

Broadening the concept of the Holocaust


In this post for LSE International History, Dr Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz provides an “untold” story of the history of the Holocaust and Nazi concentration camps, one based on the personal experiences of his grandfather at the diverse and “very last Nazi Concentration Camp of Stutthof.” Dr Dunin-Wąsowicz argues for a broadened and nuanced approach to the concept of the Holocaust.

Three weeks ago, on May 8 and 9, Europe celebrated seven decades since the end of WWII on the continent. May 9 was also the anniversary of the liberation of the very last Nazi German Concentration Camp of **Stutthof**, which happened to be the first camp to be established outside the Reich's borders on 2 September 1939 in what is today's Sztutowo, near Gdańsk (Poland). The history of the camp and its two inmates, my grandfather Marek Dunin-Wąsowicz – who delivered the keynote address at this year's remembrance ceremony at **Stutthof** – and his late brother Krzysztof, illuminates the complexity of the Holocaust, in its more expansive definition, with respect to both its historical and contemporary political dimensions.

Stutthof was initially envisaged as part of the effort to crush Polish dissent in the Nazi occupied Gdańsk area through both internment and annihilation. Subsequently, it hosted German political prisoners, mainly communists, but also Catholic priests, Jehovah Witnesses, homosexuals, as well as in 1944 the family of one of Hitler's attempted assassins. Further, in 1944 it became part of the network of the Final Solution and its facilities were included in the mass extermination of European Jews, a process which in Stutthof lasted until January of 1945. As a result of its relatively small size (in total around 120,000 inmates, half of which were murdered) and its somewhat remote location, Stutthof was one of the most “diverse” concentration camps in Nazi occupied Poland, with less than half inmates comprising Jews and Poles. In this regard it comprehensively envisaged the “**the banality of evil**” of Nazi Germany's practices of imprisonment and wiping out of entire populations and social groups. It, therefore, requires a broader understanding of the Holocaust than it is commonly presented in popular discourses.

Part of that ill-famed diversity of Stutthof were two then young men mentioned before: 21 year old Krzysztof and 17 year old Marek Dunin-Wąsowicz, who after having been captured by the Gestapo for resistance activity in Warsaw, in April 1944, were sent there for a slow death through labour. Both of them, together with their parents, were imprisoned for conspiring against the occupant. The discovery of the true activities of the family engaged in the effort of saving Jews through the **Żegota** organisation would have meant immediate execution. In fact, Krzysztof who was the key resistant fighter, together with his mother Janina, were later in 1982 awarded Righteous Among the Nations by the **Yad Vashem**. However, in 1944 he and his brother found themselves being subjected to slave labour and became first-hand witnesses to genocide, a great deal of which was carried out in the infamously systematic way by means of gas chambers and crematoria, its victims being mainly Jews from around Europe but also Poles and Russians. However, most victims of Stutthof died out of exhaustion, hunger, and disease, mainly **Typhus**. In his own historical scholarship, Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz claims that slave labour, terror, gruesome beatings, and malnutrition were an integral part of the whole system of concentration camps of the National Socialist State.

The disreputable diversity of Stutthof's victims and the ways in which they were killed echoes the criticisms of a Western European gauging of the Holocaust posed by **Timothy Snyder**:

The Germans killed somewhat more than ten million civilians in the major mass killing actions, about half of them Jews, about half of them non-Jews. The Jews and the non-Jews mostly came from the same part of Europe. The project to kill 

all Jews was substantially realized; the project to destroy Slavic populations was only very partially implemented.

He advocates a joint broadening and nuancing of the concept of the Holocaust, in conjunction with the mass killings carried out by the Soviet state predominantly on its own citizens and one that permits disrupting both nationalist and imperialist narratives of WWII martyrdom (prevalent especially in post-Communist Europe). Further, he calls for a broadening of the concept so that it contradicts popular and rather ahistorical understandings that focus on superficially comprehended racial **hatred** and its culturally embedded emotive symbols such as Auschwitz.

Politicisation of WWII is nothing new. Under communist rule in Poland the public discourse on the Holocaust was reduced to a national legacy of suffering, effectively downplaying anti-Semitism. Today, however, the question of Polish civilian complicities in pogroms on the side-lines of German orchestrated extermination of Jews has entered into the **public sphere**. On the other hand, in today's Russia the hegemonic narrative of the Great Patriotic War and its vehemently nationalist dimension remains unquestioned and underscores current ideological agenda of the Putin regime. However, the story of Stutthof disrupts those limited and rather simplistic accounts, old and new. Both Marek and Krzysztof managed to escape during the camp's evacuation, in the course of the so-called Death March, only to be subsequently imprisoned by the Red Army. The very arm that later liberated the remnants of the camp.

Ultimately, the example of this rather minor concentration camp, on the side-lines of the Third Reich, and the very personal story of my grandfather and his brother who managed to survive it, shows a need for both broader and more nuanced understanding of what had happened there, and what can be subsumed under the term Holocaust. On the one hand, Stutthof was part of the bureaucratic apparatus of Nazi Germany. It was a nexus of interment and extermination governed by a diligent administration. It operated along the same principles as the one's observed by Hannah Arendt in the enterprise of Adolf Eichmann. On the other, it was part of a larger practice of politically motivated mass killings (equally through shooting and starvation as through gassing) of different national, ethnic, and social groups, that were taking place between Germany and Russia until 1945, as posed by Snyder. This very political dimension of genocide, framed as a personal warning, was echoed in my grandfather's address at the site of the camp, 70 years after its **liberation**.

Dr Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz is a sociologist. His research interests revolve around idea of Europe, especially in its cultural and social dimensions, as well as studies of nationalism, issues of European migrations and minority rights. He is a graduate of the New School for Social Research in New York City, and received his PhD from the European Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He can be followed on Twitter via [@RochDW](#)

May 26th, 2015 | [Uncategorized](#) | [0 Comments](#)

