

Opening speech by Anton Weiss-Wendt

Two years ago we were marking the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. 100 years after, what are the defining features of the country once called Soviet Russia and later Soviet Union, I wonder.

A pursuit of justice and equality? Social mobility? economic advancements, scientific progress, perhaps avant-garde art—just trying to think aloud. No. Unfortunately, what comes first to mind in the case of the first socialist society is the excessive use of mass violence—in the name of justifying its very existence. It was brutal and it lasted for decades, essentially until the death of Stalin in 1953.

But most of all, the violence was senseless, destroying the best that the country had to offer, its people. If asked what is the lasting legacy of communism, I would say the cultivated trust in the primacy of state—the source of repression.

It was no-one else but Stalin himself, who once famously quipped: the death of one man is a tragedy, the death of millions is a statistics. And that's what we are taking issue with in this exhibition, if you will. Up to 20 million excess deaths in the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1953.

Not everyone died, but everyone lived in a perpetual state of submission. One other allegory with regard to Stalin's Russia was of a one giant camp zone of which the GULAG itself, the forced labor camp system, which at its peak held fast as many as 2.5 million people, was just a small part. The Gulag IS the Soviet Union's defining feature.

Like with any other instance of mass violence, genocide—it has a prehistory and it has an aftermath. Individuals living in the anticipation of arrest and sentencing in 1937 Moscow—with their suitcases packed, just in case the NKVD comes at night and takes you away.

Stalin had died, but the legacy of the Gulag lived on, in millions of former prisoners, their families, their former jailers, just everyone who had lived in the Soviet Union during that time. The way to cope with it was essentially just one—silence.

My grandparents were no different. I remember when a mimeographed copy of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's "*Archipelago Gulag*" appeared in our home in the late 1980s. I read it too, as a 15-year-old, but we didn't discuss it. Grandfather never shared the details of his imprisonment and subsequent forced exile that took 20 years of his life. He remained silent. And so is my father, born in exile, in Kazakhstan, a child of "enemies of the people—his childhood's memories are still with him, and he's reluctant to share them with the world.

In Holocaust studies, particularly in the United States and Israel, there is this concept of second generation Holocaust survivors. It does make sense to talk about second-generation survivors, also second-generation Gulag survivors. I am perhaps less sure about the third-generation survivor—the term also used in Holocaust studies—not least because it would put me in that category. I never thought of myself as a survivor, by no stretch of the imagination.

I am a professional historian and I sought, by means of this exhibition, to tell a story—one of millions of such stories.

So what you are going to see in this exhibition is basically the story of an individual vs. regime, the communist regime. In a sense, it's a classical story of the revolution devouring its own children, but much more than that.

It tells about a single life warped by political reality, which extended beyond Stalin, beyond the Soviet Union. It also invites to reflect on the meaning of the Gulag, the status of Gulag memory today.

Using the opportunity, I want to thank everyone who has been involved with this exhibition, especially my colleagues at the Norwegian Holocaust Center and our partners at the Military Historical Museum of the Bundeswehr.