



UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

# Remembering the Victims of European Totalitarianism

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# Disbelieving Atrocities (1944)

- Witnesses to atrocities, screaming at passers-by
- Two worlds, of suffering and well-being
- Not ignorant of, but ignoring, the Nazi persecution and annihilation of Jews
- Two worlds have to meet
- Atrocities have to enter our consciousness



# “Statistics don’t bleed” (Koestler)



They burn books, and then will burn ...





# 25 million: Nazi death toll



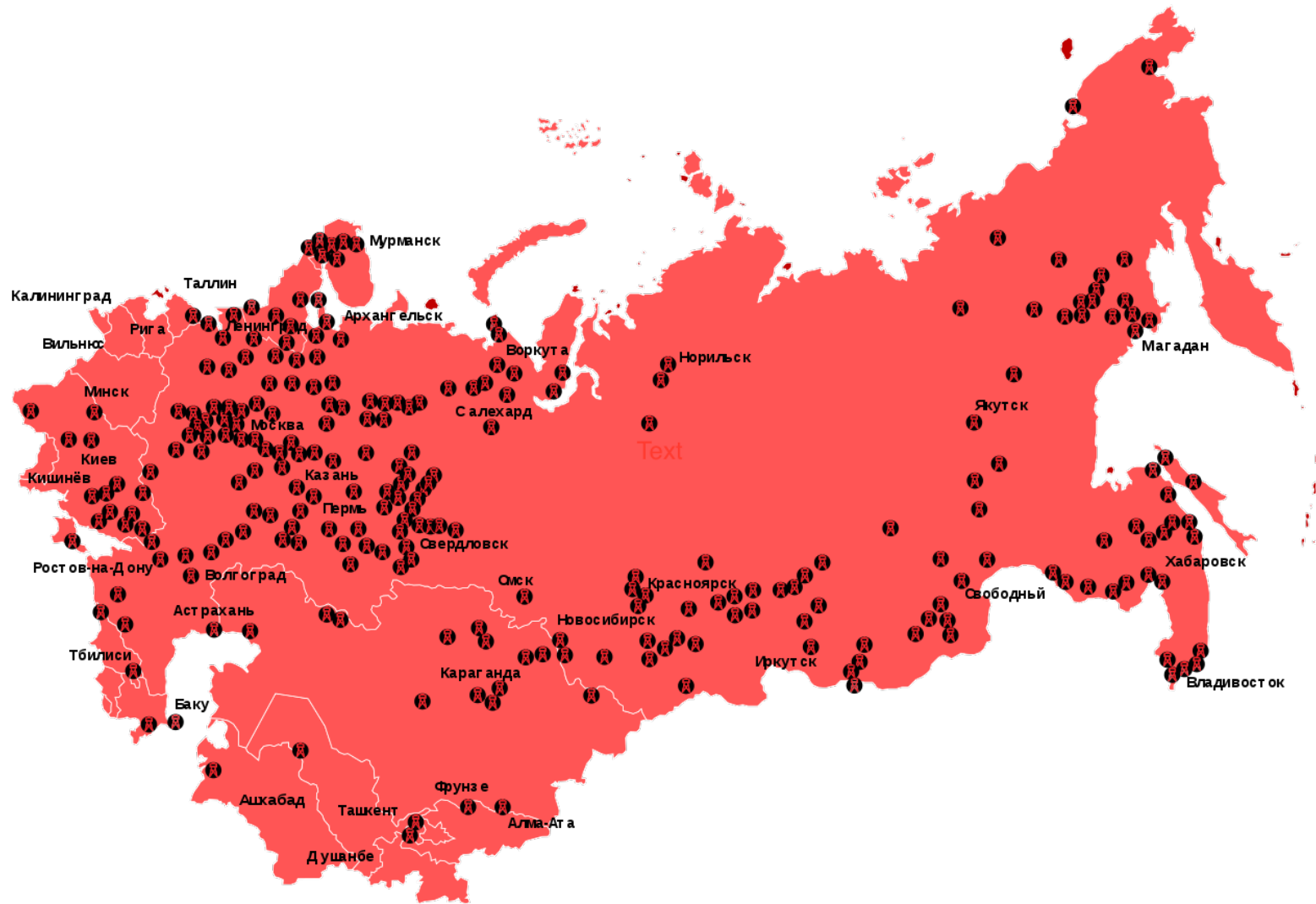
# Why remember Nazi victims?

- Not only Jews, but also Gypsies and handicapped (involuntary euthanasia programme), and Russian prisoners of war
- Respect and justice for the vanquished
- Want to ensure that this will never again happen
- Chronicling the misdeeds of dictators often only way to punish them and to ensure justice for the victims
- Hitler's question: "Who remembers the Armenians?"

# 100 million: Communist death toll



# The Gulag



# Two kinds of totalitarianism

- Communism related to, not identical with, Nazism: Both totalitarian ideologies
- Differences: no extermination camps under communism, less interference in daily life of ordinary people under Nazism
- But goals in both cases total control of both body and mind, from cradle to grave; military conquest; and mass killings of those who did not fit the project
- Courtois: Starving a child to death in Ukraine no less crime than starving a child to death in the Warsaw ghetto



# Why communism not condemned?

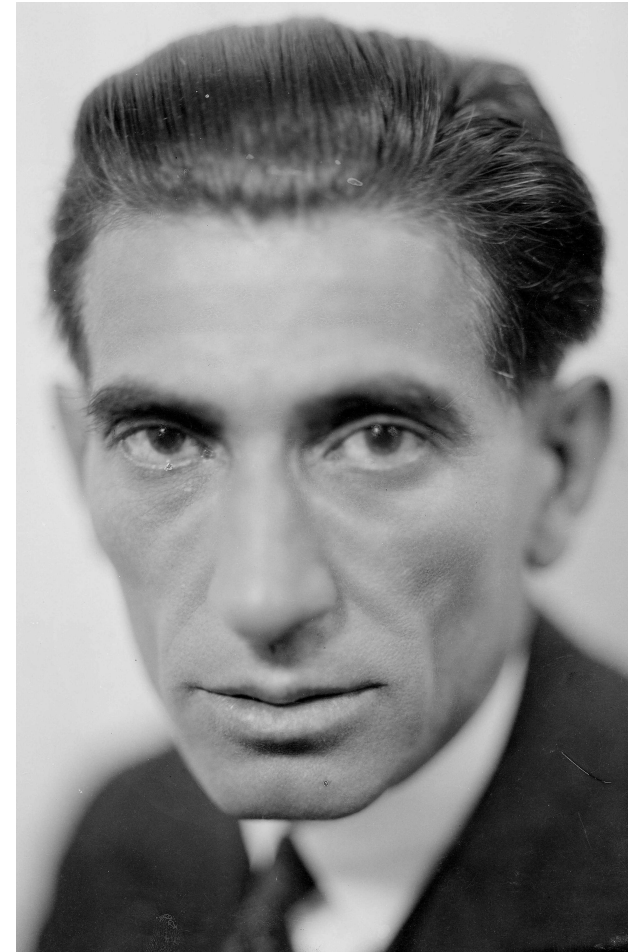


# Reasons for a different criterion

- Time lag: It took decades to discover the truth on the Holocaust. Same time lag in perception of communism
- Defeat in war: photos and films of death camps and mass graves
- No Nuremberg Trials of communists
- Powerful communist propaganda machine operating for decades
- Systematic destruction of evidence
- Many powerful accomplices in the West
- Common perception that communists were misguided, but well-meaning idealists

# Where is the Omelette?

- You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs
- Panait Istrati asked: But where is the omelette?
- Peaceful development and rapid economic growth in Sweden in 1870–1970 and in the US in 1865–1914, without terror
- To try to create a better world, or heaven, by silencing, imprisoning and murdering people for the only crime of not belonging the world is turned into a hell



# Two historical observations

- Evidence from archives broadly confirms what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Robert Conquest had been writing
- Communist terror cannot be dismissed as a local tradition: Russian, or Chinese, or Cambodian, or Cuban; it was everywhere the same
- In the first four months of their reign, the Bolsheviks had killed more people than had been executed in Russia for political crimes for more than a century

# Kuortti (1) and Lipper (11)





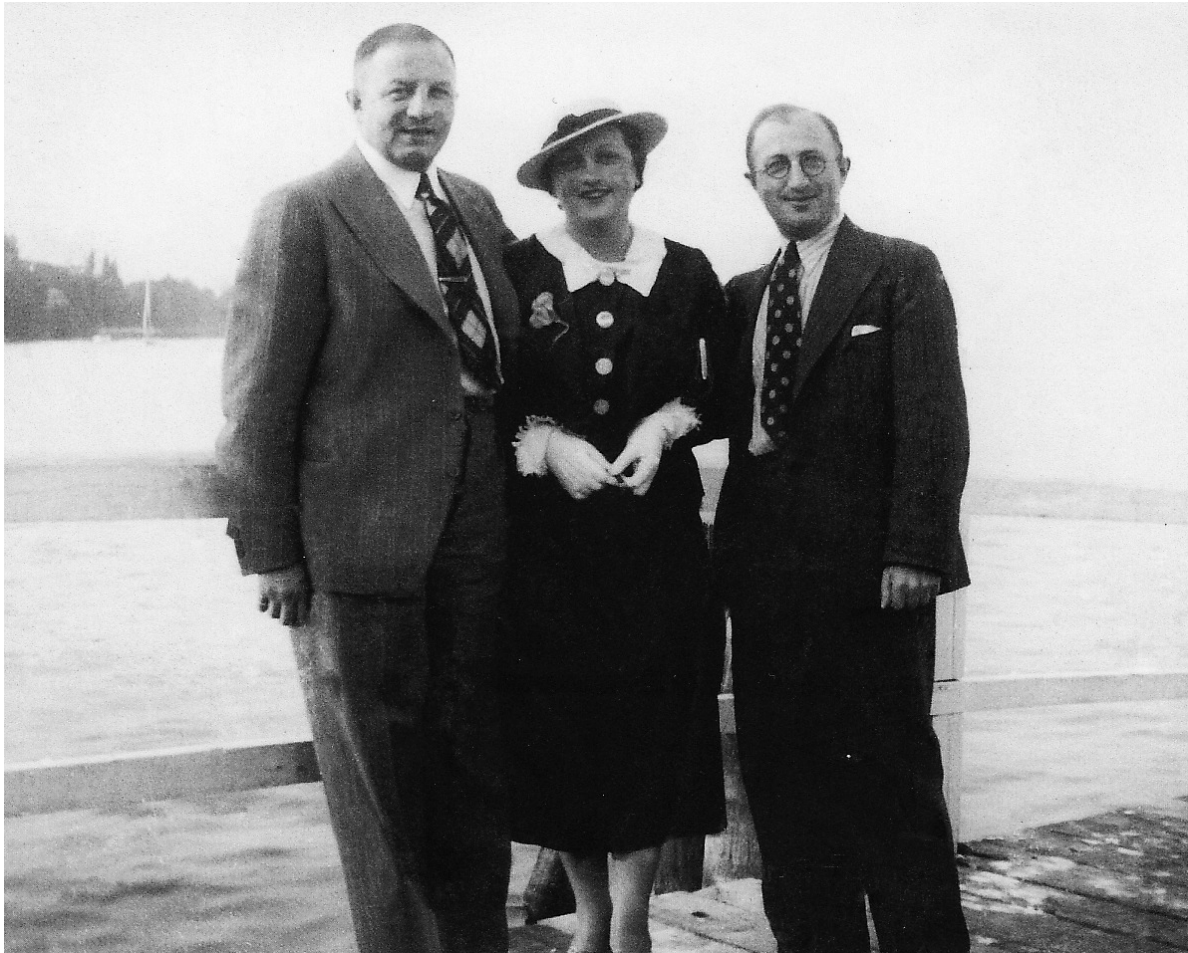
# Otto Larsen: 8 years



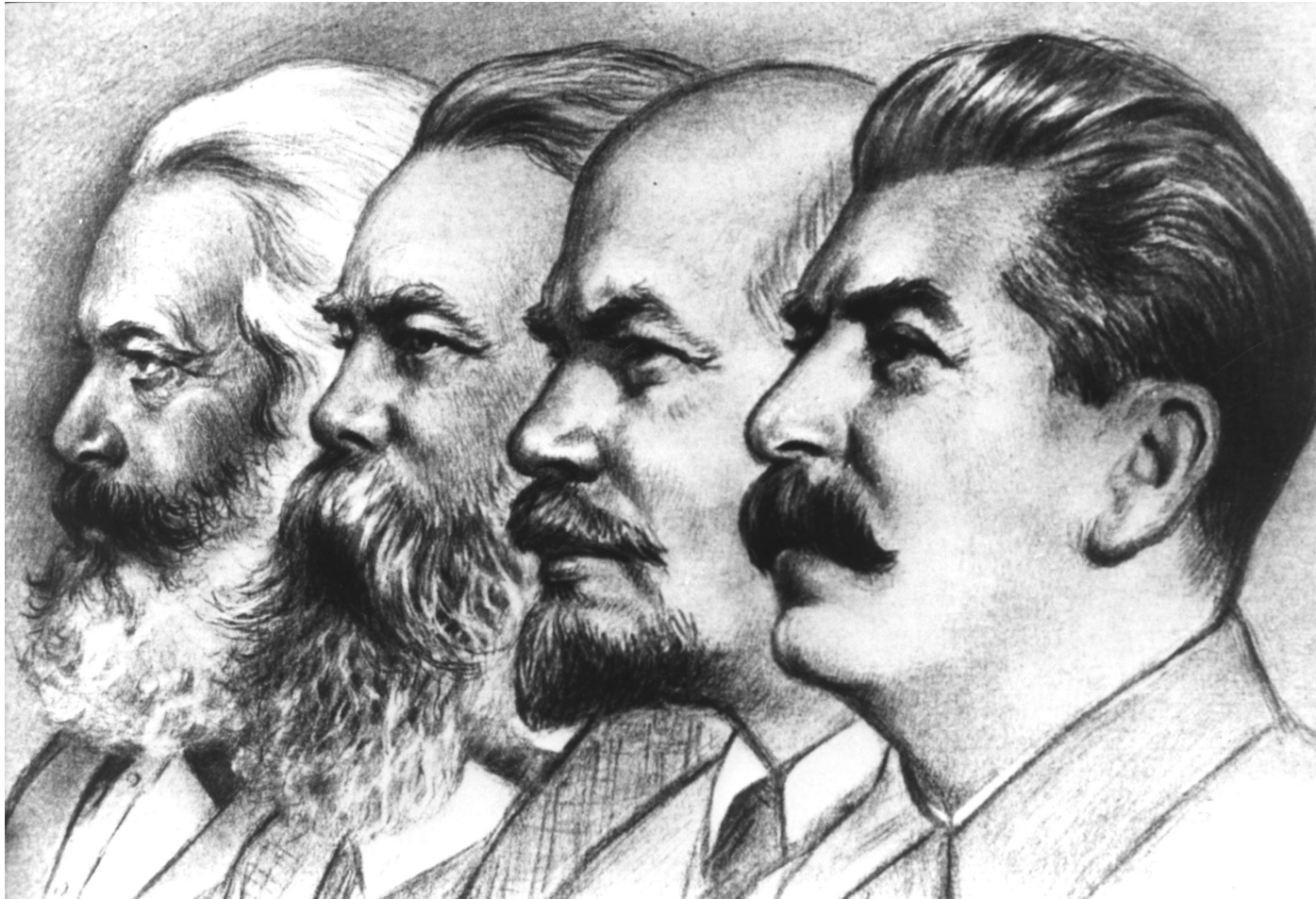
Vera  
Hertzsch and  
her baby  
1938



# Henny and her brothers Berlin 1936



Should the despots get away with it?



# The task of the historian

- To seek the truth, and some of it remains hidden, for example in military archives
- Dikötter has made startling discoveries in local archives in China
- To call a spade a spade and a murderer a murderer and not try to excuse or explain away his misdeed
- To speak for the silent and the silenced, the downtrodden, the disappeared victim



# Moral responsibility of the historian

“When in the silence of abjection, no sound can be heard save that of the chains of the slave and the voice of the informer; when all tremble before the tyrant, and it is as dangerous to incur his favour as to merit his displeasure, the historian appears, entrusted with the vengeance of the people. Nero prospers in vain, for Tacitus has already been born within the empire.”



# Conclusion: Memorial

- Communism has to be remembered and condemned as clearly as Nazism
- For the victims, so they did not die in vain
- For the courageous opponents, so they did not fight in vain
- For Europe, so that she can come to terms with her history and execute justice
- For ourselves, so that these horrors never repeat themselves

# The Bell also tolls for thee

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were:  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for  
whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.

