



Victims and Sacrifices *

31.12.2013 | Markus Himmelbauer

Alongside Jews and the Sinti and Roma people, the National Socialist regime of violence brought suffering to many others. The persecution of Christians, however, cannot be considered in any sense 'alongside' the Shoah.

War memorials in Austria are today as source of disquiet, if not despair. Thus the fallen soldiers – members of the Imperial Army in World War I or members of German Wehrmacht in World War II, both responsible for cruel wars of aggression - are no longer treated as heroes, but as victims of an unholy war. The monuments change their significance and become 'memorials for peace'. Remembrance ceremonies are dedicated to 'the victims of all wars' – the civilians who are killed, women and children, and, in the same breath, soldiers of the Austrian Imperial Army, and the German Wehrmacht - and these days often the victims of natural catastrophes as well. Remembering deceased family members is an act which human dignity demands. It is as it were symbolically to lay them to rest in their own graves. But, all their personal wretchedness notwithstanding, in these wars of aggression, the soldiers were and remain instruments of the perpetrators.

Just as vague as the term 'the victims of war' is, as often as not, all the talk of 'the victims of the Nazi dictatorship'. In the general disapproval of this time of horror, one takes a stance more of general indignation than of speaking concretely about what is the case. In commemorative speeches certain groups do not appear. Jehovah's Witnesses – then known as Bible Researchers [Bibelforscher] - and the victims of the Nazi so-called 'euthanasia' project might yet receive some sympathy. But whoever refers to the communists explicitly would have to recognise their unambiguous commitment to overcoming the Nazi regime in Austria. And whoever mentions the Sinti and Roma peoples, or homosexuals, would have to honour groups that to this day are the object of many acts of discrimination and the projection of negative stereotypes. Jews do have the good fortune, perhaps, to be called 'Jewish fellow citizens', which is almost treated as an honorific title, and as such one which is denied others: have you ever heard any talk of 'our homosexual fellow citizens'? Last but not least, mention must be made of the victims of Nazi 'justice': conscientious objectors, who were not rehabilitated in Austria until 2009. In our commemorative ceremonies, they too should be honoured.

It is helpful to get some clarity about the range of meanings of the German 'Opfer' by referring to two English words: 'victim' and 'sacrifice'. A 'victim' is a living creature who is killed or wounded at the hands of another, either intentionally or unintentionally, or as a result of a natural catastrophe. The 'victim' as such comes into view only as passive object, cf. 'victim of violence'. 'Sacrifice' on the other hand originally meant a religious offering presented to the Deity. The 'sacrifice' has an exalted meaning, which is what it is about. A 'sacrifice' is always for something else: thanks, praise, a plea for forgiveness, grace or proximity to the Deity.

Additionally, we know of 'sacrifice' as dedication, a free gift which a person offers for something important to them. In the most extreme case, one gives up one's life, to stay faithful to the truth to which one is committed, and by which one sees oneself as 'by duty bound', or to protect another person from suffering and to take it upon oneself in their place. So in today's light the soldiers of the Wehrmacht are interpreted as 'victim'. However, most of them at that time did see a rationale to their war service. Indeed, heroes' memorials were erected for them on the basis of that

rationale.

So they would have seen themselves more as 'sacrifices'. 'Victims' of these wars, by contrast, were originally those who survived but were wounded or faced a permanent disability.

According to the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for the Victims of National Socialism, the following have a claim to a reparation payment: 'those who were persecuted by the National Socialist regime on political grounds, grounds of origin, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, on grounds of a physical disability or mental handicap or on the basis of accusations of so-called asociality, or who in other ways fell victim to typically National Socialist injustice.'^[1]

Some were from the very start the persecuted of the Nazi regime: every Jew, every man and women from the Sinti and Roma peoples was by definition 'victim'. Every such family has its story to tell of the degradation, expulsion, and murder of some of its members, and it honours its dead.

Yet Jewish communities do not (any more) want to be recorded on the 'roll of victims' onto which they have been pushed from time to time, not least as the result of genuinely well-intentioned commemorative initiatives.

Besides them, there were people who consciously took a political position against the Nazi leadership. They knew what they were letting themselves in for. The precise reason why one might have been persecuted on 'political' grounds the National Fund leaves open. It does not have to have been in line with society's understanding of democracy today. One could be in opposition to National Socialism but in the same time fully agree to antisemitic positions. In totalitarian states the ruling powers find many grounds to feel themselves attacked and threatened.

In July the Reparation Fund of the Republic of Austria conferred the status of 'victim of Nazism' upon the Student Society 'Carolina' in Graz. This Catholic Society was banned straight after the invasion by the Nazis.

Two members of 'Carolina' were murdered in a concentration camp; 38 members were imprisoned; 42 had to face compulsory transfer, lowering of grades, and dismissal.

Since July, more than half of the affected Societies throughout the Republic of Austria have been recognised as 'victims of Nazism'. Financial concerns are not central: 'Much worse than the material damage is the human suffering which many in the federation of such Student Societies [Oesterreichischer Cartellverband] had to bear because of their resistance', a writer for the Cartellverband claims.

In October the Umbrella Organization of Catholic Associations [Arbeitsgemeinschaft Katholischer Verbaende, AKV] held an event in St Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna. It recalled Cardinal In-nitzer's proclamation made on the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, 7 October, 1938, in front of thousands of young people: 'Your Fuehrer is Christ!'

This was taken by the Nazis as reason enough to storm the Archbishop's Palace. So 75 years later, on 7 October 2013, this event was commemorated. The motto for the occasion was: 'Persecution of Christians - Yesterday and Today'. The invitation spoke of the 'relevance of the context of persecution of the time, in which Christians and countless others found them-selves, to the current context of persecution for many Christians'. So a direct line was drawn from the Nazi rule to a "Christianophobia"^[2] which is making itself felt more and more in Aus-tria and Europe'. But why portray oneself as victim, rather than consciously work with the themes of the courage and resistance?

Again, every year on the second or third Sunday in November, the Protestant Alliance promotes

the 'Sunday of the Persecuted Church'. And this year, as recently as 9 November, an international symposium on 'Martyrdom in the Eastern Churches' took place at the University of Vienna, organized by the Faculty of Catholic Theology and the Catholic International Theological Institute, Trumau.

But the memory of violence against Christians does not give anyone a carte blanche to treat the Church as a whole as a 'martyr' over against the Nazi state, or to push the persecution of Christians up alongside the Shoah.

For it was precisely the institutional Church which over the centuries was responsible for validating violence against dissenters. Every commemoration with a church connection has to deal self-critically with the 'teaching of contempt' vis-à-vis Judaism and its contribution along the way to the Shoah. Individual Christian witnesses must not obscure the Church's historic guilt for anti-Judaism. Only through true awareness of this history can one hold on to the right perspective in looking at the Shoah.

[1]<http://www.en.nationalfonds.org/sites/dynamic6843.html?rub=59>.

[2] Translator's note: I keep this word as in the original, although the emergent term in English is, rightly or wrongly, 'Christophobia'.

* Translator's Note: The German word 'Opfer' can mean both 'victim' and 'sacrifice'. Dr Markus Himmelbauer, Director of the Austrian Coordinating Committee for Christian-Jewish Co-operation, wrote this text on the memorialisation of victims/sacrifices of both World Wars, for his Austrian readership, Christian, Jewish and other. Here he adds for a British audience: *It seems crucially important to note that British war memorials were set up for soldiers who defended Great Britain and liberated Europe. Our Austrian war memorials are for perpetrators, who carried out two wars of aggression – in 1914 and from 1938. The commemoration of 'victims of all wars' becomes 'contaminated' when these perpetrators are included, the particular tragedies which they experienced notwithstanding. This is how I see it. And this is the argument my article seeks to articulate.*

Translated from [German](#) with permission by Patrick Morrow.