

Lithuania 2012: Holocaust Distortion as Background for Increased Anti-Semitism

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Executive Summary

1. In the wake of the transition from Communism to Democracy of many Eastern European countries during the years 1990-1991, these new democracies were forced to confront six practical Holocaust-related issues. These issues significantly influenced their foreign policy and their relations with Israel and with world Jewry:

- a. Admission of guilt and apology for participation of local Nazi collaborators in Holocaust crimes;
- b. Commemoration of the victims;
- c. Prosecution of unprosecuted perpetrators;
- d. Documentation of the crimes;
- e. Holocaust education;
- f. Restitution

2. The fact that local collaboration with the Nazis in most of Eastern Europe included active participation in mass murder (unlike the situation elsewhere in Europe), made dealing with the above issues particularly difficult for the new democracies.

3. As long as these countries were seeking entry into the European Union and NATO, their efforts regarding these issues were only very partially successful, but there were no full-scale government-sponsored systematic efforts to significantly rewrite the local history of the Holocaust to purposely hide or minimize the crimes committed by local collaborators. Thus prosecution efforts were for the most part a total failure, but there were positive initiatives regarding commemoration and apologies were rendered by most countries, usually in Israel, by political leaders.

4. Starting in late 2007, however, the situation changed drastically, especially in Lithuania, where the government began supporting a series of steps to de-emphasize local participation in Holocaust crimes and focus attention on the suffering of the victims of Communism in Eastern Europe.

The latter objective was one of the primary goals of the Prague Declaration of June 3, 2008, which promoted the canard of historical equivalency between Nazi and Communist crimes. Lithuanian politicians Vytautas Landsbergis and Emmanuelis Zingeris played an important role in formulating the declaration and the government has made its promotion and important foreign policy objective.

5. Another particularly reprehensible step taken by the government was a campaign to prosecute Jewish anti-Nazi Soviet partisans for ostensible "war crimes" against "civilian" Lithuanians who were in fact Nazi collaborators. The campaign was accompanied by a significant number of viciously anti-Semitic articles in the local media directed at these individuals who were accused of the most heinous crimes. Among those accused was noted Israeli Holocaust scholar Dr. Yitzchak Arad, who had served as the Chairman of Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust museum and research center.

6. In the wake of these steps by the government, there has been a dangerous increase in the number of anti-Semitic incidents vandalization of Jewish institutions, sites of Holocaust mass murders, and attacks on Jewish public figures in the local mass media. These phenomena were exacerbated by the public debate regarding the restitution of public Jewish property and the passage by the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) of a bill which called for the payment of 128 million litas to the Jewish community over the coming ten years (a figure which represented only a small fraction of the current value of the property confiscated or stolen).

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Six months ago, the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) sponsored a scholarly historical conference to mark the seventieth anniversary of the June 22, 1941 German invasion of Eastern Poland and the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia ("Operation Barbarossa"), an event that had horrific consequences for the entire region that swiftly came under Nazi occupation. First and foremost, German invasion marked the beginning of the implementation of the Final Solution, the Nazis' plan to annihilate European Jewry and the initial instances of the incorporation of local collaborators into the German killing machine. In Lithuania, the murder of Jews actually began even before the arrival of Nazi troops in forty-six different cities, towns, and villages, ranging from large-scale pogroms in the interwar capital of Kaunas (Kovno) to sporadic violence against individuals in small cities and towns such as Telz (Telsiai), Birz (Birzai), and Jonava.

Under these circumstances, one would naturally expect such a conference to focus on the terrible tragedy, which took place in Lithuania in the wake of the German invasion, the mass murder of 96.4% of the Lithuanian Jews who resided in the country under the Nazi occupation. In fact, however, relatively little attention was devoted to the plight of the Jews, since the major objective of the conference was to focus on the ostensibly heroic activities of the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF), a political group founded in Nazi Germany in 1940 during the initial Soviet occupation of Lithuania (June, 15, 1940 – June 22, 1941), which sought to reestablish Lithuanian independence. The leaders of the LAF returned to Lithuania on the heels of the Nazi invasion and set up a provisional Lithuanian government, but its existence was extremely short-lived as the Nazi banned its activities and disbanded the group within a month.

While one can perhaps understand the desire to focus attention on Lithuanian attempts to achieve independence, one cannot ignore the ignominious role played by the LAF in relation to Lithuania's Jews. Thus prior to the Nazi invasion, the LAF called for the revocation of the right of residence granted to Lithuanian Jews by Gediminas in the 14th century and clearly and unequivocally called upon the ethnic Lithuanian population to unleash violence against their Jewish neighbors. This anti-Semitic incitement no doubt played an important role in the widespread violence against Jews even before the Nazi troops arrived. Yet not only was the

LAF's role in this regard purposely ignored by the speakers at the conference, one participating historians asserted that there was no evidence whatsoever of anti-Jewish violence before the arrival of the Nazis, despite abundant testimony to corroborate this fact, and claimed that Israeli historian Prof. Dov Levin, who was the first to document this phenomenon, had falsified the historical record.

As shocking as this blatant case of Holocaust distortion is, it is merely the tip of the iceberg of a deliberate campaign by the government to rewrite the accepted narrative of the history of the Holocaust in Lithuania, with the clear objective of minimizing local complicity in Shoah crimes and deflecting blame from Lithuanian Nazi collaborators for their role in the horrific tragedy of Lithuanian Jewry.

Historical Background

In order to understand the roots of this phenomenon, it is necessary to explain the uniquely lethal dimension of collaboration with the Nazis in Eastern Europe. While the Germans actively enlisted the assistance of local collaborators in every country they occupied and with whom they were allied, the role played by Nazi collaborators in Eastern Europe was unique in one critical respect. Whereas those who assisted the Nazis elsewhere in Europe helped them implement the initial stages of the Final Solution-definition, Aryanization, exclusion from public life, concentration, and deportation – they did not participate in the mass murder of the Jews of their country, who were sent to be killed in Nazi death camps in Poland. Nazi collaborators in many Eastern European countries, on the other hand, were active participants in the murder of the Jews in their own countries and in many cases elsewhere as well.

This was particularly true in the Baltic countries, Ukraine, and Croatia, and especially in Lithuania where, as noted above, the murder of Jews seven preceded the Nazis' arrival and was a critical factor in the scope of Holocaust crimes in that country. The fact that thousands of Jews from France, Germany and Austria were deported to Lithuania to be murdered and that Lithuanian Auxiliary Police Battalions were sent to help murder Jews, especially in Belarus but in Poland as well, also contributed to Lithuania's image as "a nation of shooters of Jews." In fact, Lithuanian is the only language in which a special noun was coined "Zydsaudzai" to describe the killers. Unlike Germany, which had to confront its Nazi crimes immediately from the end of World War II, the countries of Eastern Europe that were either incorporated into the Soviet Union or under

Communist rule, were unable to freely do so until about twenty years ago. Only then were they, for first time ever, in a position to deal with their Shoah crimes and face six important Holocaust related issues: acknowledgement of guilt, commemoration of the victims, prosecution of perpetrators, documentation (writing the history), education and restitution. These issues were clearly quite problematic to deal with in newly independent countries with practically no democratic history and centuries-old traditions of deep-seated anti-Semitism. On the other hand, there was a strong motivation to address these problems since they were considered to be an absolute prerequisite if these countries were to succeed in achieving their primary foreign policy objective – membership in the European Union and in NATO.

For many in these countries, the long history of Communist oppression became the overriding historical memory. The success of the Nazis and their local collaborators in decimating and destroying Jewish life meant that there was little or no active Jewish post-war presence, especially in comparison with pre-war conditions. Under Communist rule, visible signs of Jewish presence were also minimal in these countries, thus creating a society where images of Jews, when present, were either based on anti-Semitic stereotypes or the result of political manipulations. When independence finally arrived, the result was a society that saw Communism as the longest and most visible oppression. They had grown up with a distorted historical education, and in rejecting that background began to construct a new national narrative based upon a return to a virulent nationalism, which both often included traditional antisemitism and xenophobic elements, as well as a reflexive anti-Communism.

As could be expected, given the ambivalence, if not clear-cut opposition, of the newly-independent countries of Eastern Europe to Holocaust related issues, their policy vis-à-vis the different tasks that they had to face was mixed, since some were clearly easier to deal with than others. Thus while commemorating the victims and even acknowledging the guilt of local perpetrators (although not the true scope of their involvement) proved relatively easy, albeit in the latter case not without controversy, prosecuting the guilty and restitution posed practically insurmountable political and practical obstacles.

If we take Lithuania as a classic case, during the first eighteen years of independence, we see quite a bit of commemorative activity, usually with a sanitized narrative which avoided dwelling on the true scope of Lithuanian complicity in Holocaust crimes, and several acknowledgements of guilt, but a total failure to successfully prosecute local Nazi collaborators and almost no palpable

progress on restitution. During this period, these issues attracted minimal attention from outside the country with the exception of the United States, Israel and the Wiesenthal Center, with much of their focus on Lithuania's failure to punish any of the many Lithuanian Holocaust perpetrators who had been able to escape justice.

The Turning Point 2008-The Battle Over the Historical Narrative of the Holocaust

Starting in the fall of 2007, and even more so during 2008, the Lithuanian government began to intensify its efforts to challenge the accepted historical narrative of the Holocaust and to more actively deflect international criticism in response to its failings in addressing specific Holocaust-related issues. The primary problems in this regard were the government's abysmal failure to punish a single Lithuanian Holocaust perpetrator despite an abundance of potential suspects, and the continuing efforts of government leaders and officials to promote the canard of historical equivalency between Communist and Nazi crimes. The failure to achieve progress on restitution also played a role.

The first step which clearly marked a new phase in official Lithuania's attitude toward Holocaust-related issues was the decision in September 2007 to investigate former Yad Vashem Chairman and noted Holocaust scholar Dr. Yitzchak Arad on the suspicion of war crimes, ostensibly committed while he was a Soviet anti-Nazi partisan in Lithuania. In addition, similar suspicions were raised against three female fellow Jewish partisans – Rochel Margolis, Fania Bransovsky, and Sara Ginaite – who were supposedly sought for questioning, but who were openly accused of committing war crimes against innocent Lithuanian civilians in vicious anti-Semitic articles in ultra nationalist newspapers such as Lietuvos Aidas and Vakaro Žinios.

Given the fact that for years Lithuanian leaders had repeatedly pointed to crimes committed by Jewish Communists against Lithuanians during the initial Soviet occupation as an explanation and justification for the subsequent participation of Lithuanians in Holocaust crimes, perhaps the launch of a pretrial investigation against Dr. Arad and the submission of an official request to Israel for judicial assistance in the case should not have been that surprising, but it clearly represented a declaration of war against the accepted Jewish narrative of the history of the Shoah in Lithuania.

The next significant upgrade in this campaign was the signing of the Prague Declaration on June 3, 2008 by 27 Eastern European political leaders and intellectuals. Lithuanian MP's Vytautas Landsbergis and Emanuelis Zingeris played an instrumental role in formulating the document and organizing its publication, and it is Lithuania, along with her Baltic neighbors, which has ever since led the efforts to promote its recommendations and have them passed as resolutions in numerous European political forums. The best way to summarize its contents is to explain that it seeks to convince Europe that the crimes of Communism are at least equivalent to those of the Nazis and they deserve the same recognition and their victims the same compensation, as awarded to Shoah survivors. Or as the declaration warns: "Europe will not be united unless it is able to reunite its history [and] recognize Communism and Nazism as a common legacy [my emphasis – EZ]."

The Declaration also includes a call for a variety of practical steps which if implemented, would undermine the current status of the Holocaust as a unique sui generis case of genocide and reduce it to just another of many tragedies. Thus, for example, the Prague Declaration seeks to rewrite European history textbooks in the spirit of the equivalency between Communism and Nazism, as well as to establish an Institute of European Memory and Conscience, which would then serve as a research center for "totalitarian studies" (a currently nonexistent fields). It would also support national research institutes "specializing in the subject of totalitarian experience," along with a museum/memorial for the victims of all totalitarian regimes. If current experience is any indication, the national research institutes which already exist (in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia for example) concentrate on Communist crimes, completely or virtually ignoring those committed against Jews during the Holocaust, making them major disseminators for the revisionist narrative preferred in post-Communist Eastern Europe and especially in the Baltics.

Another idea designed to promote the canard of historical equivalency is the call by the Prague Declaration to designate August 23 as a joint memorial day for all the victims of totalitarian regimes. The choice of the date of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement, the Soviet-Nazi Non-Aggression Pact, seeks to equally blame the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany for the atrocities and civilian losses of World War II, a choice that purposely ignores the decisive role played by the Red Army in the defeat of the Third Reich. By putting those who planned, built, and operated Auschwitz, the largest of the death camps, on the same level as those who liberated the camp, the formulators of The Prague Declaration seek to create a new and level playing field, which would

absolve the nations of Eastern Europe of their guilt for serving as executioners of Jews in the service of the Nazis.

- 1) It would also do much to silence criticism from Israel and international Jewish organizations regarding Eastern European complicity in Holocaust crimes, by pointing to the participation of Jewish Communists in crimes against humanity and even genocide, since Communist crimes according to the Prague Declaration were equivalent to those of the Nazis, and therefore they too can be classified as genocide. Needless to say, all of the above would definitively rewrite the history books and undo half a century of the Holocaust commemoration, research, and education.

Ever since the publication of the Prague Declaration, Lithuania has done more than any other country to promote its principles and have its practical recommendations supported or passed in resolutions in European political forums. This, for example, on April 2, 2009 533 members of the European Parliament voted in favor of a resolution similar to the Prague Declaration, while only 44 voted against and 33 abstained. Three months later, on June 1, 2009, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe meeting in Vilnius adopted a resolution entitled “Divided Europe Reunited” which equally condemned Nazi and Communist calls and called for August 23rd to be designated as a joint memorial day for all the victims of Communist crimes.

A Dangerous Increase in Anti-Semitic Incitement and Attacks

If the only problem concerning Lithuania would be the battle over the history of the Holocaust, it would be bad enough, but unfortunately the struggle over the accuracy of the historical narrative is also the backdrop for a dangerous rise in anti-Semitic incitement, vandalizing of Jewish institutions, cemeteries, and sites of mass murder, as well as demonstrations of neo-Nazis and ultra nationalists extremists along the major avenues of Lithuania’s two largest cities. The Lithuanian Jewish community had experienced a few such incidents during the years prior to 2008, but things took a serious turn for the worse in this regard during the past four years.

The event that signaled the beginning of the deterioration of the situation was undoubtedly the March 11, 2008 march of several hundred neo-Nazis and ultra nationalists down Gediminas Boulevard, the main street in downtown Vilnius, to mark Lithuanian Independence Day. Shouting nationalist, anti-Semitic (“Juden Raus”), and anti-Russian slogans and carrying Nazi symbols, they

marched down the main thoroughfare of Lithuania's capital to the Parliament, as local police stood idly by, taking no measures against them. In an opinion poll conducted shortly thereafter by Lithuania's most reputable daily Lietuvos Rytas, 32% of the more than 4,300 respondents replied that they approved of the slogans and another 22% indicated approval of the march. The strength of public support might help explain why the three participants, who were prosecuted for their participation in the march three months later, were only fined and not sent to jail, even though the offense they committed carried a potential punishment of up to two years' incarceration.

During the months following the neo-Nazi march in Vilnius, there was a wave of anti-Semitic attacks on Jewish institutions and memorial sites. In August 2008, the building of the Jewish community in Vilnius was daubed with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans and the wall of the Jewish community of Klaipeda was vandalized, attacks which were preceded by desecrations of the sites of the mass murder of Jews in Rokisikis, Varnikiai forest near Trakai, (where the Jews of Aukstadvaris, Rudiskes and other villages were killed) and Mariampole, where bones were heaped next to the memorial for the victims of the Shoah. When asked for their response to the attack in Vilnius, Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus and Prime Minister Kirkilas denounced the attacks because they gave Lithuania "a bad name." Given this tepid response by Lithuanian leaders, it is hardly surprising that such attacks have continued ever since.

Besides the ongoing wave of anti-Semitic incidents, the Jewish community also had to deal with a continuous barrage of vicious anti-Semitic attacks and caricatures in the local media, especially in right-wing dailies such as Respublika, Lietuvos Aidas, Lietuvos Žinios, and Vakaro Žinios. The themes of almost all of these articles are the same Holocaust-related issues referred to previously, which continue to be points of bitter contention between Lithuanians and Jews. The only exception are those concerning a dispute over the site of a very old Jewish cemetery, where a plan to build a residential building was stopped by Jewish protests. The fact that the site was a very lucrative piece of urban real estate made the issue of great interest and controversy, with numerous accusations in the nationalist press against the intervention of foreign rabbis and Jewish organizations.

In the articles on other themes, the authors among them a former MP (Ruta Gajauskaite) and the editor of the Respublika daily (Vitas Tomkus), repeatedly attack Jews in general, and the local Jewish community in particular, for attempting to preserve the accuracy of the Holocaust narrative in Lithuania, and especially the important role played by local Nazi collaborators in Shoah crimes,

as well as attacks on the Jewish anti-Nazi partisans who were accused of war crimes. Other popular themes are the demands by the Jewish community, with the backing of international Jewish organizations, for communal restitution, as well as personal attacks on those Jewish figures who have repeatedly accused Lithuania of failing to acknowledge the scope of local complicity in Holocaust crimes. The target of numerous attacks in recent years was Yosef Melamed, the Chairman of Igud Yotzei Lita (Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel) who posted the names of 23,000 Lithuanians accused of participating in the murder of Jews on his organization's website, among them at least nine who are considered heroes of the "forest brothers," Lithuanians who fought against the Soviet occupation after the end of World War II. The size of the list, as well as the names of their heroes, listed shocked Lithuanians, and triggered numerous anti-Semitic attacks regarding this subject.

The Intensification of the Battle Over the History of the Holocaust

During the past four years, and especially in the wake of the Prague Declaration, the Lithuanian government has intensified its efforts to rewrite the accepted western narrative of World War II and especially the Holocaust, putting itself on an inevitable collision course with the Jewish community and with international Jewish organizations. The results, in practical terms, have been quite negative and have seriously exacerbated Lithuanian-Jewish relations. The fact that government ministers are actively promoting the revisionist agenda has created an atmosphere that has unfortunately only stoked the flames of local anti-Semitism even higher.

In some cases, the revisionism on Holocaust issues and anti-Semitism are linked tighter, such as in the case of the campaign against former Jewish KGB operative Nachman Dushansky, who during the past two decades became the personification of the Jews who committed severe crimes against Lithuanians in the service of Moscow. Dushansky left Lithuania for Israel in the mid-nineties, but was wanted in Vilnius on the war crimes charges, which he denied. Given the fact that Dushansky was the only one of more than twenty officers of equivalent rank who served in the unit which is accused of committing the crimes in question, it is clear that he was singled out for punishment because he was Jewish. A documentary film on his case, shown in May 2008 was publicized using anti-Semitic themes, which emphasized the role of Jews in the Communist KGB. Dushansky's death was reported in Lithuania as a major news event, with extensive mention of the murder of Lithuanians in the Rainiai forest near Telsiai, although there is no clear evidence to implicate Dushansky in those crimes.

A case in which the government attempts to rewrite the history of the Holocaust led to an embarrassing statement by a leading minister took place in December 2009. After Lithuanian Prime Minister Kubilius appeared on the BBC interview show “Hard Talk” and was politely but firmly questioned by the presenter Johanathan Charles regarding his country’s poor record in confronting its Holocaust complicity, Justice Minister Remigijus Simasius came to his defense the next day. According to Simasius, the fact that many Jews were killed in Lithuania does not mean that Lithuanians are “Jew killers,” a statement which is technically true but totally divorced from the history of the Shoah in Lithuania. He then compared his country favorably to the United States and Great Britain, which limited the entry of Jewish refugees during the Nazi period, as if that policy could be compared to the extensive participation of so many Lithuanians in the mass murder of Jews during the Shoah. Needless to say, Justice Minister Simasius’ grasp of his country’s wartime history aroused protests and incredulity.

There is no question that the increasingly anti-Semitic atmosphere in Lithuania is directly linked to the ongoing controversies regarding Holocaust-related issues. The small and vulnerable Jewish community is facing increasingly blatant anti-Semitic attacks, both physical and verbal. One of the most offensive examples of the latter is a front-page story, which appeared in the right-wing Lithuanian tabloid Vakaro Žinios on December 21, 2011. The cover page had an usually large lead caption with only one word Žydai (The Jews) and an extremely large photograph of local Chabad rabbi Sholom-Ber Krinsky in ultra-Orthodox attire. In much smaller letters the explanation is given that the Jews, in this case the local Chabad school, “see no reason to pay their Social Security taxes.” Thus the impression is created that Rabbi Krinsky is the major offender in this regard, but if one bothers to read the accompanying article on pages 3 and 5, it emerges that Chabad is only one of numerous institutions and companies (such as Western Union, for example) which are guilty of the same offense. In fact, the Chabad school is not even among the worst offenders. In the same months, the same tabloid and the major Lithuanian newspaper published offensive and blatantly anti-Semitic articles on their front pages with other publicly prominent Jewish leaders such Dr. Simon Alperovich, the elected chairman of the Jewish community, as the subject of their attacks.

The chronicle presented above leaves one very important question unanswered. Why have the events, which have taken place during the past four years, been virtually ignored outside of Lithuania? One of the major reasons has been the determined efforts of the Lithuanian government

to deflect public attention from its campaigns to hide and/or minimize the role of Lithuanian Nazi war criminals in Holocaust crimes and its attempts to convince the world that Communist and Nazi crimes are equivalent by a multitude of events related to the Holocaust in general, and the history of Lithuanian Jewry in particular, which do not directly deal with the controversial issues in question. Thus during the past four years, the government has sponsored conferences, symposia, and events in many places all over the Western world, including Israel, to reinforce the illusion that it is honestly trying to confront its Holocaust past, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Another tactic employed was to say one thing to Jewish audiences and another to Lithuanians, or to emphasize different aspects of government decisions on these issues to different groups. A very good example of this policy was the September 21, 2010 decision made by the Seimas, and announced at the ceremony to mark Lithuanian Holocaust Memorial Day at the Ponar mass murder site, to designate 2011 as the “Year of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust,” which was followed a mere week later by a second decision by the same parliament to designate 2011 as the “Year of Commemoration of the Defense of Freedom and Great Losses.” If these subjects were perfectly compatible, perhaps these decisions would not appear contradictory, but when some of the people whom the Lithuanians seek to honor as “freedom fighters” actively participated in Holocaust crimes, the duplicity of the government in dealing with this sensitive issue becomes obviously apparent.

This duplicity is clearly reinforced when one sees the difference between the Seimas’ Lithuanian-language website which only notes that 2011 will be devoted to the “Defense of Freedom and of Great Losses,” while its English-language website informs the public that the same year has been designated as the “Year of Remembrance for the Victims of the Holocaust in Lithuania.” The results of this dichotomy were readily apparent at the historical conference held at the parliament to mark the seventieth anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Lithuania as explained above.