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Council of Europe — Commissioner for Human Rights

Atrocities in the past must be recognised, documented and learned from - but not distorted or misused for political purposes

[22/03/10] Gross human rights violations in the past continue to affect relations in today's Europe. In some cases the right lessons have been learned; genuine knowledge of history has facilitated understanding, tolerance and trust between individuals and peoples. However, some serious atrocities are denied or trivialised, which has created new tensions. There are also cases where violations in the past have been exploited in chauvinistic propaganda, causing division and hatred. Bogus interpretations of history have in fact been used to justify discrimination, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

There is an understandable urge among all peoples to seek pride in their own history. Or to focus on previous misdeeds by other peoples. This tendency is often more dominant in situations of crisis or when national identity is uncertain or questioned. Experience shows that strong nationalistic feelings tend to limit the space for an honest analysis of what one's forefathers or their neighbours may have done in the past.

Coming to terms with history is always essential, but particularly crucial in cases of massive atrocities and human rights violations. Such crimes cannot be ignored without severe consequences. Prolonged impunity or lack of acknowledgment over several generations tends to create bitterness among those who identify themselves with the victims, which in turn can poison relations between people who were not even born when the events in question took place.

The former colonial powers in Europe have been reluctant - even long afterwards - to recognise the full extent of the damage caused by the ruthless exploitation of human beings and natural resources in Asia, Africa and Latin America. They strongly opposed an original proposal at the World Conference against Racism in Durban 2001 that the outcome document should refer to these historic facts - which resulted in a bleak compromise formulation. This was rightly criticised.

The Nazi crimes and in particular the Holocaust were denied, trivialised or ignored by many when the killings were going on. Afterwards, every sane person has had to recognise this monumental crime against humanity – which also made the world community adopt the concept of *genocide* and an international convention for the prevention and punishment of such crimes in the future.

It has to be recognised that post-war Germany has made enormous efforts to expose the Nazi crimes, to compensate surviving victims, to punish perpetrators when possible and to educate future generations about the horrors committed in the name of their forefathers. All this has been absolutely necessary, nothing less would have been acceptable.

Authorities in some other countries have been less open about co-operation with the Nazis in the executions of Jews which were committed on their soil. The mass killings of Roma have not been given sufficient attention, and compensation to survivors has been late and minimal. The murders of homosexuals and the medical experiments on and killings of persons with disabilities have also tended to

be pushed aside.

Crimes in the Soviet Union were exposed, not least by the powerful writings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The *glasnost* during Mikhail Gorbachev opened the doors for further revelations; Andrei Sakharov and the organisation “Memorial” contributed massively to revealing the truth. Still, the full scale of the Stalinist repression seems not to be recognised by everyone in Russia. The initiated review of history education in schools should address this problem.

The recent discussion in some European countries about the role of the Soviet army during World War II was not appreciated in the Russian Federation. There was a feeling that the sacrifices during what the Russians call “the Great Patriotic War” were disregarded and – even worse - that their contribution to fight against Nazism was compared with the brutalities of Hitler’s army. The exchanges illustrated the need to make the necessary distinctions when history is discussed – in this case between Stalin’s dictatorial policy and the efforts by soldiers and civilians from the same country to defend their nation and combat Nazism.

Even more controversial has been - and is - the very description of the enforced mass displacement, the ensuing deaths as well as the outright killings of ethnic Armenians in 1915 under the Ottoman Empire. Even though this happened before the creation of the new Turkish republic, there has been unwillingness there to discuss these crimes. Writers and journalists who raised the issue were brought to trial. Now, the first steps towards recognising the facts have at long last been taken - through academic discussions - but more needs to be done.

One group of people whose history has been grossly neglected in Europe is the Roma. Not only have the Nazi crimes against them been largely ignored, the accounts of the brutal repression or systematic discrimination of them before and after this period in several European countries have not been recognised. Official apologies have been slow to come, if at all.

In the Balkans, the different versions of historic events – some of them going back several hundred years - became a distinct factor in the conflicts during the 1990s and severely undermined international peace efforts. During the war new atrocities were committed, the scope and even the existence of which became disputed. Human rights organisations all over the former Yugoslavia are asking for a regional truth commission – which would be an important initiative to avoid distortions of history becoming the cause of new tensions in the future.

Not only in the Balkans but also in other previous conflict zones, there could be more than one single historical narrative to be discovered. They can all be truthful - though seen from different perspectives and with emphasis on different aspects. It could be of paramount importance that different groupings in the community become aware of such diversity of historical accounts – and accept that there are differences even when the basic facts are established.

One example of a constructive project to create understanding of this kind was initiated in Northern Ireland. A dialogue was organised with the purpose of encouraging the different sides to recognise the legitimate version of the others. Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights in relation to unsatisfactory investigations into sectarian killings in Northern Ireland played a part in this historical reconstruction.

After the fall of the junta in Greece in 1974 trials were held to establish accountability. Similar efforts in post-dictatorship Spain and Portugal focused a lot on the activities of the secret services. In the former Communist countries in Eastern Europe the so-called lustration process was used as an instrument to

address the past.

Establishing true accounts of previous human rights violations is indeed essential for building the rule of law in all post-conflict situations. In the immediate aftermath this is crucial to the efforts to bring those responsible to justice, to compensate the victims and to take actions to prevent the recurrence of these crimes.

To establish the truth is also important in a longer-term perspective. Those killed were human beings, not numbers. Individual survivors as well as the children and grandchildren of the victims have the right to know and to grieve in dignity. The possibility to remember and commemorate must be protected.

Society as a whole must learn from what happened and therefore continue to document the events, to establish museums and memorial sites and to give the next generation a chance to understand through proper *education*.

The Council of Europe has extensive experience in fostering multi-perspective history teaching through the provision of interactive teaching materials and bilateral cooperation. It has developed teaching kits for key events of the 20th Century and the European dimension of history. Women's history has been part of these endeavours. Currently new materials are being prepared for the portrayal of "the other" in history teaching to ensure a diversity of perspectives.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Council of Europe coordinated the preparation of Common Guidelines which led to the drafting of new history and geography textbooks as well as teaching manuals. Teachers have taken an active part in the process and demonstrated enthusiasm about learning multi-perspectivity and new interactive teaching styles.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has also highlighted the role of history teaching for reconciliation in post-conflict situations. It has stressed the need to deal with controversial questions in history teaching without resorting to a politically expedient approach of representing one single interpretation of events. It noted that there is now international acceptance that there may be many views and interpretations - all based on evidence.

Historical controversies should not hold human rights hostage. One-sided interpretations or distortions of historical events should not be allowed to lead to discrimination of minorities, xenophobia and renewal of conflict. New generations should not be blamed for what some of their forefathers did.

What is important is an honest search for the truth and a sober, facts-based discussion about the different versions. Only then can the right lessons be learned.

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Links:

Discover the Past for the Future: A study on the role of historical sites and museums in Holocaust education and human rights education in the EU, FRA:

http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/home/pub_holocaust-education_en.htm

Council of Europe history teaching web-site:

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/historyteaching/Default_en.asp

Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1880 (2009) on history teaching in conflict and post-conflict areas:

<http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta09/EREC1880.htm>