thing most of these cases have in common is the fact the regime qualified them as the suicidal acts of mentally ill people. Immediately after the death of Kalanta, a commission of psychiatrists was set up to establish a post-mortem psychiatric evaluation which claimed the student was affected by so-called "sluggish" schizophrenia. Nevertheless, in 1989, the case was re-evaluated by a second commission. Doctor **Dainius Puras**, who took part in this work, explained how the investigation was carried out: people close to Kalanta were interviewed, and his diaries and possessions were analyzed. Interestingly, the first commission's verdict was not officially annulled, nor was the mental state of Romas Kalanta explicitly diagnosed. However, the second commission did not find any signs or proof of mental illness, therefore disagreeing with the 1972 judgment. As Puras noted, decades later, we can now reflect on these events from a historical perspective; Kalanta was not only an emblem of the fight for



freedom but in the broader context of an independent Lithuania, a symbol of its values. As Puras put it: "today as never before, we only have to agree on the value compass, without inventing some new Lithuanian wheel, and focus on the most important of those values, which is respect for the dignity of every person in our country and everywhere." Yet, in his view, the struggle initiated by Kalanta has not yet been won.

A similar case involves **Eliyahu Rips**, who engaged in self-immolation as a personal protest against the Soviet regime and survived to bear witness to his experience. The Latvia-born Israeli mathematician

18 Forgiving or Forgetting:

decided to self-immolate in 1969 after listening to the news about Jan Palach and others like him. But unlike most of his predecessors, he survived the attempt and was then confined to a psychiatric hospital with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. His case was eventually reconsidered and, once freed, he managed to move to Israel. Today, seeing the developments in Eastern Europe, he cannot help but be worried about the tepid response. Nonetheless, he expressed the hope that humanity will rise to the occasion and that his ideals and the memory of Palach and Kalanta will inspire the future.



Letizia Santhià, a young researcher at the Sakharov Center, has been studying historical memory in today's Lithuania and its connection with political activism. The results of the survey that she undertook with young Lithuanians demonstrated they know the history of the country, either from school, family discussions, or visits to monuments and museums (although this latter case was rare). Although these results demonstrate that collective memory persists to a certain extent, the study also showed it is ineffective in influencing the younger generation since it does not particularly inspire any kind of political and social activism. In Santhià's opinion, this suggests that a robust collective memory is not only about what is taught but also how it is taught. She hopes that in the future, society will be able to convey democratic, human rights values in a more persuasive way, especially to make this younger generation is overall less passive and more engaged as of Kalanta and his peers.



Remembering Irena Veisaitė

Remembrance is not always related to long ago historical events. Indeed, there is a short but crucial period in which the recent and still fresh memory of those who directly experienced them becomes the foundation on which to build future remembrance. This is the case of Irena Veisaite, who died during the COVID pandemic at nearly 93. The conference was the opportunity for some of her closest friends to gather and pay tribute with great warmth and affection to the memory of an extraordinary woman who was an example of integrity and tolerance all her life.

Yves Plesseraud, a close friend of Veisaité's and author of her biography, recounted her story beginning at her birth in Kaunas, in a wealthy non-religious Jewish family of left-oriented intellectuals. The family's main language was Russian, but they were perfectly integrated into Lithuanian society and Veisaite, unlike many others, felt fully Lithuanian. With such a complex and heterogenous identity, to quote Plessearud, "her real homeland was culture, and that's where she nourished her personality."

Veisaité survived the Holocaust hiding in Vilnius and later dedicated part of her life to establishing the truth and aiding reconciliation between Lithuanians and Jews. Even if there is still much work to be done, her commitment led to impressive results. Noticed by George Soros, philanthropist and founder of the Open Society Foundation (OSF), she did an admirable job leading the OSF in Lithuania and became a recognized moral authority. She was awarded several prizes and became a renowned public figure, but she did not let her celebrity change her simple way of life nor erode her empathy for those less fortunate.

In his address, poet and dissident **Tomas Venclova** recalled her house as "the most hospitable apartment in Vilnius," where the atmosphere was always lively and dynamic. Veisaité would

20

listen to everyone's ideas and arguments and then clearly express her position. Her place became a cultural hub, where ideas could be exchanged and flourish. Even if she was not directly part of the dissident movement, she shared their views and values and supported them. Veisaité witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust, the violence of the war and the brutality of Germans as well as Lithuanians and Soviets. In this respect, Venclova defined her as "almost the only person in Lithuania who was able to build a bridge between the Lithuanian and Jewish communities," a task made especially challenging by "misconceived patriotism and the desire to whitewash 'our own,' even the criminals." Veisaité's deep honesty and empathy helped her in this endeavor.

Eymert van Manen fondly remembered his friendship with Irena Veisaite and the projects that they curated together, notably "Vilnius European Capital of Culture" in 2009. Van Manen recounted a series of words they reflected on together: "Fear," as something that shouldn't

guide you because it can either paralyze you or lead to fruitless violent reactions; "Anxiety", which creates room for reflection and then may lead you to take action in threatening situations; and most of all "Hope," a word with which she often concluded her letters and emails, a "positive incentive, and encouragement showing that despite all your understandable worrying [she] continued to have faith in people working together for a better world."

These aspects of her character were what caught the attention of the young film director **Giedrė Žickytė**. After a friend in common introduced her to Irena Veisaitė, she was especially impressed with her



capacity to keep in touch with everyone and still have time for her loved ones. When she realized how unique the person in front of her was, despite her already full schedule, Žickytė decided to make a movie about Veisaitė's life so that her experiences could live on. Unfortunately, the pandemic interrupted the work before the end of shooting, and when Irena Veisaitė passed away, Žickytė felt a sense of bewilderment and emptiness: "who could ever replace her?" she wondered, echoing the same sentiments as Irena when Andrei Sakharov passed away. The movie will be released in 2023, dedicated to the memory of a great Lithuanian intellectual and passing on her important lessons about how to deal with a painful past.

Conclusion

Over the course of the conference, the issue of "forgiving or forgetting" was deconstructed and analyzed from multiple perspectives, thanks to the contributions of experts in different fields. Indeed, historians, psychologists, and politicians put their knowledge and experience at the service of the community to dissect every aspect of how to deal with a painful past.

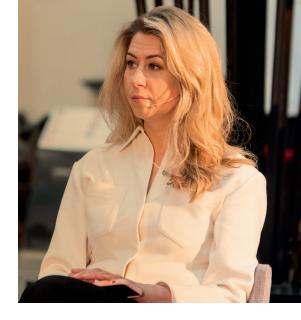
Inspired by the values and the precepts of Andrei Sakharov, participants underscored respect for human rights as a fundamental condition for creating a just historical memory. Furthermore, they agreed on the importance of undergoing a holistic process to deal with collective trauma to build strong democracies and cultivate a peaceful international community.

As we have seen, past collective trauma significantly affects the attitude of a state regarding its approach to security, universalism and international relations. Moreover, the state's subsequent actions are crucial in determining how the memory is preserved. Authoritarian regimes use, or even abuse, past traumas to influence and manipulate society. When all the dynamics are eventually brought to light through dialogue and mutual understanding, forgiveness is the starting point to building a new society based on the values of respect and democracy, as was the case in South Africa. On the contrary, when traumas are not dealt with or a falsified narrative is imposed and perpetuated, a specific sense of victimization is transmitted to the people. In this case, it is easier for the government to gain the support of the population to justify expansionism and war.

The full-scale war launched by Russia with the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, is an example of this. For years, not only has the Kremlin denied or ignored the darkest part of its own history, but it has even fed society distorted images of past wars, where Russia is depicted as emerging victorious but having been the victim of great suffering. This version of events is now poisoning the minds of the people with false propaganda about fighting Nazis and liberating Ukraine. The unspeakable violence, the violations of human rights, and the crimes against humanity that Russia is carrying out today in Ukraine are the product of a lack of commitment to uncovering the truth and an absence of policies about dealing with national trauma. Nevertheless, Ukraine is standing against the enemy, defending democratic values, and fighting for the modern Europe community to which it feels it belongs. Russian and Soviet authorities have already inflicted great pain on Ukraine, first with Holodomor (a genocide carried out in the form of an artificial famine) and later with the complete subjugation and russification of the country. Yet, the will of the people has never weakened, and today they keep fighting for their existence. Finally, it must be mentioned that the psychological consequences of war on everyone involved, civilians as well as soldiers, are severe, and it is urgent to help them overcome any related mental health issues. This work will also ensure a smoother road towards crucial collective memorialization in the future.

22

History has a lot to teach us, and yet so often these lessons are lost, and past genocides are repeated unless the crucial work of reconciliation is undertaken by all parties. The case of Srebrenica, during the Bosnian war in 1995, is a good example. Despite contradictory narratives and complex politics, great effort was made to uncover the truth behind the massacre there. This shows that open communications and honest dialogue are crucial elements in the process of coming to terms with the past.



Thankfully, history doesn't only offer examples of wars and destruction. Positive values and principles can also be extrapolated from the experience of individuals. The fight for freedom is embodied by the self-sacrificing actions of young students who believed in democratic ideals, such as Jan Palach, Romas Kalanta and others before and after them. Some victims of trauma have spent their whole lives pursuing dialogue and bringing together people of different cultures, as Irena Veisaitė did, promoting tolerance and respect.

In conclusion, forgetting the past is not the key to a better future. Remembering is the only way to ensure that what comes next is better than what came before. However, collective memory must be transmitted in the right way: manipulation and abuse of narratives and refusing to treat trauma only lead to more unjustified violence. Therefore, it is necessary to create the conditions conducive to enhancing dialogue and understanding, key elements of forgiveness and reconciliation. When the process of creating a fair and just collective memory remains incomplete, it is the duty of the international community to guarantee that history is recalled appropriately and honestly. This is a precondition for any state founded on democratic values and respect for human rights. With the commitment of all parties, history is not doomed to repeat itself but can instead be the basis for a new and free democratic future.

