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THE CLASH OF THE SOVIET- RUSSIAN AND NATIONALIST NARRATIONS OF THE PAST

ABSTRACT

Formerly occupied states or modern national movements have to develop narratives of resisting invaders or occupiers in order to teach the young never to be defeated in the future. Narratives of resistance explain temporary or permanent failures by employing resistance storytelling, which puts forward compensatory and defensive mechanisms for repressed peoples. This article is a case study of the narratives of resistance in Lithuania. The article explores the Lithuanian anti-Soviet resistance, the pro-Soviet Lithuanian partisan groups, the Polish Home Army, or the Jewish partisans in Soviet partisan formations in the framework of narratives of resistance.

KEYWORDS:

resistance, narratives, partisans, Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Israel

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Resistance to foreign occupiers and stories of fighting overwhelmingly superior enemies can be traced back to the classical world of Greece. Formerly occupied states or modern national movements have to develop narratives of resisting invaders or occupiers in order to teach the young never to be defeated in the future.

Narratives of resistance explain temporary or permanent failures by employing resistance storytelling, which puts forward compensatory and defensive mechanisms for repressed peoples. Soviet anti-Nazi resistance in the Soviet Union, the treatment of anti-Soviet resistance in the Baltic States and Ukraine, the Israeli cult of Jewish partisans, and the French and Dutch resistance movements – these are all well-known examples in academic literature. The story of the Polish Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) during the Second World War is worthy of particular mention. State-sponsored support of research into the history of the ‘cursed soldiers’ (*żołnierze wyklęci* – the post-Second World War Polish Home Army armed resistance) is another example of a modern resistance story and its usage in the politics of memory.

The Lithuanian Republic is often the subject of angry arguments in the politics of memory. Very often, participants of historical debates, namely highly ideological interest groups, fail to maintain a mutually tolerant attitude towards the legacies, mythologies and desires of interest groups that support the cause of the Lithuanian anti-Soviet resistance, pro-Soviet Lithuanian partisan groups, the Polish Home Army, or Jewish partisans in Soviet partisan formations.

In between the two world wars, the Vilnius Region, including its south-eastern corner of Lithuania and the Rudniki forest, later home to numerous partisan groups, was part of the Polish eastern border lands – *Kresy Wschodnie* (Pl.). Before World War II, Poles, Lithuanians, and Belarusians comprised the majority in this ethnically mixed rural area, where Poles and Jews lived in urban areas and dominated the local economies.

Ethnic Poles ran the administration, the police force and the school system. From 1918 to 1938, the Lithuanian-Polish territorial dispute provoked resentment and fuelled Lithuanian-Polish conflicts on both sides of the border. The inter-ethnic balance of power started to change after the incorporation of the Vilnius Region into Lithuania in November 1939. This allowed the Lithuanian administration to dominate in the recently incorporated area of the former Second Polish Republic, and the policies and balance between different ethno-religious groups began to change. Lithuanian citizens as well as ethnic Lithuanians (including any nationality entitled to Lithuanian citizenship) living in this region (including the

Vilnius Region in the 10 years prior to 1914) were given priority treatment for moving up the social ladder.¹ Refugees from the territories of the Polish Republic, occupied by Germany and the USSR, and those who settled in the territories newly acquired by the Lithuanian Republic in the interwar period were treated with suspicion and were disadvantaged. Short-lived Lithuanian rule ceased as a result of the Soviet occupation in June 1940, with the ensuing annexation turning the country into the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. This period under Soviet ideology did not relieve tensions between different ethno-religious groups in the area.

The Soviet-Nazi war started on June 22, 1941. Within three days, the Lithuanian territory was occupied by Nazi Germany. As a result, the German military government co-existed with the civil administration in Lithuania from the summer of 1941.

The German repressions and hostage taking in retaliation for the Soviets' resistance actions started in 1942 after attacks by Soviet partisans from Belarus. Overall, the population cooperated with the German authorities against the Soviet partisans' raids from Belarus. Police reports contain numerous messages from the local population and even accounts of active armed participation in operations against partisans.

The first move towards the 'Great Patriotic War' (as the Soviet Union called the German-Soviet war of 1941–45, a tradition resurrected by contemporary Russia) in Lithuania, i.e., raising an indigenous partisan force, was made when 19 partisan groups were sent to Lithuania in 1942 from a training camp in Balakhna, near Gorkyi (now Nizhny Novgorod in the Russian Federation). Nine groups were parachuted in; the other 10 groups (in three units) had to cross the front line on foot, but the arrival in Lithuania of the groups crossing on foot was not reported until 1943. The first of these groups, the so-called Pranevičius partisan unit (made up of five groups) arrived in Belarus in April 1943 (the group did not even attempt to cross into Lithuania). All the other groups arrived in May 1943. Some of them were ambushed by the police, and two groups were completely annihilated on marshland. Other groups lost several people too. However, these groups became the basis of the partisan movement.²

Out of the total of 3,910 Soviet partisans in Lithuania, there were 1,388 Lithuanians, 1,477 Russians, 676 Jews, and 367 people from other ethnic groups. There were also 1,020 escaped Soviet POWs among them. These numbers are reliable, although they create the illusion of a large partisan fighting group. This is especially so because the partisan lists included

¹ 'Laikinas įstatymas Apie Lietuvos Pilietybę', *Laikinosios vyriausybės žinios*, 1 (1919), 5.

² Report, Lithuanian Special Archives (hereafter LYA), Vilnius, col. 1771, inv. 16, f. 95; Jonis Arvasevičius and others, *Lietuvos liaudis Didžiajame Tėvynės kare (1941–1945): dokumentų ir Medžiagos Rinkinys* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1982), pp. 401, 408.

teenage males and women. Taking into consideration traditional patterns of dominant behaviour that attribute fighting to men rather than women in guerrilla movements in the past, one should assume that even if they were able to take part in the fighting, their active participation was unlikely. The lists also included partisan informants amongst a widely varied mix of supporters. There were 425 partisans in the Communist Party: 55 were candidates for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and 472 were Communist Youth members.

The movement suffered substantial casualties as a result of military encounters. According to the list of partisans killed in action whilst fighting against the 'German-Fascist occupants', the units subordinate to the Lithuanian Headquarters of the Partisan Movement suffered the following casualties: 404 killed in action (177 Russians, 119 Lithuanians, 75 Jews, 8 Poles, 4 Belarusians, 21 unidentified fighters) and 9 who were taken prisoner in 1943–44. In addition, 12 partisans were executed for treason, and 4 deserted.³ The age and social profile of Jewish partisans confirms the theoretical supposition that Jews were drawn into the Soviet Lithuanian partisan units exclusively as a part of the Soviet partisan recruitment effort, with the aim of mobilising for warfare but not of saving people from the horror of the Holocaust. The main purpose was to draw upon the human resources of the ghettos that were of conscription age. Additionally, the crucial element that allowed entry into the Soviet Lithuanian partisan units was having links to the Communist Party underground and to informal Jewish youth networks that were directed against the educated white-collar ghetto establishments in Vilnius and Kaunas.⁴

The Soviet partisans competed with German and Lithuanian officialdom over power and the resources of the local population. The main competitor for living quarters and resources in the forests was the Polish Home Army (AK), which corresponded with the Soviet partisan movement in Lithuania in terms of its founding and its expansion in building military forces. The AK eventually had to come into conflict over the zones of influence in this country, which lacked resources. The AK's military structure in the eastern parts of the pre-war Second Polish Republic was based on the regional division of the country into 'Wojewodztwa' – the AK districts roughly corresponded to the 'Wojewodztwa'. The units around Vilnius were part of the AK Wilno (Polish for Vilnius). The territory of the AK Nowogródek (Polish for Navahrudak) also overlapped with Lithuanian

³ Data about the number of partisans, 4 November 1945, LYA, col. 1, inv. 1, f. 136, p. 6. The list of partisans killed in action by the German occupation authorities, and the lists of traitors of the Headquarters of the Lithuanian Partisan Movement 1943–45, LYA, col. 1, inv. 1, f. 185, p. 1–63.

⁴ Šarūnas Liekis, 'Soviet Resistance and Jewish Partisans in Lithuania', in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, ed. by Šarūnas Liekis, Antony Polonsky, and Chaeran Freeze, xxv (Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 331–56 (p. 349).

territory. The whole area of Poland's Nowogródek Województwo was administratively included in Reichskommissariat Ostland as part of Generalkommissariat Weissruthenien; the areas around Eišiškės, which had large forests, were included in Generalkommissariat Litauen. The AK Nowogródek maintained that these areas were under their jurisdiction, despite the fact that the real borders of the Lithuanian SSR and the Belarusian SSR had been drawn differently from the original borders of the Polish 'Województwa' by the German administration, and even earlier by the Soviet Union. All units of the AK Wilno and AK Nowogrodek were under the command of the Territorial Operational Headquarters, under the supreme commander Col. Alexander Krzyżanowski (nom de guerre 'Wilk').⁵

The competing Soviet Lithuanian Partisan groups, some with predominantly Jewish membership, as well as Polish Home Army groups in the Vilnius area and elsewhere, are alleged to have shed the blood of a few hundred civilian people charged with collaboration, as well as members of the administration and some innocent bystanders. Local Nazi collaborators – from different local police forces that were maintained by Nazis – killed several thousand during punitive operations while fighting guerrilla movements in the territory of Lithuania,⁶ not to mention the genocidal extermination policies of repression and exploitation of the local population.

The partisan warfare and the saving of a few hundred Jews by the Soviet Lithuanian resistance became a part of Jewish history, culture and tragedy. It also became an integral part of Lithuanian history and culture. The Polish context was no less important. Since 2004, efforts to bring Jewish and Polish culture into the mainstream of cultural and ideological discourse have increased. The inclusion of Polish-Lithuanian common cultural heritage into Lithuanian contemporary culture was closely connected to acceptance of the political concept of nationhood.

This nationhood had to be based on civic nationalism and in order to be as favourable to multiculturalism as elsewhere in the EU (Lithuania became a member of the EU in 2004). Its presence in a large portion of Lithuanian society could have been of importance when forming a strategic Lithuanian-Polish partnership and integrating into the Western milieu.

However, processes of constructing civic nationalism based on multiculturalism in education and in public life have not only encountered resistance from population groups that view the past in terms of a national struggle for survival and see neighbouring countries as historical

⁵ Šarūnas Liekis, 'Soviet Resistance and Jewish Partisans in Lithuania', in Polin, pp. 346–47.

⁶ Arūnas Bubnys, *Pasipriešinimo judėjimai Lietuvoje Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais: lenkų pagrindis 1939–1945 m.* (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2015), p. 108; Rimantas Zizas, *Ne žydų kilmės Lietuvos piliečių persekiojimas, civilių gyventojų žudynės* (Vilnius: Tarptautinės komisijos nacių ir sovietinio okupacinių režimų nusikaltimams Lietuvoje įvertinti užsakymu, n.d.), p. 114.

competitors. They have also been met with an international campaign of obfuscation (mainly led by certain authorities of the Russian Federation) aimed at undermining Lithuania's efforts to reach an understanding of its past and to deal with the historical issues of the extermination of its Jewish citizens, antisemitism, and Polish-Lithuanian conflicts and struggles in South-Eastern Lithuania during the Second World War.

The Russian Federation's propaganda war was (and still is) based on the premise that the policies of the Baltic States and the East Central European countries seek to 'equate' the crimes of the Soviet and Nazi systems and thus somehow subvert the memory of the Holocaust as a unique event. A certain lecturer claimed that 'A sophisticated template for deleting the Holocaust "as such" from European history, without denying a single murder, has been developed in the Baltics. Far from contenting itself with revisionism locally, this ambitious project seeks to win over the European Parliament and, increasingly, the European Union. The strategy is to replace the Holocaust with a new and bogus paradigm of "two equal genocides, Nazi and Soviet"'.⁷

It is claimed that there has been a 20-year resurgence of ultra-nationalism in the former Soviet states and among Soviet satellites; this has resulted in a new narrative of Stalinism as the greater evil of the Second World War. These statements have been spearheaded by a few individuals as a result of Baltic claims for compensation for the Soviet occupation in which the Presidential Commission of the Nazi and Soviet Crimes of Lithuania is alleged to have been instrumental.

In 2007, roundtable discussions under the patronage of Mikhail Margelov, the Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Russian Federation, marked a turning point in historical debates on the Russian Federation's counteraction against the Baltic States, Ukraine and Poland.⁸

Using its proxies in the West, the Russian Federation facilitated an attack on the tradition of writing academic history and, more specifically, academic histories of the Second World War and of the post-world war period.

These attempts to attack academic writing also ignored the task of historians: to build a sufficient argument based on evidence and made up of sources in which historians are not judges of behaviour. Historians have to have multiple perspectives, and justifying or comparing is by no means tantamount to equating.

⁷ The Baltic Project to Delete the Holocaust from European History. Observations from Lithuania, Herbert Berman Memorial Series, on Tuesday 23 June 2009, 1 Tammuz, 5769, 10:00 am at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 13 Tel Hai Street. This was also echoed at a roundtable discussion with the participation of Efraim Zuroff. 'Pribaltika i Ukraina podderzivaют nacizm', KM.RU, 11 December 2006 [accessed 10 September 2009].

⁸ 'Ochotnik za nacistami bol'se ne boitsja ezdit' v Rossiju', BBC Russian Service, 1 November 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/1/russian/russia/newsid_7072000/7072730.stm> [accessed 15 September 2009].

These highly ideological attacks ignored the fact that historical narratives give coherence to disparate elements (events, icons, metaphors) by assembling a sequence in time that is made meaningful by the resolution of four features: setting, plot, a challenge/obstacle to overcome, and the set of characters or actors deemed relevant for possible outcomes/resolutions. Cultural and socio-democratic filters very often bring historical research close to art or craft. Reinhart Koselleck's concept of Experiences and Expectations in his work *Critique and Crisis* (in which he claimed that the experience of being part of a defeated nation or culture enabled a more self-reflexive form of historical understanding, and that the most interesting perspectives on history are often written by the vanquished rather than the victors) indirectly defended diverse forms of presentation and took into account the stories of both those who win and those who lose.⁹

Questions of responsibility for the violence in the forests, including the abuse and plunder of the surrounding villages by different partisan groups, were tabled for discussion without consideration of the larger historical context. The blaming of Jews and Holocaust victims who had joined the Soviet partisan groups for alleged participation in crimes against civilians and Nazi collaborators led to discussions on the nature of warfare and posed ethical questions regarding the responsibility for the misdeeds committed.

Conventional wisdom holds that the war in the East – the bloodiest conflict in history – differed dramatically from the Western front in terms of human cost, ideological fanaticism and brutality – a contrast easily visualized in the starkly different fates of different countries in the west and east of Europe.

The Baltic States face the dilemma of comparing the evils of Nazism and Stalinism, although the main object of Hitler's hatred was the Slavs, in particular Poles and Russians. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were victims of both totalitarian regimes. This episode in history has left an open wound at the most painful point of Lithuanian, Jewish and Polish historical imaginations, where divided wartime memories are at their most irreconcilable. The Lithuanian arguments, which emphasize anti-Soviet rhetoric, have been perceived as justifying Nazi crimes and According to Efraim Zuroff of the Wiesenthal Center, the questioning of the former partisans amounted to a 'deliberate campaign [...] to discredit the brave Jewish heroes of the anti-Nazi resistance and help deflect attention from

⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), p. 214.

the infinitely more numerous crimes by Lithuanians against Jews during the Holocaust'.¹⁰

Very often, historians treat any form of story as a narrative. The term itself has many meanings; however, the most appropriate in terms of its explanatory power is the concept of systemic narratives that concern the past, present, and future of the international system as a whole. Historians also deal with identity narratives concerning the identity and character of the actors in the system. Persuasion on an issue or on the shape of the world order depends on narrative alignment between imagery of (a) what a country is like, (b) in what international space it operates, and also (c) problem narratives which connect all types of narratives in system-identity-issue narratives.¹¹ There is no doubt that the systemic narrative in Lithuania was important for understanding divided wartime memories and the manner in which they impact Lithuanian society's ongoing struggle with the narratives of the Holocaust, both Nazi and Soviet.

One of the persistent themes that has gained new momentum is the rise of anti-Semitism, which, according to some, is expressed in Lithuania as politicized attempts to compare (but not to equate) Nazism with Communism. Partisan warfare in Lithuania during World War II became an important beacon of the divide between the systemic narratives presented by different historiographies.

PRESENT-DAY NARRATIVES ON PARTISAN WARFARE IN EASTERN LITHUANIA

We know that actors craft narratives in particular ways to achieve political goals: to legitimize policy, to mobilize the political public, and to maintain alliances and (re)construct identity claims in international relations. Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics in order to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors.

In the global environment, it is very easy for competing narratives to be heard. Some may be deliberately combative: those of our adversaries, for example, or perhaps hostile media outlets.

¹⁰ More on these arguments in: Saulius Sužiedėlis and Šarūnas Liekis, 'Conflicting Memories: The Reception of the Holocaust in Lithuania', in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Post-communist Europe*, ed. by John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), pp. 319–51.

¹¹ Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Russia's Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World', *Politics and Governance*, 5,3 (2017), 111–20.

Where narratives meet, they are referred to as a battle of narratives, although the reality is that this is a never-ending competition rather than a battle with winners and losers.

In general, the Great Patriotic War has been presented in Russia as a continuation of the heroic struggle, under Russian leadership, of the many Soviet nations against the historic Teutonic aggressor. While there have indeed been some useful academic works published on the German occupation, the Jewish specificity of the Holocaust was generally camouflaged as the murder of 'peaceful Soviet citizens'.¹² The Jewish resistance in Soviet partisan groups has been described as an effort of the Soviet people, while the Soviet historiography scheme talks about 'the victims of Hitlerism'. It is obvious that Lithuanian society is facing difficulties while trying to look at the Holocaust through the great Soviet historical narrative perspective.¹³

The old Soviet version of the Russian agenda suffers from both its transparent political agenda and its selectivity of documentation. The Russian agenda has now been muddled into what legitimately borders on a conspiracy theory and continues to propagate division and exclusivity. This makes it different from the Soviet agenda. This type of extremist rhetoric is deployed in order to incite pathological fear of the Lithuanian government and its institutions and individuals within world Jewry, and it reduces a multi-layered and extremely complex situation to black and white.

The crux of the issue is this: Lithuanian Jewish history is not viewed as Lithuanian, and Lithuanian history is not viewed as Jewish-Lithuanian history (Litvak). They are mutually exclusive. An exclusive system of thinking will always yield exclusive rights and privileges and historical ghettoization. Members of the Jewish resistance are treated as a separate entity born without local context, acting exclusively out of hatred for its persecutors.

On the other hand, the anti-Nazi struggle and anti-Nazi stand of the Soviet Union and Russia is well integrated into contemporary Israeli and Russian systemic narratives. This systemic narrative of international order has been largely consistent with the anti-Nazi struggle and the narrative of the Soviet Union as a liberator from Nazism in the 21st century that corresponds with Vladimir Putin's tenure as President and Prime Minister of the Russian Federation.

¹² *Masinės žudynės Lietuvoje 1941–1944. Dokumentų rinkinys. 1 dalis*, ed. by Genovaitė Erslavaitė and others (Vilnius: Mintis, 1965); Juozas Bulavas, *Vokiškųjų fašistų okupacinis Lietuvos valdymas, 1941–1944 m.* (Vilnius: LTSR Mokslų Akademija, 1969); Kazys Rukšėnas, 'Hitlerininkų politika Lietuvoje 1941–1944 metais' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Vilnius University, 1970).

¹³ Sužiedėlis and Liekis, 'Conflicting Memories', pp. 319–52.

There was and still is a propaganda and conspiracy claim that a sophisticated template for deleting the Holocaust 'as such' from European history, without denying a single murder, has been developed in the Baltics. Far from contenting itself with revisionism locally, the Baltics' alleged project seeks to win over the European Parliament and, increasingly, the European Union. The strategy is to replace the Holocaust with a new and bogus paradigm of 'two equal genocides, Nazi and Soviet'.¹⁴

This attempt at allegedly equating Nazi and Soviet crimes has been called the 'double genocide' theory in what many see as an attempt to shirk responsibility by claiming Jews also committed genocide against Lithuanians, so essentially everyone is 'even'. The events of 1941–1944 in the forests of Rudniki have been called upon to equate the crimes of local Nazi collaborators with the misdeeds of Soviet partisans, among which there is alleged to have been a large percentage of Jews.¹⁵

However, the reality is much more trivial. Most Lithuanians remember the 1940s quite differently to the 'good war' narrative that is prevalent in the West, as exemplified, for instance, in the United States. For one, there are the chronological anomalies. The usual dates given for the Second World War (1939–45) have little relevance to the experience of the majority of the population of Lithuania: demonstrably more ethnic Lithuanians were killed in the war's aftermath (1945–1953) than during the six preceding years of global conflict, and this brutal period has come to be reflected in the language itself by the term *pokaris* (Lith. 'the post-war period').¹⁶ Moreover, Lithuanian historiography has reflected three main trends: Marxist (social progress through revolution), liberal (stressing the empowerment of once socially subjugated groups), and nationalist (collective self-realization through the national state). Such historical narratives are usually characterized by a grand political mission, pretensions to objectivity, and a teleological world view which excludes other perspectives. The nationalist narrative – with its paternalistic attitudes towards minorities and appeals to the sensitivities of present-day Lithuanian society – serves to please self-esteem and self-perception, as similar narratives do in other territorial states of the world where any one of the three aforementioned trends is dominant.¹⁷

¹⁴ For example: Dovid Katz, *Holocaust Revisionism, Ultrnationalism, and the Nazi/Soviet "Double Genocide" debate in Eastern Europe*, 7 March 2011 <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/holocaust-revisionism-ultranationalism-and-the-nazisoviet-double-genocide-debate-eastern>> [accessed 10 September 2021].

¹⁵ Leszek Żebrowski, 'Virtuti Militari za dokonanie masakry w polskiej wsi Koniuchy', *WP Opinie*, 8 October 2014 <<https://opinie.wp.pl/virtuti-militari-za-dokowanie-masakry-w-polskiej-wsi-koniuchy-6126042173597313a>> [accessed 15 September 2021]; Redakcja PMN, 'Zbrodnie żydowskich „partyzantów” na polskiej ludności – Koniuchy i Naliboki', 24 November 2012 <<https://myslnarodowa.wordpress.com/2012/11/24/zbrodnie-zydowskich-partyzantow-na-polskiej-ludnosci-koniuchy-i-naliboki/>> [accessed 8 September 2021].

¹⁶ Zizas, *Ne žydų kilmės Lietuvus*, p. 114.

¹⁷ Sužiedėlis and Liekis, 'Conflicting Memories', pp. 325–26.

THE CASE OF KONIUCHY

In 1943–44, the Jewish resistance in Kaunas organized escapes into the eastern Lithuanian forests and western Belarus, where conditions for guerrilla activity were more favourable. Of all the Lithuanian resistance movements, the one that emerged from the Vilna Ghetto has garnered the most worldwide attention and admiration. The Vilnius fighters were the first Jewish resistance organization that originated in the ghettos. The Jews who made up the Jewish resistance groups in 1943 and 1944 had at the time a contentious relationship with the Soviet partisans who had been operating in Lithuania since 1942. The village militias that were equipped and supported by the German and Lithuanian administration had significant popular support stemming from resentment with the requisitions exacted by the pro-Soviet partisans. The well-documented friction and even fighting between the Home Army and Jewish partisans added to the mix of clashing forces. One interesting factor which further complicated the situation was that Lithuanian-speaking villages sometimes preferred the 'Red partisans' as a lesser evil as a result of the depredations of the Home Army units, which often raided their homesteads in continuation of the bitter internecine rivalry which had long characterized Polish and Lithuanian communities of the region. While there is evidence indicating that the Jewish and Soviet resistance movements encountered a friendly reception in some villages, this was hardly the norm in the Lithuanian countryside. Jewish participation in the partisan groups became an issue during debates over the extent to which local collaborators were involved in the Holocaust. Accusations of collaboration with the Nazis were often countered with claims of alleged Jewish crimes against local non-Jewish populations. For detractors of the partisans, there is an ideal opportunity here to besmirch them, but it is important to understand the context of the violence. It is, of course, egregious to suggest any equivalence (moral or otherwise) between, for example, Koniuchy (Kaniūkai) and the massive singular crimes of the Nazis.

The case of Koniuchy was a case of perplexed memory issues. This village was situated on the present border between Lithuania and Belarus. The village apparently cooperated both with the Lithuanian police and Polish AK units. What happened there? The years 1943 and 1944 witnessed an increase in fighting between Soviet partisans and the village's defence force, which had been set up by the German and Lithuanian police in the eastern part of Lithuania. During this period, many encounters between Soviet partisans and the *Hilfspolizei* (Ger. auxiliary police) took place. There were many fierce encounters and arbitrary killings on both sides, including the killing of many innocent as well as suspected civilians. One such

episode was an attack by Soviet partisan units on Koniuchy village, during which innocent civilians were killed. The village was taken by surprise and alleged members of the auxiliary police did not manage to put up any resistance. Moreover, the attack took place at a time when the AK partisans were not in the vicinity of the village. According to an official report (Report no. 53) from the commander of the Baltininkų Lithuanian police defence station to the commander of the 253rd Lithuanian Police Battalion Vladas Žibas, January 31, 1944:

1A. 1944.01.29 at 6 am around 150 bandits (Jews and Russians) armed with 1 heavy machine gun, 3 light machine guns, machine pistols, rifles and grenades attacked Koniuchy village. The village was burnt down, people were killed and cattle were slaughtered. (There were 35 KIA and 15 WIA.) The bandits had arrived from the directions of Dauciunai and WLK Salky. They spent one hour, then retreated in the same directions.¹⁸

The same day, at 7 am, 52 men armed with machine guns from the 252nd Police battalion marched to Koniuchy but did not manage to catch the retreating Soviet partisans. Additionally, platoons from the battalion's defence stations had organized hideouts in order to ambush Soviet partisans, but their attempts failed.

It is evident from the 253rd battalion's diary that Soviet partisans threatened and ordered the removal of firearms from the nearby Lithuanian villages of Klepociai, Butrimonys, Jononiai, Sauliai and Pasalis. The partisans attacked and robbed Kiemeliškės village that same day.

Other sources confirm the number of casualties. According to Soviet partisan reporting, the attack on Koniuchy village was a joint action by the Rudniki forest partisans. Genrikas Zimanas (First Secretary of the 'South Area' Underground Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania) reported to the head of the Lithuanian Partisan Movement Headquarters:

The joint forces of the Vilnius partisan units ('Death to the Occupants', 'Margiris', and General Headquarters Special Group [Soviet Military Intelligence – GRU]) destroyed the fiercest Eishyshok self-defence village, Kaniūkai. Kaniūkai not only objected to the Soviet partisans entering the village but also organized ambushes on the roads, attacked partisan-friendly villages, and forcibly took firearms to partisan-neutral villages. The defence force suffered heavy casualties. We did not have casualties on our side.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lithuanian Central State Archive, Vilnius, fol. R-666, inv. 1, f. 7, p. 29.

¹⁹ Lithuanian Archive of Public Organizations, fol. 1, inv. 1, f. 410, p. 173.

With regard to the national composition of the partisans, it has only been possible to identify a small number of those who personally participated in the attack. We can only estimate the number of people of each nationality that were in these units by their personal files in the archive. The popular argument that these were Jews does not survive scrutiny. We know the ethnic composition of the groups that contributed to the composite force attacking Koniuchy. The partisan group 'Death to the Occupants' had 224 partisans with 79 Jews; 'Margiris' at that stage had 51 partisans, of whom 30 were Jewish. The soviet Military intelligence group (the GRU Special Group, often designated as the 14th) at that time was predominantly Russian and had 250 men, of whom very few were locals. It is correct to state the following: of the 3,910 Soviet partisans in Lithuania, there were 1,388 Lithuanians, 1,477 Russians, 676 Jews, and the remaining 367 were from other ethnic groups. There were also 1,020 escaped Soviet POWs among them.²⁰ These numbers are reliable, although they create the illusion that these partisans made up a large fighting group. We might allege that there were more Russians and Lithuanian members than Jewish partisans because, as a rule, more experienced and better-armed partisans would be used for this kind of operation. The core of the group was more experienced and was armed with automatic weapons; these members of the core groups had arrived from the Soviet Union or were members of the Soviet military intelligence groups.

In the AK reports, this event was presented as an anti-Polish massacre in which 300 alleged victims were killed by Jewish partisans. Later, it was included in the Polish martyrology of the Second World War. The post-1990 Lithuanian independence movement treated the Soviet partisan attack on the village as an anti-Lithuanian action.²¹ Rimantas Zizas writes that Soviet records lack any precise facts regarding alleged resistance and activities by Koniuchy, and no events or combat operations involving the village are recorded in the Soviet archives. The Soviet partisans tried to intimidate or punish local villagers. The Polish Institute of National Remembrance initiated a formal investigation into the incident on 3 March 2001 at the request of the Canadian Polish Congress. The institute examined a number of archival documents, including police reports, encoded messages, military records and personnel files of the Soviet partisans. Requests for legal assistance were then sent to state prosecutors in Belarus, Lithuania, the Russian Federation and Israel.

The Lithuanian prosecutor general's office subsequently opened its own investigation into the massacre in 2004. As part of its investigation, Lithuanian prosecutors sought out Jewish veterans of the partisan movement.

²⁰ Data about the number of partisans, 4 November 1945, LYA, Vilnius, col. 1, inv. 1, f. 136, p. 6.

²¹ Rimantas Zizas, 'Žudynių Kaniūkuose pėdsakais', *Genocidas ir rezistencija* 11 (2002), 149–65.

One of these was Yitzhak Arad, an expert on the Holocaust in Lithuania and former chairman of Yad Vashem. Arad had also served as a member of a commission appointed by Lithuania's president in 2005 to examine past war crimes. The widely perceived failure of the Lithuanian judiciary to investigate pro-Nazi collaborators while choosing to prosecute Jewish partisans led to charges of hypocrisy concerning Lithuanian motivation. The work of an international commission to investigate war crimes in Lithuania was derailed by the Lithuanian investigation. Further attempts to investigate elderly Jewish survivors were perceived as an attempt at victim blaming. Following wide international criticism (and some domestic criticism), the Lithuanian investigation was closed in September 2008.²²

Upon a request from Poland, a couple of former Soviet partisans, Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky and Dr Rachel Margolis, were placed under investigation because of accusations of 'war crimes'. This caused the campaign for the cause of the Jewish partisans to provoke a public outcry. The argument that was raised on the international stage is that the only chance of survival for Jewish partisans in the Soviet units was to fight alongside Soviet-backed partisan groups, who were both fighting against Hitler and trying to restore communist rule in Lithuania.²³ No proof was found of any involvement of women in the events of Koniuchy.

As a result, the IPN investigation was closed in February 2018. The official reason that was given for this was that the investigators were not able to establish "beyond a reasonable doubt" that any perpetrators of the massacre were still alive; as a result, they concluded that there was no one who could be charged with a crime.²⁴

According to Antony Polonsky, Professor of Holocaust studies at Brandeis University, ethno-nationalists in both Lithuania and Poland have portrayed Koniuchy as a 'Jewish action'. Although exact determination of the ethnicity of the Soviet partisans is not possible, it is clear that Jews were a minority in these formations. While discussing anti-Semitic stereotypes and historical exaggeration of the role of Jews in Soviet atrocities, Antony Polonsky stated that the time had come for Jews to accept that [some of] their compatriots also carried out atrocities, and that partisans involved in the Koniuchy massacres did 'very evil things'.²⁵

²² Saulius Sužiedėlis, 'The International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania: successes, challenges, perspectives', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 49.1 (2018), 103–16.

²³ Edward Lucas, 'Prosecution and persecution. Lithuania must stop blaming the victims', *The Economist*, 21 August 2008 <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2008/08/21/prosecution-and-persecution>> [accessed 10 September 2021].

²⁴ 'Information on the Investigation in the Case of Crime Committed in Koniuchy', *Institute of National Remembrance*, 13 September 2005, News <<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/69,Information-on-the-Investigation-in-the-Crime-of-Crime-Committed-in-Koniuchy.html>> [accessed 10 September 2021].

²⁵ Piotr Zychowicz, 'Winni i tak nie przepraszają', *Plus Minus*, 20 September 2008 <<https://www.rp.pl/plus-minus/art16030371-winni-i-tak-nie-przepraszaja>> [accessed 10 September 2021].

Despite failed attempts to persecute the Jewish partisans, the Russian media continue to claim that the East Europeans that critically assess Russian politics are Nazis or Nazi sympathisers. Russia has invested millions of dollars in a campaign to infiltrate U.S. media markets with English language news, opinion, conspiracy, and troll content, often interlocking with the most popular U.S. conspiracy theory websites. The partisan warfare issues of the Second World War continue to be well integrated into their ideological scheme.

In this one-sided approach, promoters of the official Russian narrative claim that ‘in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union was often the only escape route from certain death, both for Jews who fled eastward to escape Nazi rule, and for those who escaped ghettos to join up with the anti-Nazi partisans supported by the Soviets’.²⁶

A controversial figure in the debate, prof. Dovid Katz, goes on to point out that even attempting to discuss an incident such as Koniuchy is tantamount to a ‘hatchet job against Jewish partisans’ that resorts to ‘a number of abuses of academic structure to mask the genre of the nationalist polemic’.²⁷

These arguments echoed larger debates on the possible obfuscation of the Holocaust, debates on double genocide, and the comparison-equation of Soviet and Nazi crimes, etc. They were also included in conflicting debates on the issues and conflicts of the resistance groups in the forests of East Central Europe. A statement by Efraim Zuroff is an interesting exposé of these kinds of views:

One of the biggest problems we are facing now is something called the ‘double genocide theory’, which is prevalent throughout Eastern Europe, where governments are trying to say that Communist crimes amounted to genocide. They were not. If they were, then that means that Jews committed genocide. There were Jews – not out of any loyalty to the Jewish people, and usually Jews who had left the Jewish community – who worked in the KGB, in the Communist security apparatus, and did horrible things. It’s true... The pernicious subtext of this argument’, he said. ‘If Jews committed genocide, what right do they then have to complain against the genocide committed in eastern Europe during the Holocaust by people who collaborated with the Nazis?’

²⁶ David Katz, review of *Intermarium: The Land between the Black and Baltic Seas*, by Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 7.2 (2013), 1–7 (p. 4).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

According to Zuroff, Communist crimes should not be characterized as genocide because the Communists did not want to wipe a people off the face of the earth.²⁸

As professor Barry Rubin noted in 2010, this kind of pro-Soviet and pro-Russian treatment of history makes Jews the defenders of a Communist totalitarian system that murdered and tortured millions of people, including hundreds of thousands of Jews; it also buries the fact that the Soviet Union systematically destroyed Jewish society, including religion, community and the Yiddish language; it makes it impossible to fully acknowledge the sufferings of Jews under Communism, which emerged as a major world force for anti-Semitism in the post-1945 period; and it divides Jews from those who suffered under Communism, at least the non-Russians, thus intensifying the friction between them.²⁹

The other source of purported moral legitimacy seems to be this: since the representatives of Putin's regime have only very selectively distanced themselves from Stalinism, they are therefore reliable inheritors of Soviet history and should be seen as the automatic opposite of Nazis, therefore they should be trusted to oppose the far right. It will be more difficult in the future to refer to the Holocaust in the service of any good cause, be it Jewish history specifically or human rights more generally.

For those who do not like contextualization of the Holocaust and the accompanying events of partisan warfare in the East European 'Bloodlands',³⁰ the drawing of any substantial similarities between Nazism and Communism in terms of their horrific and appalling character and their crimes against humanity is unacceptable. The Stalinist version of history is being introduced under the disguise of a critique of Holocaust obfuscators, or it is being muddled into what is legitimately bordering on a conspiracy theory, thus continuing to propagate the divisionism and exclusivity that are at the ideological core of East European xenophobia.

This rhetoric incites pathological fear within world Jewry against the Lithuanian government and its institutions and individuals, reducing a multi-layered and extremely complex situation to black and white, right and wrong, innocent and guilty.

Any exclusive system of thinking will always yield restrictive rights and privileges and historical ghettoization. This system of thinking ignores attempts to construct Lithuanian strategic narratives that are a means for

²⁸ Herb Keinson, 'Zuroff: Israel should not recognize Holodomor as genocide', *The Jerusalem Post*, 22 January 2019 <<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Zuroff-Israel-should-not-recognize-Holodomor-as-genocide-578308>> [accessed 15 September 2021].

²⁹ Barry Rubin, "'Those who neglect their past have no future'", *The Jerusalem Post*, 13 August 2010 <<https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Those-who-neglect-their-past-have-no-future>> [accessed 15 September 2021].

³⁰ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2010).

political actors to create a shared meaning of the past, present and future. This is assessed by communication scholars as a battle without winners and losers. Nevertheless, the battle of the systemic narratives presented by different countries' elites does not necessarily have to be won by one over the other. There is always an expectation that any competition between narratives will be a zero-sum game. However, a more realistic view is that the narratives remain until the individuals and institutions – or, at the larger end of the scale, states propagating narratives – live and reproduce these narratives. The only feasible strategy to overcome the dilemma of not being able to win is to engage in dialogue and educational efforts.

LESSONS FOR EDUCATORS

Education is usually multi-layered and complex and involves many institutions and interest groups as well as individual agendas. In the past, the majority of Lithuanian émigrés were unable to accept the Western narrative of the war, including the enormous sacrifice of the Soviet people in the struggle against fascism, and many failed to fully appreciate Nazism's genocidal nature. The émigré story rested on an intensely anti-Soviet attitude and a denial of native participation in the murder of the Jews, sometimes accompanied by open or disguised anti-Semitism.

Much Lithuanian scholarship, especially during the 1990s, tended towards the nationalist narrative, which largely mirrors attitudes dominant during the interwar period and also reflects the intellectual world of the country's influential Western diaspora, which has had a considerable impact on interpretations of the national past. The educational institutions of the post-Soviet Lithuanian state embraced a 'national school' concept which claimed that the Republic of 1990 was the legal restoration of the independent state of 1918–40.

With the post-Soviet, often revisionist Russian dialogue, which is willing to rehabilitate Stalinism, is it possible for educators to build a sensible dialogue for the memory groups that still clash in the framework of the nationalist ideologies of Lithuanians and Poles? The Holocaust is the standout event in the shadow of the Second World War and has been appropriated by practically all nations and minorities.

When it comes to the Lithuanian context, this country suffers all the actual and potential problems of the post-Communist era, as well as those which are European in scope: a population buffeted by social and economic crises and thus susceptible to populist demagoguery; an extremist nationalist fringe; xenophobia expressed in openly racist discourse,

although hardly ever in physical violence. Despite the official attachment to liberal democracy and tolerance, anti-Jewish prejudices still play a limited role in political imagery.

Only minor issues surface in local crimes against other groups during the Second World War and the Holocaust. Lithuanian and Polish underground fighting and crimes against civilians are noted by observers in public debates and during commemoration events.

These conflicting narrative clashes are downplayed by Lithuania and Poland, which reserve them for internal narratives among respected audiences and allow equal participation by former adversaries. An example of this is the *Tropem Wilczym* marathon (Pol. On the Path of the Wolf) in January 2019, organized jointly by Polish organizations and the Lithuanian army to commemorate AK soldiers who died after the beginning of the Second Soviet Occupation of 1944–45 in Lithuania and Poland.³¹ The Soviet partisan story in Lithuania could not be remembered in the same way as Polish AK heroism. The Polish AK was on the side of the Western war effort, and the Soviets were members of the same coalition. However, the Soviet resistance still has to wait to be integrated into what is still a rather hostile reception in Lithuania.

Educators should pay greater attention to media literacy. Most public debates on historical topics seem to be played out on the pages of mass media publications. Looking at how one or another question is integrated or not integrated into allegedly 'critical national history', the media most often follows the line of monumental national history that underscores the nationalist version of history and its heroes. The creative aspects of 'critical history' are being constrained by media representations that usually strive for a stereotypical presentation of foes and friends.

This fundamentalist approach to history within the media is of high concern indeed. Predominantly, the current state of affairs is one of increased information wars and propaganda (the latter issue became especially sensitive in the context of the information attacks, trolling, falsification and lies that are incessantly found in the digital space). Although the Lithuanian government has outlined certain future directions (such as the activation of media-related analysis skills training in schools), related policies are still underdeveloped and lack realism; the measures that are being taken only address certain specific and fragmented matters, leaving us in a world of fundamental national stereotypes.

³¹ 'Wilno oddaje hold Żołnierzom Wyklętym', *TVP Info*, 1 March 2019 <<https://www.tvp.info/41541632/wilno-oddaje-hold-zolnierzom-wykletym>> [accessed 5 May 2019].

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