

*Research Project***TRAUMATIZED SOCIETY, DEMOCRACY AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFE**

Lithuanian society experienced significant traumatization during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For 50 years, from 1940 to 1990, Lithuania lived under successive occupations, first by the Soviet Union, then by the Nazi Germany, and again by the Soviet Union. In 1939 the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, dividing Europe into spheres of interest. Lithuania was assigned to the Soviet sphere. In the summer of 1940, even before the formal incorporation of Lithuania into the USSR, mass arrests and deportations began. The victims were the most educated members of society: public servants, teachers, university professors, high school and university students, farmers, members of public organisations and political parties, and other “anti-Soviet elements”. In June of 1941, Nazi Germany occupied Lithuania, and, with the help of local collaborators, began the mass extermination of the Jews. The Soviet army reestablished its control of Lithuania in 1944, starting a new period of occupation that lasted almost 50 years. Every year thousands of people from Lithuania were sent to the Gulag camps, or deported in cattle cars to Siberia, where they experienced severe physical and mental suffering. More than a million people, or about 30% of the population, were deported, sentenced to death, imprisoned or forced to emigrate. Many people suffered directly from political repression, while others lived for decades under the communist regime. The sufferings of the victims were not recognised, they were concealed from the public. The sufferers often did not dare to tell their own children about them. Thus, the victims of repression were exposed to traumatic experiences for an extremely long period of time, for several decades. People exposed to the most severe traumas as a result of political repression were forced to hide their past for a long time. Many of them did not share their experiences of deportation or the Gulag camps even with their own children for fear of new repressions.

The available studies of political repression provide little data on the consequences of the communist regime, although millions of people fell victim to Stalinist repression. In terms of trauma psychology, the experience of victims of repression living in Lithuania, as well as in other former Soviet republics, is interesting due to the extremely long duration of their exposure

to trauma, lasting for decades, and to the non-recognition of their traumas, which forced them to hide their past experiences for a very long time.

How has this affected the victims of repression? Does the enforced suppression of trauma memories weaken the effects of the trauma too? Does the psychological state of people who were directly exposed to repression differ from that of people who were not exposed? What coping strategies did the victims employ in order to endure the hardships of repression?

The existence of formal criteria defining the status of victim of repression, established under the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Legal Status of Persons who Suffered under the Occupations of 1939 to 1990, enables to compare the effects of different forms of repression - political prisoners, deportees, Nazi victims and residents of Lithuania who had not been directly subjected to political repression.

The project aims to investigate the randomly selected non-clinical sample of politically repressed people using the semi-structured interviews, self-administrated questionnaires on exposure to trauma, trauma-symptom instruments and questions on psychosocial consequences of long-lasting traumatization. The comparison group would consist of people of the same age and gender who had also lived under the Soviet regime, but were not exposed directly to traumatizing events. Important part of the investigation would be the question of psychological and spiritual resilience to the long-lasting traumatization and even questions regarding the positive aspects of trauma. Scientific psychotraumatology only started investigating aspects of coping with trauma and psychological resilience recently. Which factors were important in coping with trauma, do the coping strategies adopted by people subjected to repression differ from those of the comparison group, what was the influence of spiritual values, beliefs, faith and the ability to find meaning in suffering. Catholic church was the main institution of resilience to the totalitarian regime. What was the role of individual church attendance in coping with traumatizing experiences?

The Lithuanian experience over the past two decades points to the emergence of more general problems in the society - moral, political and legal. Since regaining independence in 1991, the basic documents of the state have recognised the Soviet period as a period of illegitimate occupation, and identified those who suffered from it. But what we lack is a deeper reflection by the society on the effects of the 50 years of occupation. On the contrary, every effort has been taken to forget the past as quickly as possible and to avoid any discussions about

it. In moral terms, the idea is raised that the new state has been built on moral compromise. Such historical and present-day stereotypes, inherited from the Soviet past, as political and moral relativism, and indifferent attitude to national history, still prevail in society. The lack of a comprehensive and thorough evaluation of the not-too-distant past still remains a problem in the most post-communist countries. The effect of collective traumas is very complicated and multi-faceted. If individual trauma is a break in the normal flow of life, the collective trauma disrupts the continuance of social memory and the successful inter-generation passage of historical memory, bonds between family and society, its groups and generations. Another result of life in an abnormal society is also a moral trauma. Life by moral double standards eventually affects the personality and his or her deepest values. Even today one can observe many forms mentality and habits developed during the regime. The reflection on the effects of historical traumas to society, to public health and moral values would be a part of the project.