



Posted on Aug. 7, 2003

Still much too reluctant to talk

A recent report chastises central Europeans for dodging recent history

“NOT trying hard enough; could do better” would sum up the verdict of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, a Jewish human-rights foundation, on the efforts of most European countries to hunt down the last surviving perpetrators of Hitler's Holocaust. The Wiesenthal Centre singles out Austria for doing the least to pursue old war criminals, relative to the number probably on its soil. And it scolds Sweden and Norway for allowing statutes of limitation to rule out prosecutions.

But the centre, in a report on the investigation and prosecution of ex-Nazi war criminals around the world, reserves much of its criticism for countries of central and eastern Europe. There, it says, the fall of communist regimes and the access to previously secret archives should have meant “numerous new opportunities” for identifying and prosecuting war criminals. It finds instead that of all the countries in the region, only Poland has been making any serious effort to prosecute Nazi criminals—and then only with very limited success. The three Baltic countries, Belarus, Romania, Russia and Ukraine have shown very little political will to pursue Holocaust crimes, it says.

The centre has been trying to prod the Baltic governments into fresh efforts at investigation and prosecution. Last year it launched publicity campaigns in all three countries under the slogan “Operation Last Chance”, offering rewards of up to \$10,000 for information leading to the investigation of war criminals. The centre said last month it had received the names of 174 suspects in Lithuania, 37 in Latvia and six in Estonia. But one Lithuanian prosecutor says the information passed on to his office is of more use to historians and archivists than to courts of law.

As the Wiesenthal report shows, the ex-communist countries have special difficulties still in confronting the Holocaust. The problem afflicts not only those countries which collaborated with Hitler but even those which suffered terribly under him.

One reason is that the Holocaust was a taboo subject in communist countries for decades after the war. Accurate information was scarce or non-existent, dulling public understanding of the crime for generations. Communist history insisted on the communists themselves as both the main fighters against fascism and its main victims.

A second obstacle is the feeling among many people in ex-communist countries that their national sufferings under communism should command the world's attention and sympathy as

much as, if not more than, the suffering of Jews under Hitler. They think it smacks of double standards to pursue ex-Nazis more vigorously than ex-KGB men. Anti-Semites add poison to the argument by caricaturing communism as a Jewish-dominated movement. Countries such as Slovakia, where a national regime allied itself with the Nazis, have an even stronger incentive to downplay the Holocaust. Many who regret wartime collaboration would prefer to see it forgotten. Those who admire it would rather emphasise its nationalistic aspect than its genocidal one.

Even heads of state can trip themselves up when talking on the subject. Recently President Ion Iliescu of Romania said that the Holocaust “was not unique to the Jewish population in Europe” and that “Jews and communists” were treated “equally” in Romania in the Nazi period. He said he opposed restitution of properties seized from Jews, because “the wretched Romanian citizen of today” should not “pay for what happened then”. The interview caused an outcry—but not in Romania, where such views would have passed easily. Mr Iliescu's mistake, beyond voicing such comments at all, was in offering them to Haaretz, an Israeli newspaper.