VICTIMS

Victims East and West

Under Stalinism, crime was said to exist only as a bourgeois 'relic' and was expected to simply vanish in the communist system. It is not surprising therefore that criminology was thought to be fairly useless. Only 'socialist criminology' (based on the classical works of Marx and Lenin) was acceptable and criminology as understood by the West filtered through the Iron Curtain very slowly. This was also true of victimology which reached east European countries as late as the early 1970s.

Victimology, regarded very much as a bourgeois branch of science, never was officially accepted in former east Germany and did not develop in Romania either.

The development of the study of victims in the USSR, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia arose mainly from the work, in the 1960s and 1970s, of L. W. Frank. Coming from Tadzhikistan, he is acknowledged as the 'father' of Soviet victimology. He argued for the recognition of the position of victims within the socialist state and managed to do both empirical and theoretical research. In Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, some work was undertaken on the relationship between victim and offender.

Current thinking in the Soviet Union about victims develops the themes established by Frank before his death in 1977. Researchers in the USSR more so than in other east European countries are focused on the etiological and phenomenological problems of victimisation in the criminal justice system.

Some attention is also being given to so called 'criminalistic victimology' - the study of the victim-offender relationship in order to help in the detection of crime. Other researchers are looking at the field of 'processual victimology' which is concerned with the guilt of the victim and the significance of this from the point of view of substantive criminal law. Proposals have been put forward to grant the 'guilty' victim a special status in the legal process of being between the offender and the 'innocent' victim; these proposals have not been without their opponents.

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In Hungary and Poland, things have been quite different. Already in the 1960s, the victim-offender relationship was being studied, somewhat earlier than in this country when interest in the position of the victim emerged only in the early 1970s. In Poland more than in Hungary and indeed in the West, great attention is paid to theoretical problems in victimology. Furthermore, Poland has, since 1974, been the only east European country in which there has been compensa-

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tion for victims of crime; in that year, the after-care fund for crime victims and their families as well as the alimony fund were set up. In 1985, the Foundation for Assisting Victims of Crime, a complement to the state compensation fund, was established.

Poland however has no system of practical support for victims of the type which has flourished in Great Britain over the last two decades. Hungary however boasts a new consultative centre for rape victims.

The current of victimology and its prospects are very different in eastern and western Europe. The emphasis in the West on the development of services for victims has not really found favour in the East because it was thought that victims' interests were already adequately catered for by the state. However, particularly in Poland and Hungary, attitudes are changing and, in time, measures to improve the position of victims are very likely to come about. Conferences such as the first East/West European victimology conference which was held near Warsaw in March have a significant part to play.

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The first east-west European victimology conference held in Poland, started on a grey morning in March 1991 and was attended by about forty people from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Germany, Estonia, Russia, Finland, England, and of course Poland.

The language of the conference (which was organised by the Polish Academy of Sciences, and the Foundation for Assisting Victims of Crime) was English, though some papers were subject to simultaneous translation. Certain efforts (by the English) at pronouncing eastern European names was a source of amusement. In her opening address Ewa Bienkowska, who had also organised the conference, expanded on the development in victimology in the East (see above).

The first paper was Dr Poklews Ki Koziell and focused on the abortion law debate taking place in Poland. An unusual focus you might think for a victimology conference, but placed in the context of a society in which a recent survey revealed that 65% of the people thought that the most important authority in their lives was the Catholic Church, perhaps not so bizarre; especially if victimology is concerned with the mechanisms of who produces the victims. In this case, the author was concerned not to portray foetuses as victims! This was followed by a paper by Gerd Kirchoff (Germany); and one by myself. Gerd's paper detailed the history and concepts of victimology and my own challenged some of the assumptions in such a history.

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From this varied beginning, the papers moved into fairly conventional victimologicál areas, Ando Leps (Estonia) offering a paper on murderers, their victims and relations, Zofia Ostchanska and Dobrochna Wojcik a paper on victims of burglary in high rise flats. The latter whilst sounding perhaps a little dry, was a very interesting detailed report on the experiences and attitudes of fifty burglary victims (twenty of whom were re-interviewed after six months) to the event, the offender and the police. People in Warsaw, at least, have very little trust or confidence in the police. Indeed as the findings of the paper were revealed, I was struck by the remarkable similarities between these findings and certain parts of Merseyside as echoed by the state of disrepair of many of the houses, streets and bus shelters we saw on the way into Warsaw.

The second day of the conference moved to a discussion of victim surveys through presentations by Jerzy Szumski (Poland) on Fear of Crime and Punitiveness of Polish Society and by Rob Mawby on the Impact of Crime: victims' views of their crimes and the response of the criminal justice system. The ensuing discussion, focussed on the value and the development of criminal victimisation surveys in the east European context.

Yet to come in the conference programme were presentations concerned with helping victims of crime both within and outside the criminal justice system. Anne Viney and Helen Reeves (both of Victim Support U.K.) gave their presentations during the last two days of the conference, but through informal conversation, we were all well aware that an English notion of volunteering was a problematic concept to discuss in societies (particularly Poland and Hungary) where many people have two or three jobs just to make ends meet!

Lech Falandysz, from Warsaw commented that victimologists were expected to produce two things in this climate. On the one hand, they were being faced with demands concerning crime prevention; how do people stop themselves from becoming victims of crime now that crime is seen to be an issue? On the other hand, there was also a clear demand to address the historical questions of who are the victims of the communist system, who were the perpetrators, and where does the responsibility for the past (and its legacy) lie?

Whilst these were being presented as questions for Poland, it seems to me that they encapsulate some of the questions for victimology as a whole. In the West, it may be that the former issue has dominated to the expense of the latter, but it may also be that western victimologists have something to learn from the way in which this latter question is addressed and may be tackled in eastern Europe.

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