

FROM BLACK AND WHITE TO SHADES OF GREY: TOWARDS A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PERCEPTION OF HISTORY
SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS ON THE 7TH INTERNATIONAL LEONIDAS DONSKIS MEMORIAL CONFERENCE

The life of a man is vulnerable and fragile, just like our ability to remember the tragedies of mankind.

Leonidas Donskis

The famous Lithuanian professor, philosopher and politician Leonidas Donskis passed away eight years ago, and a conference was organized for the seventh time to commemorate his legacy. The conference, which took place on the 20th of September, 2024, at the Town Hall of Vilnius, explored the topic “From Black and White to Shades of Grey: Towards a Multi-dimensional Perception of History.” Prof. Robert van Voren, the director of the Andrei Sakharov Research Center for Democratic Development, argued that the late professor would not only have encouraged this discussion but would have “absolutely dominated” it.

Indeed, in one of his last published texts, prof. Donskis raised existential questions – should we try our best to remember everything, thus extending the line of existence and giving a “second life” to those who deserve it? Or, on the contrary, should we forget irrationalities which do not deserve our collective keepsake? However, the philosopher was clear about his personal decision on the matter in question and wrote about the necessity of memorializing major tragedies, such as the Holocaust, by recording the stories of people who are still around to tell them. Otherwise, he argued, history can end up being manipulated and twisted.

“Memory is the tool of the small and weak, but forgetfulness is best used for the interests of the big and powerful,” he said.¹ And yet, while everything seems clear on paper, the conversation is never easy. Marius Vaščega, Head of the European Commission Office in Lithuania, emphasized the need to maintain this dialogue in the spirit of the late Leonidas’ former talk-show title, “Without Anger” (originally, “Be pykčio”).

In the opening speech, prof. Van Voren set the scene for the conference, explaining that the title of the event implies a division between black and white narratives of history, which oversimplify the truth. Meanwhile, the real truth and the complexities of all historical events lie in the shades of grey. In addition, as Marius Vaščega noted, various powers may decide to fabricate new truths or convert the meaning associated with them from white to black and vice versa. No wonder Polish dissident Adam Michnik has said that democracy is grey – made up of numerous shades which symbolize each person’s opinions.

Nevertheless, historical narratives, regardless of their color, are not easy to distinguish. As one of the leading historians in the United Kingdom, John Hughes-Wilson, said, there is no absolute truth, and whatever narrative is prevalent depends entirely on the social context. In addition, it is being improved with new findings – facts that were not even believed to have existed. Historians and other keepers of the past also have a responsibility to consider the social context in which the events happened and personas were living. Considering all that is difficult, but it is a job well worth the effort.

Indeed, the topic of historical narratives was chosen for a reason. Not only is the society on the verge of difficult choices – which side to take, whom to believe – but the tales of the past also shape it, and now conflicts emerge due to undigested collective trauma. Georgian psychiatrist Jana Javakhishvili clarified the divisions created through historical narratives – us vs. them, victim vs. the oppressor – which signal an unprocessed past. According to the psychiatrist, the unprocessed past is one of the key elements which continue to shape Russia’s policies towards gaining revenge. Its inability to mourn past losses destabilizes society and provokes annihilation. In addition, prof. Javakhishvili argued that “*unprocessed trauma creates fertile soil for political manipulation.*” Taking Russia as an example, the psychiatrist explained that Vladimir Putin used unprocessed trauma as a tool to promote a national project of collective revenge – the reanimation of the Russian Empire.

Considering that Russia’s aggression over the past several years remains one of the biggest threats to the international order and the democratic world, the topic

¹ Donskis, Leonidas. „Jei aš Tave užmiršiu...“ [a speech written for the opening of A. Sutkus’ exhibition “IN MEMORIAM”], 2016.

played a significant role in the conference. A panel discussion, moderated by journalist Janet Anderson, united a number of high-level experts to exchange insights about the historical events (and their manipulations) that led Russian policy towards an unnecessary war. Emilia Koustova, a professor of Russian and Soviet Studies at the University of Strasbourg, presented qualitative and discourse-related data which compared the parallels between Putin's policy and public image creation and the picture that was built up and reinforced during Soviet times. The presented vocabulary and imagery similarities in spreading propaganda currently as well as during the Soviet era further prove the points previously made by prof. Javakhishvili. Another participant in the panel discussion, Nicolas Werth, a French historian specializing in Stalinism and Soviet state violence, provided an exclusive overview of tendencies he had identified in Russian history books, which the state had prepared for high school students in Russia. According to his findings, numerous facts are untold or manipulated to tell tales of Russian heroism throughout the years. In addition, western actors' roles are omitted. For example, one of the books includes a chapter about how Russia successfully defeated Germany in the First World War without a single mention of the Western allies. The books, prepared and published several years before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, were introduced to students only in 2022-2023. However, the systemized and structured attack on historical truth is clearly aimed at discrediting the West, which serves the purposes of the regime's current foreign policy.

Yaroslav Hrytsak, a popular Ukrainian historian, examined the context of Russian imperialism and colonizing policies in his address "Decolonizing Ukrainian History." According to him, as an empire with Ukraine as its colony, Russia did its best to diminish the sense of national identity in Ukraine, maintaining that it was one of Russia's minorities. He argued that Ukrainians were encouraged to believe they were part of a growing superpower and willingly participated in its development, and in later years, even occupied many of the most powerful positions in the Soviet Union. After the fall of the "Soviet Empire," Ukrainians continued to be marginalized as the Russian leaders did not want to allow them to seek autonomy. Ukrainian identity was ripped apart, and in many contexts, the use of the Ukrainian language was banned. To this day, narratives of Ukrainian not being a rightful nationality but rather a part of the Russian nation are prevalent and used by Vladimir Putin.

However, Russia is not the first nation to use its historical narratives to disrupt the world order. The Dutch sociologist and author of several books, Abram de Swaan, added profound insights into the taxonomy of mass violence, which is made possible in the so-called "killing compartments," which allow for outbursts of aggression. In his keynote address, de Swaan provided an erudite overview of

the conditions under which violence against populations occurs. He presented and analyzed examples of numerous European imperialist and/or colonialist countries applying the same method of action – fighting far away from home and attacking, in a well-organized and weaponized manner, an under-armed and unprepared nation. The expert knowledge of sociologists on past conflicts and vast research of the tendencies that lead to them added important context to understanding why man-made tragedies occur and the need to discuss them openly.

Indeed, such a discussion is crucial, as was masterfully demonstrated by a panel titled “After the Holocaust – the Sad Picture That Continues to Emerge,” which was inspired by the wide-assumed notion that Lithuanians are “Jew killers” and the Dutch are their “saviors,” when the real difference between the two is little. Marty Bax, a cultural historian, presented data based on files related to Dutch collaboration with the Nazi regime. According to the data, over 485,000 collaboration files were made public, and 66,000 people were sentenced based on this evidence. The prosecution was not easy due to the complexities of the time in question. For example, the historian shared the story of how some local Jew civil servants had to explain themselves for collaborating with the Nazi regime simply because of their position and involvement in the preparation of specific maps which show which areas of Amsterdam were the most densely populated by Jews. Nevertheless, all this information was made public for the sole purpose of educating and informing the current population of the mistakes made in the past.

Meanwhile, the Lithuanian side was represented by historian Linas Venclauskas, Arūnas Bubnys, Director of the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania, and Ronaldas Račinskas, Executive Director of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania. In a wide-ranging discussion, they touched upon the topics of the national mentality of Lithuania, the methods used by the Nazi regime to fabricate historical truth for their image during the occupation of Klaipėda (and later, the rest of Lithuanian territories), the populations’ rather eager decision to assist the Nazi occupants, and the way Lithuania is still trying to digest its painful past. While the mentality of victims of history is still prevalent in Lithuanian society, the information about the nations’ collaboration with the Nazis is becoming more underscored. The process was set back by 50 years due to the soviet occupation, but the society is now finally starting to talk about the tragic consequences of their ancestors’ actions. Still, history is often used as a strongly unifying factor, although nothing is more unifying than a common enemy. No wonder the nation still faces issues of acknowledgement, as people keep pointing fingers at each other instead of admitting collective mistakes.

However, some nations have been dubbed beacons of morality for how skillfully they have come to terms with their past. A prominent example is South Africa, which set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) after decades of Apartheid policies. The Commission is known worldwide and has inspired other countries to offer similar programs. Nevertheless, Tshepo Madlingozi, Commissioner of the South African Human Rights Commission, presented the program's shortcomings with the hope of finding better tools for the future processing of tragic events. While Commissioner Madlingozi agreed that the TRC managed to achieve a compromise constitution, recognized the suffering of victims publicly and initiated useful institutional reforms, he argued that the TRC did not address many of the victims' psychosocial needs, resulted in continuous inequality, did not provide sufficient reparations and did not conduct any prosecutions.

Senator Michelle Audette shared the experience of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission and emphasized how the nation was shaken to the core to learn that their country is not as perfect as it seems. The Canadian TRC allowed people to publicly come to terms with the long-lasting implications of the Canadian Indian residential school system on Indigenous people and their families. The Senator, herself being Innu, shared the painful realities of discrimination, violence and racism against Indigenous people by the colonizers, which made its way well into contemporary Canada. She argued that while the TRC was a successful platform for people to tell their truth, the most crucial part came later in the form of an accountability mechanism created to keep the government in check by obliging it to address its failures and be kept responsible.

Overall, the conference commemorating Leonidas Donskis underscored the intricate relationship between memory, history, and identity, particularly in the context of unprocessed traumas and political manipulation. Through diverse discussions and expert insights, participants highlighted the necessity of a nuanced understanding of historical narratives, moving beyond binary interpretations to embrace the complexities represented by the shades of grey. This exploration revealed how narratives can shape national identities and influence current political climates, particularly in the face of aggression and colonial legacies. The examples from Lithuania, Canada, South Africa, the Netherlands, Ukraine and Russia emphasized the importance of confronting uncomfortable truths, acknowledging collective mistakes, and learning from history to foster accountability and reconciliation. Ultimately, the conference honored Donskis' legacy and reinforced the vital role of memory in promoting a more just and democratic society, reminding us that the past, if left unexamined, can continue to haunt the present.