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Sweden, Russia Should Find Truth on Wallenberg

By Susanne Berger

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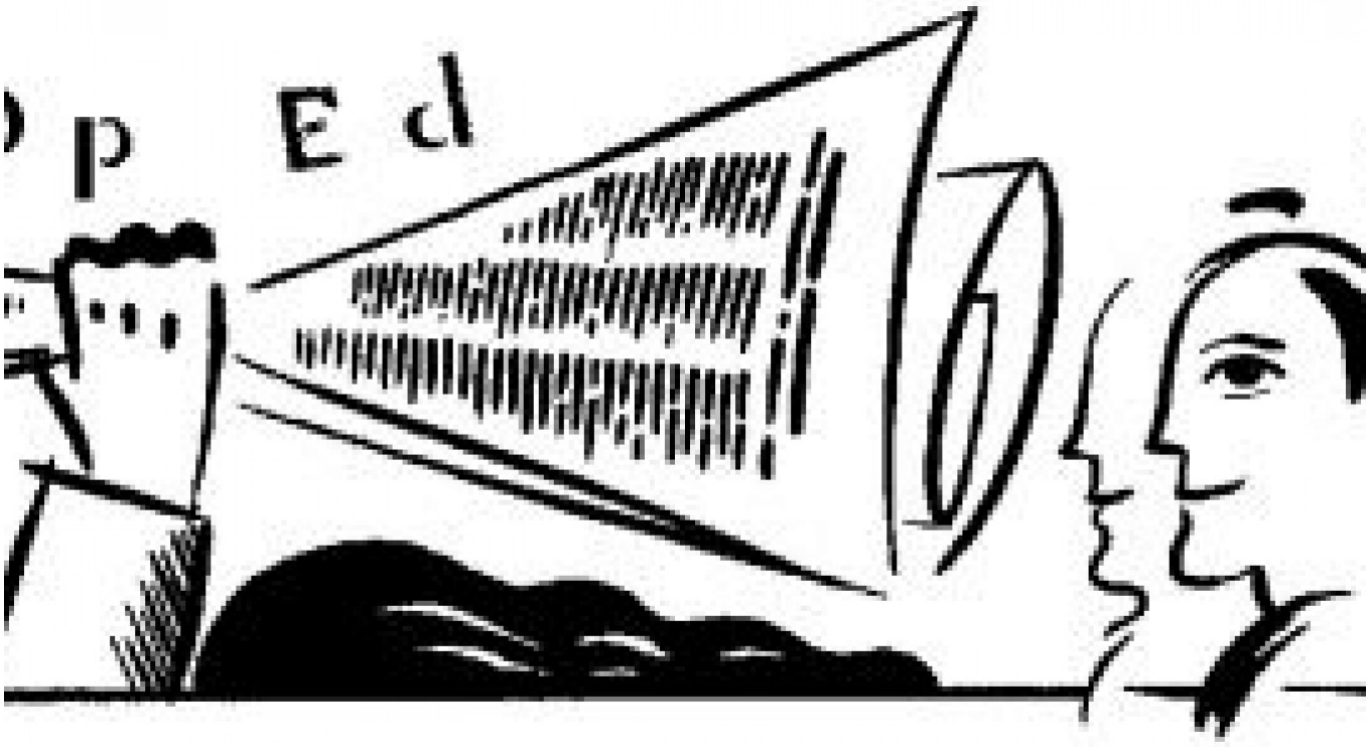

In the early morning of May 9, 1945, after the radio announcement of the German capitulation, joyous celebrations erupted all over Moscow and throughout the Soviet Union, marking the end of the most horrific conflict the world had ever seen.

For the hundreds of inmates inside Moscow's Lubyanka prison who most likely heard the sounds of the fireworks and explosions — 1,000 cannons shot 1,000 times — this moment no doubt stirred a wide range of emotions. Lubyanka housed many top generals and officials of the defeated Nazi regime, some sharing cells with former resistance fighters, including a 32-year-old Swedish diplomat named Raoul Wallenberg.

Upon learning the news, the young Swede must have felt hopeful that for him the end of the war also signaled the end of his ordeal. After having saved thousands of Jews from certain death in wartime Budapest, Wallenberg was arrested by the Soviet military counterintelligence in January 1945. Yet many details of his imprisonment and final fate have never been revealed.

Sweden declared 2012, the 100th anniversary of his birth, as the official Wallenberg year, dedicated to celebrating his creativity, stamina and courage in saving Hungarian Jews. But in terms of establishing the full circumstances of Wallenberg's disappearance in the Soviet Union, the 2012 commemoration was a resounding disappointment.

For a variety of reasons, the Swedish organizers decided to focus attention entirely on highlighting Wallenberg's legacy, excluding almost completely the question of his fate. As a result, many observers feel that Sweden once again missed a golden opportunity to press the Russian authorities for answers. The approach was also troubling because it signaled that Sweden no longer considers solving the Wallenberg mystery important.

Just as perplexing is that Swedish officials continue to emphasize all the obstacles that stand in the way of clarifying Wallenberg's fate instead of energetically pursuing the many options that are available to investigators. Unfortunately, this position plays directly into the hands of President Vladimir Putin, who still shows only a limited willingness to properly reckon with the Soviet past.

As historian Nikita Petrov argued in an April 12 article in Novaya Gazeta, the Kremlin's restrictive approach to reviewing the crimes of Stalin's regime is deeply troubling since it appears closely linked to Putin's broader political aim of strengthening the state's power.

According to Petrov, the fact that Russia still refuses to present complete information about sensitive issues, like the Katyn massacre in which thousands of Polish officers were slaughtered in 1940 on Josef Stalin's orders, raises serious concerns about Russia's political maturity and its political future.

The official attitude to the Katyn question and similarly complex historical issues, such as the Wallenberg case, serves as an important indicator of the health of Russian civil society overall.

It will be interesting to see if Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt presses his Russian counterparts on the ruling issued recently by the Russian Constitutional Court in another sensitive case, namely to allow Petrov to review collections of the Soviet intelligence operations in post-war Germany from 1948-53.

The Constitutional Court agreed with Petrov's argument that the term of secrecy for these records has expired. This decision sets an important precedent for similar requests, including those currently pending in the Wallenberg case.

Swedish diplomats say they remain interested in thoroughly investigating all aspects of the Wallenberg question, including reasons for his arrest, but so far they have not lobbied for access to the archives of Soviet security and intelligence agencies that could shed light on the matter.

They have not firmly protested the fact that Russian archivists have withheld key documentation in the Wallenberg case, such as records from Lubyanka prison from late July 1947 that could verify if Wallenberg was held there as "Prisoner No. 7." Similarly, Swedish officials have ignored several false claims made by representatives of the Federal Security Service archives, including the spurious statement that no investigative file was ever created

for Wallenberg, which is patently untrue.

Discovering the full truth about Wallenberg's disappearance requires bold, carefully targeted action, just like the rescue of the Jews of Budapest. But Sweden can't seem to muster the same level of courage and determination regarding the Wallenberg file. Unfortunately, both Sweden and Russia consider the current status quo in the Wallenberg investigation acceptable and perhaps even preferable because of the many problematic revelations a complete resolution of the case could produce.

For instance, what exactly did Wallenberg's diplomatic colleagues tell Soviet officials about him in the spring of 1945, when they believed that Wallenberg had died in Budapest? Why were they allowed to return home while Wallenberg was not?

Key questions also remain about Wallenberg's prominent relatives, the Wallenberg bankers, especially their business relations with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II and beyond. These ties appear to be connected with the mystery of Wallenberg's disappearance

The Swedish government and its international partners should find the courage to use the Wallenberg case as an important test case for democratic values in Russia. The West needs to draw a line in the sand, just as a young Swede once did in Nazi-controlled Hungary. Such a step would commemorate Wallenberg's legacy better than any monument or celebration and could lead to an important affirmation of democratic principles for all Russians fighting for civil liberties and human rights in their country today.

Susanne Berger is a historical researcher and former consultant to the Swedish-Russian working group that investigated the fate of Raoul Wallenberg from 1991-2001. Vadim Birstein, a geneticist and historian, former member of the first International Wallenberg Commission from 1990-1991, is author of the recently published book "Smersh, Stalin's Secret Weapon: Soviet Military Counterintelligence in WWII."

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