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The Russians must reflect on the evildoings

The president of "Memorial" talks about the Russian-Polish culture of remembrance. An interview with Ulrich M. Schmid

Ulrich Schmid: Mr Roginski, do you think it's right to remember Katyn in Russia when so little progress has been made with regard to the culture of remembrance for the victims of Stalinist terror?

Mr Roginski: It is absolutely necessary, to remember the victims of Katyn; we cannot allow them simply to be forgotten. The party leadership under Stalin was responsible for this crime, just as it was responsible for the crimes against Soviet citizens. This is why the attention to Katyn is stirring memories about Soviet terror. This shared experience is helping both sides to move towards one another.

Does Polish remembering of Katyn have any influence on Russian cultural memory?

The Russians and the Poles have an entirely different cultural memory. There are two central tenets to **Polish cultural memory**. Firstly: we are always the victims – at least as far as the Russians or the Germans are concerned. Secondly: we always resisted heroically. An understanding of the victim role barely registers in Russian minds, and resistance even less so. We cannot adopt the Polish remembrance model. Russian remembrance is in a chaotic state. Unfortunately we have no shared cultural memory, let alone a shared memory of the terror. The Russian memory is fragmented – according to region and social grouping. The **constant stream of propaganda** under the Czars and particularly in the Soviet Union and under Putin has engraved in the Russian mind the conviction that we do nothing but good in the world. We saved Europe from fascism and we get only ingratitude in return. Working through the past, and this includes Katyn, destroys our constructed memories and compels us to account for not having *only* done good in the world at all times. The Russians need to be forced to reflect on evildoings. We have to **take civic responsibility** for the crimes of our rulers.

Should Russia apologise to Poland for the crime of Katyn?

You use the word "sich entschuldigen" which stems from the word "schuld" meaning guilt. I do not think that the German concept of collective guilt is applicable here. And individual penitence is a religious act that has no place here. We should not feel guilty; we should assume our civic responsibility – individually and as a nation. What does this mean with respect to Katyn? Quite simply – it means bringing to light the whole truth. This has not happened yet. We have to reopen the investigations into this crime, which were shut down in 2004. We have to provide **access to all archive material** on the subject, without exception. There must be a court ruling on the crimes in Katyn. We have to **rehabilitate the victims**. It is extremely important to define the events in legal terminology. We cannot simply name a set of names (as the military courts did) and say that these persons overstepped their competencies. This makes a mockery of the victims. We must adopt the norms of international law: Katyn is a crime against humanity or a war crime. We have to publicly name everyone involved, Stalin included. I am not insisting that we drag the names of every last executioner or henchman into the public eye, but all those **pulling the wires** behind the scenes must be named. At present "Memorial" is losing every case in Russian courts that

involves the events in Katyn, the opening of the archives or the rehabilitation of the victims. But time is on our side. □

Your assessment of Katyn differs very little from Putin's position, except that you are demanding a court ruling.

To define the events in **judicial terms**, to describe the criminals as criminals and to name them by their names and to rehabilitate the victims in the courts – this is a huge difference. The first step has already been taken: Putin called the events in Katyn a crime. I listened to his speech on April 7 in Katyn. It struck me as honest, emotional and **full of horror at the crime**. This is a step in the right direction, but it does not go far enough. The criminals of Katyn must be condemned in judicial terms and the country must be informed about it. Katyn has to go into the schoolbooks - it does not even get a mention there today. We must talk about it loudly and constantly, only then will consciousness change.

Do you believe that Lech Kaczynski's death has had an effect on the way Russian view Katyn?

I don't know. But it is hugely important that **Andrzej Wajda's** film "[Katyn](#)" was shown once again after the plane crash by Russia's second national TV channel Rossiya. On April 2 the film was aired on the specialist arts channel Kultura but attracted limited attention because that channel is watched only by a handful of intellectuals. On April 10, however, the film reached a **much wider audience**. People who had known very little about the events in Katyn were greatly taken aback. And people who perhaps lost their parents during the years of Stalinist terror were distressed to recognise that our own people had been killed – that they had all been shot in the same way. In this sense, "Katyn" is not only a Polish film anymore, it's also a Russian film. The flowers in front of the Polish embassy in Moscow, Putin kneeling before the graves of the Polish soldiers and then the film – all these events form a symbolic line. I think that the death of Lech Kaczynski will play a key role in the process of working through the crime of Katyn for Russia. Perhaps some of the old phobias will reawaken in Polish minds. On the other hand, all my Polish friends tell me that they have been so touched by the **scale of Russian sympathy** that it might be time to move beyond the toxic residue of the past.

Do you see a difference between Medvedev and Putin when it comes to politics of memory?

I don't know. Even before the events in Katyn, Medvedev [said](#) some very important things in his video blog on October 30: no modernisation can be justified by such **appalling numbers of victims**. I found it very courageous of him to talk this way about Stalinist terror. It might be true that he went on to reiterate clichés about Russia's rise to world power, but he also rose above them at the same time. The same goes for Putin. At the memorial in Katyn he was overtaken by spontaneous, sincere emotions but he later lapsed back into bureaucratic jargon. The government is **making tiny steps**, and we should support them in this. Of course we can always criticise details. I, for one, am happy that Putin used the word "**totalitarian**". This is quite considerable! This, in itself, is a step in the right direction! Perhaps there will be more to follow. And in another context, words like this can take on a huge importance. The allies have been invited to take part in the celebrations on Red Square for the 65th anniversary of WWII victory, for example. So something is happening and we must feed and foster this "something".

Arseni Roginski was born in Northern Russian as the son of a exiled Leningrad family. In 1968 he completed his degree in history at the University of Tartu, which, being on the periphery of the Soviet Unionm was not subjected to same level of ideological restrictions as the big cities. He went on to work as a bibliographer, teacher, historian. In 1981 he was sentenced to four years in prison for publishing documents abroad about the history of the Gulag. In 1989, Roginski helped to found the human rights organisation [Memorial](#). He has been its president since 1996.

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